

Getting the Water Right: Economic Links Between Everglades Restoration and the Florida Keys

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Monroe County's economic prosperity fundamentally depends on its aquatic resources and a thriving tourism economy, forming a critical component of South Florida's larger Clean Water Economy. Classified as a recreation-dependent economy by the USDA Economic Research Service, Monroe County tourism contributed approximately \$3.5 billion in visitor spending in 2023, a major contributor to the county's total GDP of \$7.65 billion. This economic vitality relies heavily on healthy marine and estuarine ecosystems sustained by freshwater inflows from the Everglades ecosystem. Florida Bay serves as the crucial ecological link between upstream freshwater marshes and coastal estuaries, and downstream coral reefs, seagrass habitats, and economically valuable fisheries. Ensuring water security is essential to maintaining the region's ecological stability and economic resilience. This requires consistent water availability, high water quality, effective management of risks and variability, ecosystem and biodiversity protection, and equitable access through strong institutional coordination. Historical disruptions in Everglades hydrology have triggered significant ecological threats, including extensive seagrass die-offs and harmful algal blooms, jeopardizing fisheries, tourism revenue, and community livelihoods. This presentation reviews past and current economic research, emphasizing the critical links between natural capital and economic outcomes. Attendees will gain insights into how integrated management across freshwater, estuarine, and marine ecosystems supports critical economic sectors such as tourism and fisheries. Emphasizing the essential role of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and the theme "Getting the Water Right," this talk underscores the foundational importance of integrated freshwater management for ecological integrity and the long-term prosperity of Monroe County and South Florida.