

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**\*\*PRESS RELEASE\*\***

**A STATEWIDE CALL FOR CONSERVATION FUNDING PRIORITIES**

**TALLAHASSEE**—Today, seventy-three (73) businesses and organizations representing every corner of the state sent a [letter](#) urging Florida legislators to prioritize certain conservation land acquisition, water quality protection, and resiliency funding during the 2025 legislative session that begins tomorrow.

LETTER:

March 3, 2025

The Honorable Senate  
The Honorable House  
The Capitol  
400 S. Monroe St.  
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Dear Legislator,

The undersigned seventy-three (73) organizations respectively request you adopt the budget recommendations detailed below. It is our position that these recommendations, at a minimum, are those that best reflect the long-standing public support for the continued protection of Florida's lands, waters, and wildlife.

**Florida Forever**

Florida's budget should include a minimum of \$500 million to fund land acquisitions through the Florida Forever program.

Development pressure and land acquisition costs continue to increase throughout the state, making now the opportune time to invest in conservation and recreation land acquisition. Serving as the state's flagship program for exemplary, transparent, and established conservation and recreation land acquisition efforts, the Florida Forever

program represents this state's commitment to boldly conserving critical natural resources and preserving important cultural heritage sites.

The funding mechanism for Florida Forever is tax revenue tied to growth, development, and real estate transactions (commonly known as "doc stamp" taxes). A byproduct of a robust economy and real estate growth is an acceleration in habitat loss and fragmentation and an intensified need for conservation efforts to counteract these damaging impacts. The Florida Legislature must provide sufficient funding to continue its commitment to conservation.

Florida's budget must reflect the urgency with which we need to acquire conservation land to secure Florida's heritage, underscored below:

- Florida's population is expected to increase by almost 5 million, or 23%, by 2040.
- Florida is on track to lose 1 million acres of natural and agricultural land due to development by 2040.
- The estimated cost to acquire the remaining acres slated for conservation through Florida Forever is over \$23 Billion.<sup>1</sup> Source: EDR Assessment of Florida's Conservation Lands
- Development pressure is fueling rapid increases in the cost of acquiring land, e.g., from 2021 to 2023 the estimated cost of the Lake Wales Ridge Florida Forever Project increased by 131%

The return on investment for conserving Florida's natural lands is exemplified by its benefits to the state's water resources. Florida Forever funding supports downstream water quality and receiving water bodies. By acquiring and preserving large forested areas, Florida Forever ensures that spring recharge zones remain intact, maintaining the flow of freshwater needed to sustain Florida's iconic springs. Similarly, the program complements Everglades restoration by safeguarding wetlands and uplands critical for water storage and filtration, which improve water quality and help restore the natural flow of water southward. By buffering nutrient runoff, many Florida Forever acquisitions also make the state's Water Quality Improvement Grant dollars go further, maximizing the impact of these investments. Conservation land enhances resilience to climate change impacts by protecting coastal and floodplain areas, reducing the effects of storm surge and sea level rise on communities and ecosystems. Preserving upland habitats adjacent to coral reef systems minimizes sediment and nutrient runoff, supporting healthier marine environments. Springs restoration, Everglades restoration, resilience initiatives, and coral restoration all benefit from Florida Forever funding and

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<sup>1</sup> [\(3 million acres \\* \\$7703/acre = \\$23,109,000,000\)](#)

subsequent land acquisition. By funding Florida Forever, the state ensures that land-based conservation efforts work to enhance these targeted restoration projects, amplifying their effectiveness and securing long-term conservation success.

### **Rural and Family Lands**

Separate supplemental funding should be provided for less-than-fee-simple acquisitions through the Rural and Family Lands Program. Like Florida Forever, the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program is especially urgent now, given the development pressures in Florida. This program secures vital connections throughout the Florida Wildlife Corridor and gives landowners an opportunity to ensure their legacy of land stewardship carries on into future generations.

### **Florida Communities Trust**

Florida's budget should include at least \$30 million to fund the Florida Communities Trust program. Florida Communities Trust assists local governments in creating local recreational opportunities, ensuring public access to our beautiful beaches, protecting our historical and cultural resources, preserving Florida's commercial fishing heritage and traditional working waterfronts, and providing clean air and drinking water essential to creating livable communities.

### **Indian Gaming Revenue Trust Fund**

In 2024, the Florida Legislature established the Indian Gaming Revenue Clearing Trust Fund within the Department of Financial Services and s. 380.095 F.S. for dedicated funding for conservation lands, resiliency, and clean water infrastructure.

