

The Emerging Role of Regional Water Management Districts in Hurricane Preparedness, Response, and Recovery

Bonnie Kranzer

South Florida Water Management District

The Emergency Management Division of the Department of Community Affairs is the agency responsible for statewide planning and implementation of hurricane preparedness, response, and recovery plans for Florida. This responsibility is laid out in Florida Statutes, Chapter 252. In that law, the Division of Emergency Management is charged with authorizing “the creation of local organizations for emergency management in the political subdivisions of the state, and to authorize cooperation with the Federal Government and the governments of other states” (Ch. 252.32 F.S.). The Statutes also say it is “the policy of the state that all emergency management functions of the state be coordinated to the maximum extent with comparable functions of the Federal Government, including its various departments, agencies of other states and localities, and private agencies of every type, to the end that the most effective preparation and use may be made of the manpower, resources, and facilities of the nation for dealing with any emergency that may occur” (Ch. 252.32 (2) F.S.).

Water management in Florida is administered through Chapter 373 F.S., which established five hydrologically distinct water management districts (Figure 1). These five regional agencies are charged, among other responsibilities, with managing water and related land resources; promoting the conservation, development and proper utilization of surface and groundwater; preventing damage from floods, soil erosion, and excessive drainage; minimizing degradation of water resources caused by the discharge of stormwater; maintaining the navigability of rivers and harbors, and promoting the health, safety, and general welfare of the people of this state (Ch. 373.016 F.S.).

The purpose of this paper is to describe the emerging role of the water management districts in the state emergency planning process. This will be accomplished by describing how one district, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), has changed its traditional role of single-purpose flood control, operating independently of the state emergency planning process. Its current role includes a seat in the State Emergency Management Operations Center, being a member of a statewide task force developing a disaster recovery plan, and being an agency attempting to coordinate hurricane preparedness, response, and recovery within its 16 county area.

Overview of the south florida water management district

Physical description

The South Florida Water Management District is a regional agency responsible for water resources throughout all or part of Florida's 16 southernmost counties. It is one of five such agencies created by state legislation in 1972 and is the largest both in land area and population. The District covers 17,930 square miles ranging from the southern portions of the city of Orlando to both the Gulf and Atlantic coasts including the City of Miami through the Florida Keys (Figure 1). The present resident population in the region approaches 5 million with over 60% residing in Dade and Broward Counties (the Miami consolidated statistical metropolitan area).

The District is in a tropical and subtropical climatic zone. It is characterized by two distinct seasons, wet tropical weather in the summer and a dry temperate climate in the winter. The average rainfall is 54 inches with 36 inches falling from May through September. These concentrated periods of rainfall and level terrain produce a continually swampy, flooded condition that for a long time made South Florida an undesirable region for human settlement (Fernald and Patton, 1984).

The geography of the South Florida Water Management District is dominated by the Kissimmee-Everglades system (Figure 2). The region is characterized as low and flat with extensive wetlands seasonally inundated except where drained by canals. The largest wetlands are the

