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## Greens to Obama: Save Everglades

By: [Bob King](#)

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Florida environmentalists are launching a national ad campaign urging President Barack Obama to rescue the lagging multibillion-dollar Everglades restoration effort, with some activists arguing it could give him an edge in the swing state in 2012.

At the very least, stepping up on the Everglades could help Obama avoid the friction with some Florida greens that may have helped doom Al Gore's presidential hopes 11 years ago.

Everglades supporters also argue that the mammoth marsh project, approved 10½ years ago by a Republican Congress and Democratic president, offers a rare chance to seize on bipartisan agreement about the environment — the kind Obama won't find on climate change or offshore drilling.

“The Everglades is to Florida what ethanol is to Iowa,” said Kirk Fordham, CEO of the Everglades Foundation, a well-financed advocacy group that is running full-page [ads Tuesday in the Washington Post](#), Roll Call and CQ Today. The ads note that the Everglades supplies drinking water to millions of Floridians, along with livelihoods for fishermen and tourism-dependent businesses.

“There's a widespread constituency of people who benefit from a clean and healthy Everglades,” said Fordham, who has served as an aide or campaign worker for various Hill Republicans, including ex-Sen. Mel Martinez, ex-Rep. Mark Foley and then-Rep. Jim Inhofe. “It's not just environmental activists who care about this.”

Still, some of the steps the group is advocating seem likely to inspire strong opposition from some quarters.

For example, the ads call for elimination of the federal sugar program that helps growers farm cane across hundreds of thousands of acres of drained former Everglades. The sugar industry's political influence has fended off similar calls before, even from conservative free-market groups, such as the Cato Institute.

The foundation is also advocating strong EPA action on pollution in the Everglades — just as House Republicans have been trying to throttle a separate attempt by the agency to regulate water pollution in Florida.

Probably less controversially, the ads say Obama should direct Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, Attorney General Eric Holder, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and the leader of the Army Corps of Engineers to “launch a coordinated Everglades restoration strategy.” Their agencies are already part of a state-federal task force that's supposed to be doing just that, but Fordham said direction needs to come from a higher level.

“We're looking for the White House to put in some strong political leadership and almost have a war-room-like strategy,” he said.

The foundation has considerable resources to put into the fight: Its board includes

musician Jimmy Buffett and golfer Jack Nicklaus, and the group has gotten major backing from billionaire-trader Paul Tudor Jones. It used to hold its annual fundraisers at Donald Trump's Palm Beach mansion.”

Then again, the Everglades could use all the help it can get.

It's a moment of both promise and peril for the state-federal restoration, a giant plumbing and land-buying initiative that then-President Bill Clinton signed into law in December 2000 amid virtually unanimous support from Florida environmentalists, politicians, farmers and business leaders. At the time, supporters hoped it would provide a model for similar efforts around the country and the world.

But now the estimated price tag has risen from \$7.8 billion to as much as \$15 billion. Through the 2010 fiscal year, state and federal funding for the effort has totaled \$3.5 billion, without finishing a single major project or meeting any of its ambitious ecological goals. And so far, 79 percent of the money has come from the state of Florida, a far cry from the 50-50 partnership that Congress promised.

Meanwhile, budget woes are shrinking the flow of state dollars, and the state agency in charge of Florida's half of the project is facing sharp spending cuts under new Gov. Rick Scott. The state also shows no signs of finishing a separate \$1 billion-plus Everglades pollution cleanup it agreed to in 1991 — a failure that last month prompted a federal judge to order the EPA to take control of the cleanup's discharge permits.

On the other hand, Fordham notes that federal Everglades restoration spending has risen sharply under the Obama administration. Some crucial Everglades-related efforts are on track for completion in the next couple of years, including a controversial 22-year-old project to increase water flows into Everglades National Park. And in January, Salazar announced an effort to assemble 150,000 acres of land and conservation easements to preserve habitat and reduce water pollution north of Lake Okeechobee, the giant hole visible in Florida when the state is viewed from space.

“We've seen significant progress over the last two years,” Fordham said. “It would be a tragedy if it all collapsed.”

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