This funding is designated for distribution to the following agencies, initiatives, and trust funds:

- \$100 million to support the wildlife corridor.
- \$100 million for the management of uplands and the removal of invasive species, which is divided as follows:
  - \$36 million to the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), of which:
    - \$32 million for state park land management activities;
    - \$4 million for implementation of the Local Trail Management Grant Program;
  - \$32 million to the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services for land management activities;
  - \$32 million to the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission for land management activities;

- \$100 million to the DEP to the Resilient Florida Trust Fund;
- The remainder to the DEP to the Water Protection and Sustainability Program Trust Fund.

We commend the legislature for implementing this forward-thinking approach to supplementing, not supplanting, funding for conservation land management and restoration.

### **Everglades Restoration**

Florida's record investment in Everglades restoration in recent years has created unprecedented momentum for the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP). Florida allocated more than \$769 million in 24-25 for restoration, including \$550 million for CERP projects, \$64 million for Northern Everglades and Estuaries Protection Plan (NEEP) projects and \$50 million for Lake Okeechobee Watershed Restoration Plan initiatives. This funding is beginning to pay dividends.

However, significantly more land to store, clean and convey water south remains a critical unaddressed need. The state should act ahead of federal dollars and allocate significant funding to acquire needed lands in the Everglades footprint now to ensure they are acquired at a lower cost and are not lost to development pressures.

Many of these properties, especially in Miami-Dade County, are not a priority on the Florida Forever Acquisition list but are just as important to acquire as soon as possible. The Environmental Endangered Lands Program over the years has taken on the role of funding and buying land in Miami Dade County but now that program is out of funding to acquire new land. Additional funding will ultimately be needed to complete restoration to allow clean water to flow south to the Everglades and Florida Bay and prevent harmful discharges to the Caloosahatchee, St. Lucie, and Lake Worth Lagoon estuaries.

### **Springs Restoration**

Florida's budget should include a minimum of \$150 million for springs restoration to slow the continued degradation of Florida's springs, rivers, and groundwater resources. Springs restoration has been continuously underfunded compared to other environmental priorities in Florida, typically receiving only \$50 million per year, the minimum allowable under Florida Statutes.

The Department of Environmental Protection's (FDEP) public workshops to update the Outstanding Florida Springs Basin Management Action Plans adopted in 2018 have

exposed significant declines in springs water quality. Despite FDEP's target, adopted by rule, of reducing springs pollution by 30% between 2018 and 2023, nitrogen pollution in Florida's most important and iconic springs has steadily increased over this time period. At the public workshops, FDEP staff identified a lack of funding from the legislature as a major cause for their failure to achieve water quality goals.

Experience tells us that the \$50 million currently proposed by FDEP in their legislative budget request is insufficient to even maintain the status quo, much less make any meaningful improvement to the health of Florida's springs and springfed rivers. To make progress in protecting Florida's springs and rivers, the Legislature should significantly increase funding available for springs restoration projects and provide robust funding for fee-simple land acquisition projects within priority springsheds in the 2025 budget.

Florida's springs are important cultural landmarks and economic drivers in rural areas; they are the flow that feeds our rivers like the St. Johns, Suwannee, Santa Fe, and Withlacoochee, as well as the coastal estuaries where these rivers meet the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico; and they are our window to the Floridan Aquifer, the source of two-thirds of Floridians' drinking water. If we continue to fail to provide adequate springs funding we will lose much more than just Florida's springs.

### **Hurricane Restoration Reimbursement Grant Program and Resilient Florida**

According to FDEP, 52% of Florida's sandy beaches are critically eroded and will need to be managed in perpetuity (DEP's Critically Eroded Beaches of Florida Report). At the same time, about 95% of all Florida tourism occurs in coastal or Orlando-area counties, and these counties generate 88% of Florida's GDP (Federal Reserve Economic Database 2023, Rockport 2023). As the State of Florida responds to sea level rise, it is critical that investments in solutions that maintain our sandy beaches, such as dune plantings and living shorelines, are prioritized. Engineered solutions, including seawalls, rock revetments, geotubes, and other gray infrastructure, lead to further erosion and pose a threat to our critically important wildlife. Instead of funding these reactive, beach-altering responses to sea level rise, the State should prioritize land acquisition and infrastructure transition away from highly erosional areas..

One simple way that the State can begin to achieve this goal is by terminating the Hurricane Restoration Reimbursement Grant Program on July 1, 2025. This program provides grants to private beachfront property owners to carry out dredge and fill projects, as well as temporary and permanent armoring projects, to protect their private properties. The Legislature's ongoing funding of private coastal armoring is an unconstitutional expenditure of public funds without serving a public purpose, and must

be ended immediately. Any purported benefits of coastal armoring are solely to private property owners. Conversely, the beachgoing public and Florida's coastal public trust resources will be significantly harmed by taxpayer-funded coastal armoring.

