

'Big Everglades plans'

Governor cheers efforts by environmentalists at annual conference

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NAPLES — Environmentalists from around the country gathered Friday to create a blueprint for the 1989 chapter of the ongoing battle to save the Everglades.

Cheering them on was Gov. Bob Martinez as he addressed the 200-plus participants attending the Fourth Annual Everglades Coalition Conference at the Port of the Islands.

The resort is on the fringe of the fragile yet massive ecosystem south of Naples.

Martinez says he has big plans this year, beginning with a meeting next week with U.S. Secretary of Interior-designate Manuel Lujan.

"I will establish Florida's environmental priorities with this (Bush) administration and expect strong support," the Republican governor said Friday.

This year will hold many challenges in regard to the Everglades,

Martinez said, including the continued restoration work on the Kissimmee River, saving Lake Okeechobee from death and stemming the cattail invasion of the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge.

The river, lake and refuge are all part of the giant system that filters water through the Everglades—and, in turn, to millions of South Florida residents and visitors.

Earlier Friday, Martinez took his first airboat tour of the Everglades National Park. While doing so, he

spoke with the heads of the Wilderness Society, the National Audubon Society and the Defenders of Wildlife.

"Every time I visit the 'Glades, I see it from a new perspective, and I leave inspired by its beauty and importance," Martinez said.

Estus Whitfield, the governor's environmental advisor, said Friday's trip was designed to bring attention

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to the Everglades.

"It was to make a statement: This is South Florida — drinking water for 4.5 million people," Whitfield said. "Ever since 1881, people have been using and abusing the Everglades. Governor Martinez is trying to reverse it."

The governor said he's continuing with plans to expand the park further east into Dade County.

"We started bill-drafting and expect to introduce legislation this next session of Congress," Martinez said.

Wilderness Society President George T. Frampton Jr. called on members of Florida's congressional delegation to support the effort. He added that land acquisition is not

enough.

"If we cannot ensure the high quality of water flowing into these areas, then all of the land protection will be for naught," Frampton said.

One way of doing so is to continue restoring the Kissimmee River to its natural flow, rather than the mostly manmade path it currently follows.

But that might be quite a battle, Martinez said.

"The (U.S. Army) Corps of Engineers presented us with a challenge. The corps wants to ignore the state's efforts to restore the Kissimmee River — and wants to ignore the fact that Congress allocated funds for the restoration," the first-term governor said.

"In Florida, we are intent on restoring the river."

Another water quality problem in the Everglades was addressed Friday by Peter Berle, president of the National Audubon Society. Berle called for a study of the economics of subsidizing Florida's multimillion-dollar sugar industry.

"We have to look at the economics and environmental values, and see if it makes sense," Berle said.

He was referring to the sugar industry and the impact it has on both the Everglades ecosystem and South Florida's water supply.

The conference continues today and Sunday with panel discussions, more field trips and more guest speakers.

