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The Immense Need to Conserve Florida's Natural Lands

Florida loses an equivalent of 10 acres of natural and working lands an hour to development,¹ and with them, the invaluable ecosystem services they provide. Agricultural and residential demand for water in Florida could more than double by 2070.² Excessive nitrogen and phosphorus pollution have impaired our coastal waters, rivers, springs, lakes and estuaries. The fates of species like the Florida panther hang in the balance. Our sea level is rising, and our properties more at risk from flooding and extreme weather events.

Conservation land acquisition is the only way certain and, over time, least expensive method of addressing all these environmental woes. These lands provide essential aquifer recharge for clean drinking water, wetlands to remove pollution, habitat for our iconic species, natural carbon sequestration and buffering against storms.

The Office of Economic and Demographic Research (EDR) estimates that acquiring the conservation lands identified in priority lists by state agencies and water management districts would require nearly \$25.3 billion. EDR's 2020 Annual Assessment of Florida's Water Resources and Conservation Lands states, "[a]t the current rate of annual state conservation land acquisition expenditures, it would take about 370 years to generate the state's share (of the cost to acquire these lands)."³

Florida does not have 370 years to acquire priority lands. The best way to protect our rivers, lakes, and bays from nutrient pollution and toxic algae blooms is to perpetually protect the lands around them. Priority lands also include those critical for protecting threatened and endangered wildlife and preserving farms and working ranches. Florida is an increasingly urban state. Eighty percent of our population lives in urban areas and those urban residents need access to parks and nature. If we fail to act, these remaining natural areas will be converted to other land uses.

Recent state land conservation funding allocations and expenditures have not kept up with development, leaving Florida unprepared to address environmental and human needs.

¹ Geoplan Center at the University of Florida, Margaret H. Carr, Paul D. Zwick, Ph.D. "Technical Report Florida 2070: Mapping Florida's Future – Alternative Patterns of Development in 2070." September, 2016. Revised November, 2016.

² Geoplan Center at the University of Florida. "Technical Report Water 2070: Mapping Florida's Future – Alternative Patterns of Water Use in 2070." Edited by Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and 1000 Friends of Florida, Nov. 2016.

³ Office of Economic & Demographic Research. Annual Assessment of Florida's Water Resources and Conservation Lands. 2020 Edition.

Voters Consistently Request Land Conservation Funding

Land conservation, especially when tied to growth, has consistently enjoyed wide support from Florida voters. A few noteworthy examples:

- **1998:** 72% of Florida voters approved Amendment 5 which extended authorization indefinitely for the State to sell bonds for environmental land acquisition and made it harder for the State to surplus conservation lands.
- **2014:** 75% of Florida voters approved the Water and Land Conservation Amendment with the primary purpose of restoring funding for conservation and recreation land acquisition.
- **1998 – 2019:** 94 of the 114 (82%) state or local land conservation ballot measures that have been placed on the ballot have been approved by the voters.⁴

Time and time again, Florida voters have asked their local and state government to protect Florida's most environmentally sensitive lands in perpetuity. Recently, these calls have gone unanswered by the Legislature.

Options for Increasing Land Conservation Funding in 2021-2022

- Authorize the sale of Florida Forever bonds backed by documentary stamp tax revenue. Bonding has historically been utilized, and supported, as a funding mechanism for land acquisition. Given that land is rapidly being lost to development and that the price of land is increasing faster than the rate of inflation, it makes fiscal sense to sell long-term bonds to acquire environmentally sensitive lands while we still have the opportunity. The cost of land in Florida will only increase.
- Pass legislation that statutorily dedicates sufficient funds to meet Florida's land acquisition needs. These acquisitions could be in fee or via conservation easements.
- Restore Water Management Districts' ad valorem tax rates to the levels described in Article VII, Section 9 (b) of the Florida Constitution to enable them to meet their responsibilities, including the acquisition, management and restoration of lands important for protecting local and regional water quality and supply.

⁴ The Trust for Public Land. LandVote: Measures > History – Florida. Accessed at <https://tpl.quickbase.com/db/bbqna2qct?a=dbpage&pageID=8> on July 20, 2020.