

News Release



March 14, 2023

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US Fish and Wildlife Service seeks public input on proposed Southwest Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Area

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is exploring the possibility of a new conservation area across Southwest Florida and asks for the public’s input. The Service is examining opportunities to provide conservation assistance within a study area, which stretches from Lakeland to Naples with Lake Okeechobee as the eastern edge and will host a series of public meetings.

This geographic region is home to many rare and endemic plants and animals, including 74 federally or state-listed threatened and endangered species. Its terrain is an ecologically wondrous combination of lakes large and small, palmetto and oak prairies, cattle ranches, orange groves, melon and sugar cane fields. While some areas are conserved in state and national parks – wildlife management areas, national wildlife refuges and Tribal lands – wildlife corridors are missing to connect all these special places.

Wildlife in this region is under pressure from rapid development, disappearing ranchlands and sea level rise. A subset of the study area, known as a conservation area, will also be reviewed during the public meetings.

“Input from landowners, Tribes, and the private sector is critical to helping us with this open and transparent planning process,” said Mike Oetker, Acting Regional Director for the Southeast Region of the US Fish and Wildlife Service. “There’s no time to wait. Central Florida is succumbing to the same growth and development pressures impacting coastal areas. The state’s unique flora and wildlife deserve protected places to thrive. So do our children and grandchildren.”

A conservation area, if approved, would be woven together in the same public and private fashion that created the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area established a decade ago. The Service will not use condemnation of any lands (eminent domain) to create a conservation area. Willing landowners would have the opportunity to sell their land outright or place it in a conservation easement which precludes the development of subdivisions and shopping centers. An easement affords ranchers the opportunity to keep their ranches working as ranches.

Voluntary conservation of land to benefit wildlife, plants and people is a hallmark of the Biden-Harris administration’s [America the Beautiful initiative](#), which seeks to protect 30 percent of the nation’s lands and waters by 2030.

The Service will hold a series of public meetings to gather input on the benefits and impacts of conservation within the study area. While the study area includes cities like Fort Myers and Naples, the much smaller conservation area will most likely hew towards the center of the Florida Peninsula and complement the much-acclaimed Florida Wildlife Corridor. Using the input from the series of public meetings, a Land Protection Plan and environmental compliance documents will be developed identifying a conservation area. The Service would present alternatives and impacts for the public to review later in 2023.

Through the Service's land purchases, a fish and wildlife conservation area could offer wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities such as hiking, biking, fishing, kayaking and birding.

The Southwest Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Area could improve the health and quality of Greater Everglades including waterways leading into, and out of, Lake Okeechobee and Charlotte Harbor. Creating a wildlife corridor from Southwest Florida into the state's northern stretches would allow panthers, bonneted bats, Everglade snail kites and other animals and plants to migrate away from increasingly diminished habitats.

Details, including information on virtual public meetings, will be posted online at:

<https://www.fws.gov/project/proposed-southwest-florida-conservation-area>. All interested parties will have the opportunity to participate and provide comments during the 30-day scoping period. Please contact: southeast_fws_planning@fws.gov.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service works with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. For more information, visit www.fws.gov, or connect with us through any of these social media channels: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#) and [Flickr](#).

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