



## STEERING COMMITTEE:

Chairman

**Bob Graham**

Vice Chairman

**Lee Constantine**

Organizations:

AUDUBON FLORIDA

CONSERVANCY OF  
SOUTHWEST  
FLORIDA

DEFENDERS OF  
WILDLIFE

FLORIDA WILDLIFE  
FEDERATION

NORTH FLORIDA  
LAND TRUST

LEAGUE OF WOMEN  
VOTERS

1000 FRIENDS OF  
FLORIDA

SIERRA CLUB  
FLORIDA

ST JOHNS  
RIVERKEEPER

TRUST FOR PUBLIC  
LAND

Individuals:

**Craig Diamond**

**Ryan Smart**

**Victoria Tschinkel**

**Estus Whitfield**

## The Critical Need to Conserve Florida's Natural Lands

Florida loses an equivalent of 10 acres of natural and working lands every hour to development,<sup>1</sup> and with them, the invaluable natural goods and services they provide. Agricultural and residential demand for water in Florida could more than double by 2070.<sup>2</sup> Excessive nitrogen and phosphorus pollution have impaired our coastal waters, rivers, springs, lakes and estuaries. The fates of endangered species like the Florida panther hang in the balance. Our sea level is rising, and our properties are 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 \$12.3 billion. EDR's 2019 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 172 years to generate the state's share (of the cost to acquire these lands)."<sup>3</sup>

Florida does not have 172 years to wait 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. Unfortunately, current budget proposals for land conservation during the 2019 Legislative Session are inadequate and continue this negative trend. The Florida House of Representatives and Senate have proposed only \$20 million and \$45 million, respectively, for the Florida Forever program. This is less than the \$100 million allocated last year and mere fractions of the historic average annual allocation of \$300 million the Florida Forever program received for decades.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Office of Economic & Demographic Research. Annual Assessment of Florida's Water Resources and Conservation Lands. 2019 Edition.

## **Voters Consistently Support 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:** 93 of the 113 (82%) state or local land conservation ballot measures that have been placed on the ballot have been approved by the voters.<sup>4</sup>

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.

## **How to Increase Land Conservation Funding in 2019**

- 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 good fiscal sense to borrow now at low interest rates to acquire environmentally sensitive lands when they are cheaper and while we still have the opportunity. The cost of land in Florida will only increase.
- Pass legislation that statutorily dedicates sufficient funds from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund to meet the needs of Florida's land acquisition programs. 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.

<sup>4</sup> The Trust for Public Land. LandVote: Measures> History – Florida. Accessed at <https://tpl.quickbase.com/db/bbqna2qct?a=dbpage&pageID=8> on April 2, 2019.