

FEATURE – FLORIDA RANGLANDS ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES PROJECT

INTRO: A program funded by U-S-D-A and the Florida state agencies is helping ranchers protect the environmentally sensitive Everglades. The USDA's Bob Ellison has more. (1:46)

LAKE OKEECHOBEE IS CALLED THE LIQUID HEART OF THE FLORIDA EVERGLADES. THE FLORIDA RANGLANDS ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES PROJECT, KNOWN AS FRESP, HELPS PROTECT WATERSHEDS NEAR THE LAKE. THE U-S DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE'S NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE IS WORKING WITH AREA RANGLERS TO PROTECT THE LAKE.

Greg Hendricks, USDA NRCS: What the ranchers are doing is looking at specific drainage projects that they installed many, many decades ago and restoring those to hold water back and to retain water in natural freshwater systems.

Jim Handley, Executive Vice President, Florida Cattlemen's Association: It's a tremendous opportunity to showcase what private land managers have been doing for hundreds of years.

THE FRESP ASSISTS RANGLERS TO HOLD WATER ON THEIR PROPERTY THAT WOULD OTHERWISE CARRY POLLUTANTS TO LAKE OKEECHOBEE.

Chip Merriam, Deputy Executive Director, South Florida Water Management District: It gets into the natural system or stays in the natural system in a way that is closer to what had been done prior to our efforts at draining the swamp.

Jimmy Wohl, Rancher, Okeechobee, FL: The whole idea between creating financial incentives for property owners, whether they be ranchers, farmers or anybody that owns land to provide environmental services I think is something that is long overdue..

RANGLERS SAY THE PROGRAM HELPS THEM COOPERATE WITH NATURE.

Wes Williamson, Rancher, Okeechobee, FL: When you can spend less money and have a private rancher in this instance provide those services for you and probably do as good or better job, keep the land on the tax rolls, keep it in production and continue to pay taxes.

John Payne, Rancher, Sebring, FL: It'll allow our operation to stay in ranching. I think that's real important, so the generations that come behind us will have the opportunity to be ranchers instead of it being developed.

FOR THE U-S DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, I'M BOB ELLISON.