Instead of underwriting harmful coastal armoring activities, the state should allow the Hurricane Restoration Reimbursement Grant Program to expire and revert those funds to Resilient Florida. While Resilient Florida has enjoyed robust levels of funding since its inception, the proposed budgets the past two years represents a marked decrease from \$300 million to \$200 million for eligible resiliency projects. Local need for these funds remains high, last year, the program received 143 eligible applications for implementation projects – a total of \$834 million requested. In the wake of Hurricanes Debby, Helene, and Milton - which have led to billions of dollars in damage - the state should be prioritizing comprehensive resiliency investments to ensure that Floridians, critical infrastructure, and coastal environments in vulnerable areas are adequately protected from the impacts of flooding, sea level rise, and storms.

### **Resiliency - Wastewater Infrastructure**

Another result of increasingly violent hurricanes is sewage spills from aging or faulty infrastructure. Failing wastewater infrastructure is not only harmful to the environment, it also poses a risk to human health and our state's economy. According to an analysis of pollution spills reported to the FDEP after Hurricane Milton, more than 70 million gallons of polluted effluent spilled into waterways, communities and neighborhoods all across the state. Most of those reports were for raw sewage or partially treated wastewater. A combination of flooding, overwhelmed equipment and old faulty infrastructure was the cause in over 90% of cases. The estimated volume from this one storm alone is conservative, given that over 100 reports were still missing the amount spilled, the real number is likely much higher. The largest spill recorded was roughly 20M gallons of partially treated wastewater from the city of Bradenton that flowed directly into the Manatee River. What is even more telling from the pollution reports is that even during a month without a hurricane, like May, over 100 reports of pollution spills roll in. Many are caused by broken, aging and faulty equipment.

FDEP currently has pollution reports that spell out where the worst cases of infrastructure failure occur, documented by repeated sewage spills. That data should be leveraged to help identify and drive funding appropriations to update some of our state's most at-risk infrastructure systems.

As more wastewater infrastructure reaches the end of its useful life, additional funding will be needed to inspect and repair aging and failing systems. According to the Florida Office of Economic and Demographic Research's most recent 20-year needs analysis,

\$62.29 billion is anticipated for project-related wastewater utility expenditures with an additional \$77.24 billion for operation and maintenance expenditures. The costs associated with these repairs often fall on municipalities and taxpayers. For far too long Florida has relied on the fallacy that sprawling new development pays for itself. Growth management policies need to acknowledge that the cost of sprawling development consistently exceeds the revenue generated by it. Furthermore, additional sustainable funding sources must be identified to maintain and repair existing infrastructure. Functional infrastructure is core-responsibility of the government to protect public health and the wildlife and waterways we hold so dear in Florida.

Respectfully,

**1000 Friends of Florida**

Kim Dinkins, Policy and Planning Director

**Aquatic Preserve Alliance of Central Florida**

Deborah Shelley, President

**Aquatic Preserve Society**

Barbara Howell, Secretary

**Bay and Reef of the Florida Keys**

Captain Xavier Figueredo, Captain Elizabeth Jolin

**Bear Warriors United**

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**City of Seminole Community Garden**

Mary Ann Kirk, Coordinator

**Clean Water Coalition of Indian River County**

Judy Orcutt, President

**Clearview Geographic LLC**

Alex Zelenski, Chief Executive Officer

**Conservation Alliance of St. Lucie**

Shari Anker, President

**Conservation Science, Inc.**

Reed Noss, Chief Scientist

**Democratic Environmental Caucus of Florida**

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**Defenders of Wildlife**

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**Earth Ethics, Inc.**

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Mia McCormick, State Advocate

**Environmental Confederation of Southwest Florida**

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**Florida Defenders of the Environment**

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**Florida Voices for Animals, Inc.**

Myriam Parham, President

**Florida Wildlife Federation**

Sarah Gledhill, President

**Friends of Biscayne Bay**

Bruce Matheson, President

**Friends of Camp Helen State Park**



Courtney Harper, Executive Director

**Friends of Oleta River State Park**

Nina Jackson, Vice President

**Friends of St. Sebastian River**

Tim Glover, President

**Friends of the Everglades**

Eve Samples, Executive Director

**Friends of the Wekiva River**

Mark Pafford, President

**Friends of Wakulla Springs State Park**

Julie Harrington, President

**Gulf Coast Community Foundation**

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**Healthy Gulf**

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**Hold The Line Coalition**

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**Indian Riverkeeper**

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**Keep the Country, Inc.**

Susan Schoettle-Gumm, President

**Kissimmee Waterkeeper**

John Capece, Waterkeeper

**Lake County Conservation Council, Inc.**

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**League of Women Voters of Alachua County**

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**League of Women Voters of Sarasota**

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**St. Johns Riverkeeper**

Lisa Rinaman, Riverkeeper

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**Surfrider Foundation**

Katie Bauman, Florida Policy Manager

**The Guardians of Martin County**

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**The Paper Bear Inc.**

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