

## Florida Water Management District Swiftly Cuts Budget With 120+ Employee Bailouts, Does This Really Hurt the Everglades?

By Rosa Schechter

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The **South Florida Water Management District** was quick to put together a buyout package for its employees after the Florida Legislature's big budgetary cutbacks were signed into law by Governor Scott last month. Facing a big budget cut from the state, the South Florida Water Management district hastily put together a buyout package to reduce payroll.

### ***Water Management District Saves Money on Payroll, Employees Avoid Layoff***

It was a nice package, and last Friday, 123 South Florida Water Management District employees who had been on a salary of \$100,000+ per year officially started their Fourth of July Weekend by saying goodbye to the South Florida Water Management District as their employer - saving them from layoffs expected to occur next month and saving the SFWMD around \$10,000,000 in payroll.

### ***How Will This Impact Florida? The Doom and Gloom***

Out of the 123 employees who took the buyout last Friday, 15% were scientists and 10% were engineers. Already, there are those who question how the SFWMD can be effective with this loss of expertise, given that the District is responsible for managing the state's water supply. Who knows how many more of these brainiacs will be let go next month, when it's expected that 100 employees will be laid off, leaving the SFWMD will around 1500 employees.

Meanwhile, conservationists are bemoaning the future of the Everglades with these manpower cutbacks at the South Florida Water Management District. These critics include attorney Allan Milledge, member of the Florida Audubon Board and formerly the chairman of the board for the South Florida Water Management District. In a recent editorial in the *Orlando Sentinel*, Mr. Milledge voiced his concern that the cutbacks at the SFWMD will harm the Everglades, especially as drought conditions continue.

### ***The Hard Realities Florida Faces Means Tightening the Budget - We Must All Work Together for Florida***

It is true that last week's buyouts and next week's layoffs at the South Florida Water Management District are motivated by money: the SFWMD governing board has to find \$128,300,000 to cut from its \$1+ billion budget because of the new legislation that cut its revenues by 30% as part of a statewide reduction in property taxes.

However, this does not mean that the District has been gutted and made powerless. There are those that thought it could use some streamlining - that the District had more people on its books that it really needed in the first place.

New Executive Director Mellissa Meeker, for example, has announced her desire to reduce the District's overall salary and benefits package so that it looks more like the packages that other State of Florida workers get.

This means the SFWMD folk don't get golf carts to carry them from the office to their car, for example. And Meeker's already sold ONE of the SFWMD airplanes. She's also cut her own salary from \$202,000 of her predecessor to \$165,000, taking 20% off her own payday at the get-go.

It makes sense for conservationists to be afraid of rampant disregard of everything they hold dear if there is no regulation left for protecting the Florida Everglades. However, the cruel reality is that the State of Florida is broke, Floridians are sharing the tough times of this Great Recession, and we must all tighten our belts in this economic crisis.

The Everglades are protected by local, state, and federal laws as well as being monitored by private and public groups dedicated to its survival. Perhaps there will be dangers to the Everglades because of these cutbacks, but that suggests a distrust of Ms. Meeker and her remaining, streamlined crew at SFWMD which may be very premature and unwarranted. Melissa Meeker gave up her job as state water czar to helm the SFWMD, after all.

*We must all be financially responsible as well as ethically vigilant. We're in tough times and things have to change.*