



CONSERVATION LANDS

INVEST IN FLORIDA'S FUTURE

Florida has a long and proud history of acquiring land for conservation and recreation.

Floridians want conservation

Going back to 1963, Florida voters and elected officials have dedicated significant state and local funding to protect our state's most important natural areas and provide access for visitors and residents alike to experience the "real" Florida.

Floridians in dozens of counties and cities throughout the state have voted to dedicate local funds for conservation. These strategic land conservation programs have provided immense benefits to Florida's wildlife, helping to bring back cherished species such as the Florida panther and West Indian manatee from the brink of extinction. They have also resulted in the nation's top-rated state park system. They have provided nature-based solutions to protecting our state's drinking water supply, controlling flooding, and mitigating the impact of hurricanes and coastal storms.

Florida's commitment to land conservation has also made important and often overlooked contributions to the state's economy in jobs, taxes, tourism, and other revenue. Protecting working and open lands maintains lower demand for public services. Open space and agricultural lands save communities costs in the form of decreased

demand for schools, roads, sewers, public safety, and other community services. The market values of residential properties located near parks and natural areas are typically higher than those of comparable properties more distant from such public lands. Property owners benefit from higher property values and local governments benefit from an increased tax base.

Additionally, our growing population puts increased demands on natural resources that support this growth, most importantly clean drinking water. Protecting land is the most conservative and cost-effective way to protect our water supply. Natural, undeveloped land adjacent to waterbodies acts as a filter and barrier for pesticides, fertilizers, and other pollutants, allowing clean water to replenish the Floridan aquifer which supplies 90 percent of our state's drinking water.

Conservation is cost-effective

It is far cheaper to buy environmentally sensitive lands than to restore our natural systems once they have been damaged by poorly planned development, as evidenced by the tremendous price tags for restoration of the Everglades, our springs and the Indian River Lagoon.

Smart policy involves an investment in the future in the form of strategic and science-based land acquisition. Florida already has an award-winning conservation and recreation lands acquisition program, Florida Forever. Amendment 1, which received an unprecedented 75 percent voter approval, provides a dedicated funding stream to purchase these critical conservation lands.

Conservation easements protect rural landscapes

Protection of the state's agricultural land base is an increasingly important priority for the state's land conservation programs. The use of voluntary conservation partnership agreements, also known as conservation easements, is an increasingly popular and effective land conservation tool. In many cases, prohibiting future development, while also allowing for continued private stewardship of working lands, can provide greater benefits than outright public ownership while not adding to the state land management burden. The Rural and Family Lands program has demonstrated that there is significant interest among private landowners throughout the state in conservation easements, which keeps their land in private ownership and on the tax roll while preventing future residential or commercial development.



MANAGING OUR CONSERVATION LANDS

Continued conservation and recreation land acquisition is essential for nature and the economy. Therefore we recommend policymakers:

- fund high-priority Florida Forever projects to complete the state's network of core conservation areas and wildlife corridors to allow the movement of wildlife;
- fund Florida Communities Trust to provide nature-based solutions to infrastructure problems and an adequate land-base to meet future public recreation needs;
- fund the Rural and Family Lands program to protect Florida's farms, ranches, and working lands through voluntary conservation partnership agreements which will provide key buffers to public nature preserves and help maintain our state's agricultural economy;
- fully fund land management of public lands to increase biodiversity and combat invasive species.

Our landscapes need fire

The diversity of plants and animals in Florida is adapted to and dependent on fire, and the scenic beauty of Florida's upland and wetland landscapes is maintained by fire. Without fire, both may be lost. Support for prescribed burning and the agencies that manage with fire is critical to protect the real Florida. The plant and animal species diversity in fire-dependent pine savannahs of Florida rival the richness found anywhere else in North America. Many of these species cannot exist without periodic fires that provide nutrients, maintain structure, or prevent the encroachment of hardwoods that shade out essential habitat. Northern bobwhite quail, gopher tortoises, and turkeys all depend on grassy savannas for their way of life. In the end, fire suppression in fire-dependent landscapes can be as damaging as other forms of land conversion.

We must combat exotic invasive plants and animals

More than any other state, exotic invasive plants and animals threaten our state's native flora and fauna. Exotic invasive plants like cogongrass, Brazilian pepper, and climbing fern can overrun protected natural areas,

pushing out or smothering native species. Often, small prevention efforts early can prevent huge, costly eradication efforts and the loss of native wildlife later. Programs that provide cost-efficient strategies to prevent the establishment of new introduced species can prevent the enormous expense of managing them once they become established.

Managed public lands need buffers

Development on the edges of our public natural areas makes prescribed fire, restoration, and fighting exotic invasive species more challenging. Funding conservation programs like Florida Forever and the Rural and Family Lands program assists private landowners with protecting their land and ensures that Florida agricultural lands can persist with development pressures. Protecting private lands can buffer adjacent public lands from suburban development. Funding the acquisition of outparcels and optimum boundaries to State Parks, Forests, Wildlife Management Areas and other actively managed lands reduces conflicts when conducting prescribed fire, battling exotics, and performing other natural resource management activities.

A LEGACY OF CONSERVATION

1963: THE LAND ACQUISITION TRUST FUND (LATF)

1972: ENVIRONMENTALLY ENDANGERED LANDS (EEL)

1979: CONSERVATION AND RECREATION LAND (CARL)

1981: SAVE OUR COASTS AND SAVE OUR RIVERS

1991: PRESERVATION 2000

1999: FLORIDA FOREVER

Additional reading:

Florida's Landmark Programs for Conservation and Recreation Land Acquisition, James A. Farr, Ph.D. and O. Greg Brock, Ph.D. <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/lands/AcqHistory.htm>

Land Conservation in Florida Makes Economic Sense, The Trust for Public Land, Jessica Sargent

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