

# A Brief History of Water Management in the Everglades Agricultural Area

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## Introduction

Recently, a great amount of attention has been focused on the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) in south Florida. The attention stems from concern over the environmental health of Lake Okeechobee, the Water Conservation Areas (WCAs), and the Everglades National Park (ENP). The first step towards developing plans for the future management of the EAA, WCAs, ENP, and Lake Okeechobee, is to understand and appreciate the past history of the area.

The purpose of this publication is to give a brief accounting of how and why the present water management scheme in south Florida was developed. The purpose, herein, is not to present an exhaustive water history of the area, but rather to generate an appreciation for the complexity of the development of the area. For a more in-depth discussion of the EAA and water related topics, the reader is referred to Izuno and Bottcher (1987).

## General Background Information

The Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) (Figure 1) is contained in one of the largest contiguous bodies of organic soil in the world (Jones, 1948). By different accounts, it has been reported to encompass a total area ranging in size from 650,000 acres (Snyder, 1987) to 770,000 acres (Knecht, 1986). The EAA is only a small portion of the area originally called the Everglades Region (4.8 million acres) that included Lake Okeechobee to the north and a major part of the Florida Peninsula to the south (Jones, 1948) (Figure 2).

Growers in the EAA have built a thriving agricultural industry with average annual cash receipts of about 500 million dollars (Snyder, 1987), due for the most part, to sugarcane and winter vegetables. The agricultural industry is responsible for generating over 1.2 billion dollars worth of economic activity annually (SFWMD, 1985b). To maintain this obvious productivity, water management is essential. During the wet season, adequate provisions for

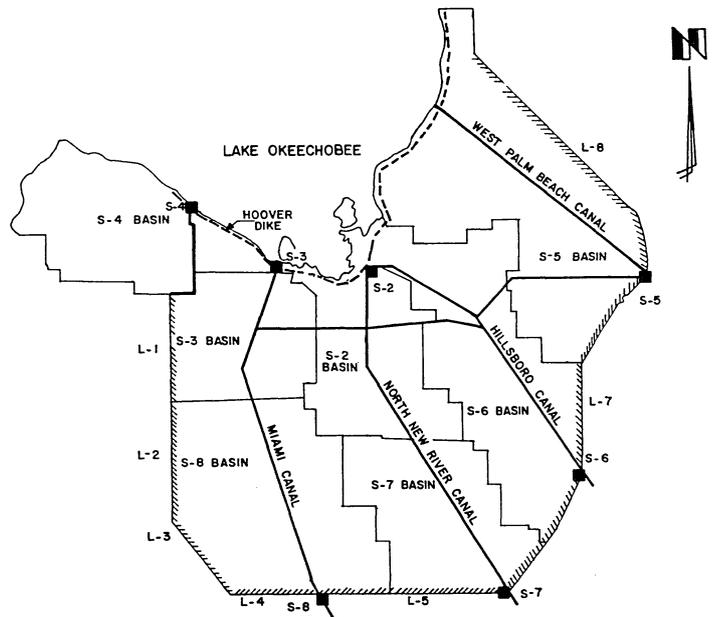


Figure 1  
Definition map of the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) and its canals and drainage basins.

drainage are mandatory. Alternatively, during the dry season, irrigation water must be available in amounts sufficient for supplemental crop use. Without the provisions for both irrigation and drainage, at or near current levels, agriculture in the EAA could cease to be one of the major industries in south Florida.

Historically, Lake Okeechobee has supplied the EAA with approximately 438,000 acre-feet of water annually (Florida Department of Administration, 1976). Returns to the Lake, through the process called **backpumping** (pumping against the flow direction that would occur naturally due to gravity), averaged over 480,000 acre-feet annually, prior to implementation of the Interim Action Plan (IAP) in 1983. This fact supports assertions, made by

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