



December 5, 2005

Environmental Protection Agency Atlanta
Federal Center
61 Forsyth Street, SW
Atlanta, GA 30303-3104

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It has come to the attention of the Southwest Florida community that the Environmental Protection Agency's regional office in Fort Myers, Florida has closed its doors permanently. This is very troubling to the constituents whom that office served.

The mission of the Environmental Protection Agency is to protect human health and the environment. As an agent of the United States government, it is the EPA's duty not only to protect the environment of its citizens, but also to operate successfully within the system of checks and balances. This agency is imperative to providing regulatory oversight. It has the responsibility to interact with constituents and communities and to give the opportunity for Public Comment. As such, there has been close collaboration with the EPA Fort Myers office through the years. The EPA's Fort Myers office has formerly been available to provide guidance and critiques on issues involving the Southwest Florida area, via special knowledge that can only be ascertained by being in the immediate regional area and understanding both the physical and social landscape of environmental issues in the area. It is the personal interaction with the local community that has made the EPA Fort Myers office such a valuable addition and indispensable commodity to improvement of management and environmental support in Southwest Florida.

The Everglades is an ecologically unique system; it exists nowhere else on earth. The EPA, the Governor of Florida, along with the United States Congress, has recognized the incredible asset that the Everglades is to the Southwest Florida region. It was Congress that codified restoration of the Everglades. The eastern portion of Collier County is the western Everglades. With an obvious declaration of acknowledgement of the importance of this system, and subsequently this region, the EPA is obligated to ensure that the Everglades, Southwest Florida in particular, is given the appropriate amount of oversight, which is substantial. This system, with its immense expanse, its subtle and delicate interconnections, requires the localized oversight and expertise that was provided by the local EPA Fort Myers office.

The members of the Southwest Florida Watershed Council recognize and deeply value the vital role that the Environmental Protection Agency has had in Southwest Florida. The EPA has provided much needed oversight to ensure proper water quality protection. It is imperative that such oversight and valued representation remain intact. Southwest Floridians have utilized the EPA's expertise and guidance on a variety of projects that directly affect the region.

This nation is predicated on the belief that all individuals deserve proper local representation. While it is understood that the EPA's Atlanta office will be assuming the task of overseeing the Southwest Florida region, it is generally accepted that the long arm reach from Atlanta will fall short of our borders, leaving federally mandated and protected representation substandard, which in turn threatens proper management of the delicate system found right here in Southwest Florida.

In conclusion, the Southwest Florida Watershed Council respectfully requests that the Environmental Protection Agency reopen the Fort Myers office. It provides an essential service to the community and its loss is simply unacceptable. We thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Karen Bickford
Vice Chair

The mission of the Southwest Florida Watershed Council is to protect, conserve, manage and/or restore the land and water resources of the Caloosahatchee and Big Cypress Watersheds. Through increased awareness, participation and cooperation among all stakeholders in consensus building, planning and decision making, we are working to meet the economic, natural and cultural needs for this and succeeding generations.