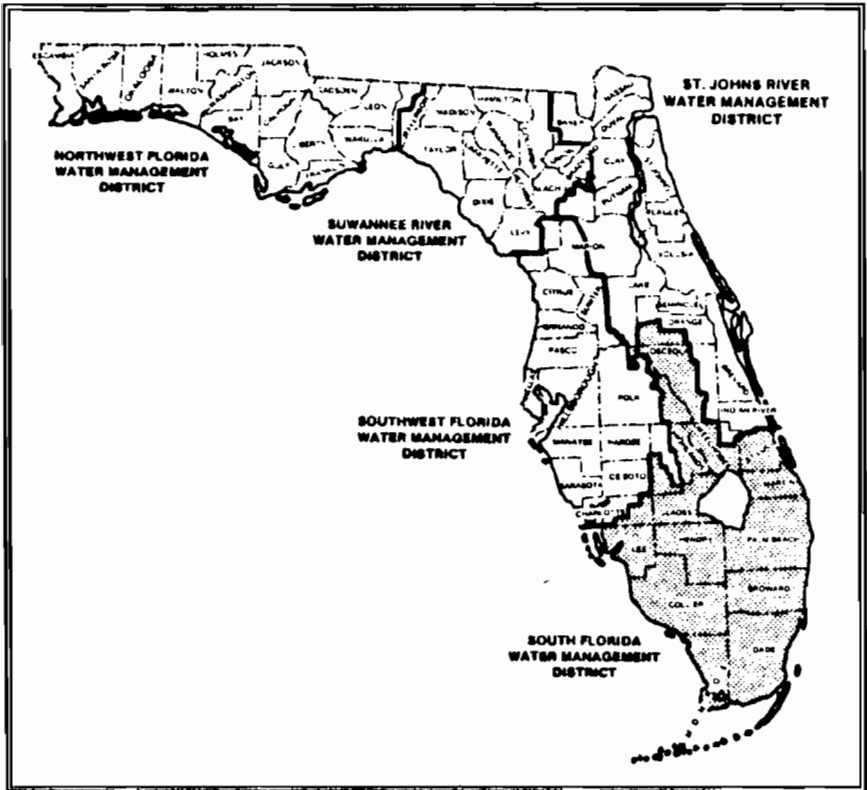


Figure 1
Water Management Districts

Everglades and the Big Cypress Swamp. Most of the surface water flow moves through marshes or through broad sloughs. The southeastern part of the district has a large network of regulated canals used to control water movement during periods of high and low water (Fernald and Patton, 1984). Many natural communities are found in the South Florida region. These range from the more predominant Pine Flatwoods, Saw Palmetto Prairies and Prairie Grasslands in the central part of the District

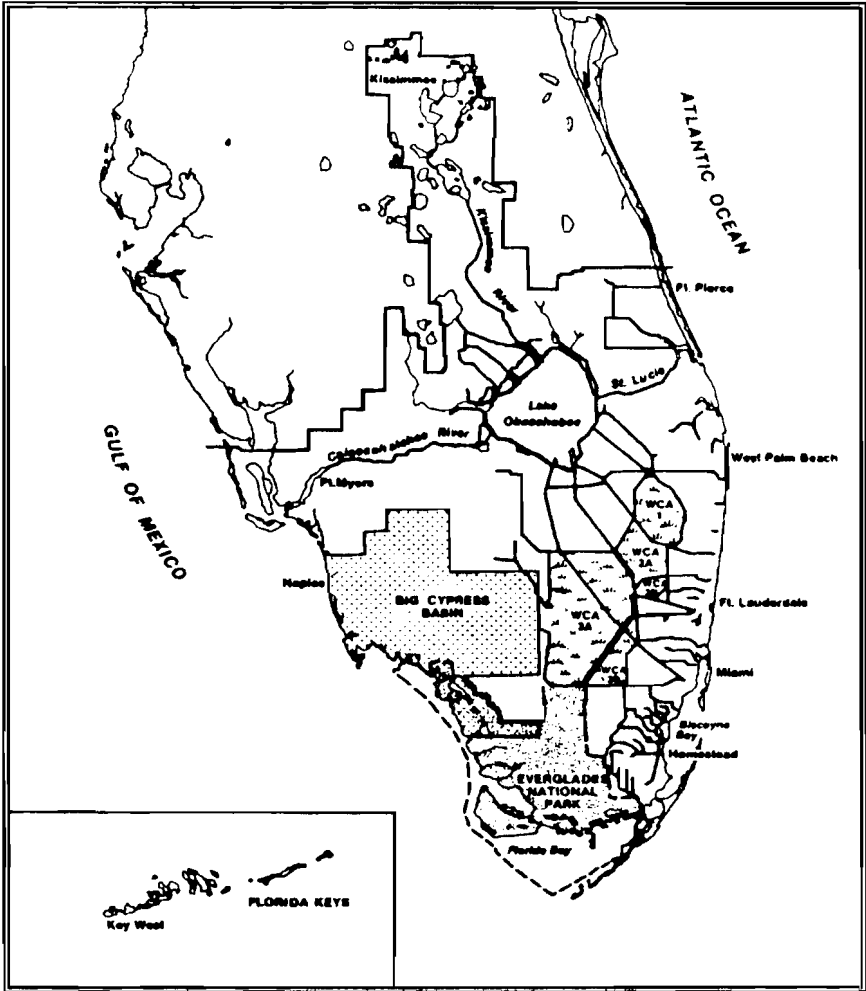


Figure 2
Major Political and Geographic Features
South Florida Water Management District

