

Kissimmee River restoration begins; Kankakee model

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — In the 1960s, the government spent \$30 million to turn the Kissimmee River into a 56-mile-long ditch. On Saturday, it will start refilling part that ditch to let the river return to its old twisting course.

The \$372 million river restoration project — the nation's largest, according to the Army Corp of Engineers — is also intended to improve the quality of the water that flows to Lake Okeechobee and ultimately to the Everglades. Both have been suffering because of pollution from ranching and farming.

(The project has been held up by the regional group Alliance to Restore the Kankakee as a potential model for restoration of the river here. ARK has been financing a multi-year federal scientific study aimed at providing the evidence necessary to justify similar restoration work on the river here and in Indiana.)

The Corps of Engineers, which dug the original ditch, is also in charge of filling it in.

"It's an exciting event," said Theresa Woody of the Sierra Club. "It symbolizes a real commitment by this country to use the knowledge and skills of the Army Corps to benefit the environment. These are the guys that have historically worn the black hats."

After Saturday's groundbreaking, bulldozers will move in Monday to start backfilling some 1,000 feet of what is officially known as "Canal 38" feeding Lake Okeechobee. It is known as the "ditch" to environmentalists and critics.

The 60-day, \$860,000 job will test construction methods to be used in the larger project.

The plan is simply to fill in 22 miles of the canal and force the river to spill out onto the floodplain and find its own way to Okeechobee. Engineers expect the river will generally return to its old, meandering bed, which never was filled in.

If all goes as designers hope, the river will in time abandon more of the ditch, leaving only about 13 miles that will be maintained for flood control and to protect some nearby property.

The work will result in restoring some 26,500 acres of wetlands and 40 square miles of river-and-floodplain ecosystem.

The Kissimmee River has been on the brink of death for two decades as a result of the flood-control project, which left it an oxygen-starved drainage ditch 300 feet wide and 30 feet deep.

The work was done after hurricanes caused some widespread flooding of bordering ranchland. Within five years, state officials were admitting it was all a big mistake and began lobbying for restoration.

Florida officials persuaded Congress in 1992 to fund half the Kissimmee restoration, which includes compensating some of the ranchers and farmers whose land will again be flooded. The state is paying the other half.

The project will restore habitat for endangered species such as the wood stork and snail kite and for more than 300 other fish and wildlife species.