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FLORIDA

Bill to improve Keys' water gains approval of Congress

Florida and Monroe County officials will decide how to spend the \$100 million.

USA FLUSS

MARATHON — A \$100 million water-quality improvement bill for the Florida Keys finally made its way through Congress during the final hours of the legislative session Friday, but government staffers say much work lies ahead before the federal funds are disbursed and put to use locally. State and Monroe County officials must now craft a plan outlining how and where the federal money will be spent on wastewater and storm water upgrades — and more importantly, find funding sources for the \$50 million non-federal match required as part of the improvement package.

With unincorporated Monroe, as well as five Keys municipalities, eligible for the federal funds as early as October, local politicians are preparing for the mammoth bid-making process ahead. Monroe County Mayor George Nougatz says a record table discussion among state and local leaders is imminent in light of the recent congressional action.

"We're looking to think cities like Key Colony Beach and Key West need a piece of the action even though they already have wastewater treatment systems in place," said Nougatz, who traveled to Capitol Hill earlier this year to lobby for the funding. "This is a big chunk of change we're talking about and everybody

is going to want a piece. Priorities are going to have to be established."

Despite some politicians' charges that Florida was receiving more than its share of federal financial assistance this session, Congress overwhelmingly approved the Keys legislation as part of a \$100 billion omnibus appropriations bill — the last major bill to pass before lawmakers adjourned last week.

The funding, the result of seven months of negotiations led by Rep. Peter Deutch, D-Bradwood, was linked into an environmental infrastructure package largely authored by Rep. Bud Shuster, R-Pa., chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

Although the House passed the Keys measure three times, the Senate had repeatedly refused to support it until sponsors attached it to the must-pass spending bill as an effort to improve its chances of passage.

The Keys initiative, which will be coordinated by the Florida Keys Aqueduct Authority if it acts through appropriations in January, will be used for projects like sewage treatment and central sewage systems along the 180 miles of the island chain.

Environmentalists contend the projects are necessary to fix leaking sewage systems that have caused irreversible damage to the outlying coral reefs and rendered nearby waters unsafe even for swimming.

Dabbin Harrison, Keys director of the World Wildlife Fund, says the Keys water-quality omnibus was a hard sell because of its timing in relation to the passage of the \$78 billion Everglades bill, but

contents also never gave up hope that lawmakers would buy into it after realizing its importance to the environment.

While some politicians protested that the Keys initiative was simply a local infrastructure project and not something of federal concern, Harrison insists that Deutch, county officials and residents succeeded in convincing most lawmakers that the quality of Keys waters has effects on a state and national level.

"After they heard over and over again from people that the water quality here is harming our state's resources, I think they realized something had to be done soon," said Harrison. "Seeing our coral reefs is for more than a local infrastructure project."

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