

## **Proposed Everglades to Gulf (formerly called Southwest Florida) Conservation Area Frequently Asked Questions**

### **Project Overview**

#### **What is the National Wildlife Refuge System?**

The National Wildlife Refuge System, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is the world's largest network of conservation lands and waters dedicated to the conservation of native wildlife and their habitats, encompassing 568 national wildlife refuges and 38 wetlands management districts covering more than 95 million land acres and 740 million acres of submerged lands and waters.

#### **What is the Southwest Florida Study Area?**

The SWFL Landscape Conservation Design (LCD) study area incorporates almost 7 million acres of land and water from the northwestern Everglades north to the headwaters of the Peace River, west to incorporate the Myakka River watershed, and east to the Lake Wales Ridge, Fisheating Creek and the western half of Lake Okeechobee. The LCD evaluated wildlife resources, habitat, and threats. The LCD identifies lands having high-quality wildlife habitat values and good habitat restoration potential where wildlife, such as migratory birds or threatened and endangered species, would benefit from long-term habitat protection and management.

#### **Was all the land within the Study Area included in the proposed Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area?**

No, all the land within the Study Area is not included in the proposed Conservation Area. The planning team has evaluated habitat conditions and other factors to determine what lands should be included in the proposed Conservation Area. After receiving and considering public comments regarding the Study Area, the planning team further analyzed wildlife use, current and past land use, and threats and developed preliminary alternatives.

The proposed acquisition boundary and potential habitat protection measures were analyzed and are being made available for public review and comment in a National Environmental Policy Act-compliant document and a draft Land Protection Plan. These documents identify the lands and habitats within the Study Area that would be suitable for inclusion in the Refuge System.

#### **Why did the Service choose this study area for the conservation area?**

In 2022, a Landscape Conservation Design for Southwest Florida that incorporates the Greater Everglades, Caloosahatchee River, Fisheating Creek, Peace River, and Myakka River watersheds was developed. This document provided the scientific justification to explore further the need for the proposed Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area.

Southwest Florida has a unique set of species under threats from rapid development and land use changes. This region harbors a largely intact rural landscape critical to many threatened and endangered species. It also plays a vital role in the ecological integrity of both the Everglades and Charlotte Harbor watersheds. Opportunities still exist to conserve large working and natural landscapes that would protect this region's water and wildlife.

### **How does this effort complement previous conservation efforts of the state?**

Florida is a leader in land conservation. The state has a long history of conservation planning and land protection within southwest Florida. This effort would allow the Service to work with state and federal partners to continue protecting land within this region. There are many properties within the Study Area where landowners have applied to be on the state's list to be considered for conservation.

The current effort by the Service could be leveraged with state funds to enhance efforts to protect wildlife and water resources and provide recreational activities within southwest Florida. This effort would add to the tremendous and successful efforts to protect the Florida Wildlife Corridor and other lands critical for our wildlife and water resources.

### **Planning Process**

#### **What is NEPA?**

The National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA, requires that federal planning activities be documented to ensure that environmental, economic, or social effects are thoroughly evaluated and disclosed to the public. The Service has developed an environmental report analyzing wildlife protection needs, proposed alternatives, and the effects of the proposed alternatives on the human environment. The documents also address compliance requirements for other laws and regulations the Service must fulfill to gain authority to add land to the Refuge System.

#### **What is the process for establishing the Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area, and what opportunities for public input exist?**

A draft Land Protection Plan and associated NEPA compliance document are required to be developed and made available for public comment. The Land Protection Plan informs landowners and interested stakeholders of the proposal to establish a conservation area. The Service prepares the compliance document as required by the National Environmental Policy Act to analyze different strategies for land protection in the area.

#### **What is the Land Protection Planning process?**

The Refuge System's Land Protection Planning process is a transparent evaluation, planning, and compliance process, with public input encouraged at key milestones. It is used by the Service to study land protection opportunities with our partners and the public, including adding lands to the Refuge System. The Refuge System's land protection tools include purchasing land or an easement from willing sellers or establishing a long-term lease or agreement with landowners wishing to enroll their land in the Refuge System.

#### **What types of activities could be allowed on the proposed Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area?**

The Service supports wildlife-dependent recreation on lands acquired in fee-title, which may include hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation. The Service has evaluated the compatibility of these uses through a draft Land Protection Plan and Conceptual Management Plan, both of which are being made available for public review and comment.

#### **How can I get involved in the planning process?**

You can request to be placed on our mailing list, provide comments early in the process, review and comment on the documents, and participate in public meetings. The public's input helps us identify the issues, alternatives, and solutions that make the Refuge System work for both wildlife and people. If you are on our mailing list, you will be notified of all the planning activities and opportunities to provide information and comments.

### **What are the next steps?**

The Service is presenting the public with the Draft Land Protection Plan and associated compliance document, complete with maps and other information describing the Service's proposed action for the Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area. The Service is providing an opportunity for the public to review and comment on the proposal. Once the public review and comment period ends, the Service will evaluate and respond to substantive comments and make any changes needed before developing a final plan, which would be submitted to the Service Director requesting approval.

### **What is the timeline for completing the Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area?**

This is a long-term effort that may take decades to complete. The number of willing landowners and the availability of funding would determine the timeline.

### **Realty Process**

#### **How will land be part of the proposed Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area?**

The Service and its partners would work with willing landowners to establish the Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area through several methods, including acquiring land at fair market value and acquiring conservation easements that contain permanent restrictions on the use or development of the land to protect its conservation values.

#### **How would the Service acquire land for the proposed Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area?**

If the Service Director approves the Land Protection Plan, land protection strategies would be implemented, such as working with willing landowners within the Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area. This boundary would not affect the rights of private landowners. The Service would acquire land from willing landowners only. Conservation easements that protect the land from development would also be considered if a landowner desires.

#### **If my land is within the Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area, what does that mean?**

The rights of a private landowner are not affected by the designation of the Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area. Landowners have no obligation to sell their land or otherwise participate in the proposed Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area at any time.

#### **Does the Service use the power of condemnation (eminent domain) to acquire property?**

It is the Service's long-standing policy to only acquire land or interests in land from property owners who wish to add their lands to the Refuge System. . The Service's policy is only to use the condemnation process to determine the legal owner (clear title), settle a difference of opinion of value (when the owner is agreeable to court action), or prevent uses that would cause irreparable damage to resources that the unit (refuge, etc.) was established to protect. The Service, like many other federal agencies, has the power of eminent domain. It is granted in the

Constitution and the Condemnation Act of 1888 and can be used to acquire lands and interests in lands for the public good.

**What if the Service wants to buy my land, and I do not want to sell?**

You don't have to sell your land as part of this proposal. The Service would only buy land from willing sellers.

**How would tax revenue be affected if lands become part of the Refuge System?**

The federal government does not pay property tax. However, the Service annually reimburses counties to compensate for lost revenue based on whichever is greater: 75 cents per acre, three-fourths of one percent of the fair market value, or 25 percent of the net receipts collected from operation and management of refuge lands. Congress must first approve the use of these funds. Also, Congress may appropriate additional funds to compensate local governments. Other economic benefits typically associated with refuge lands include tourism, improved property values adjacent to the refuge, and access to federal grants.

**Where does the money come from to buy private land in a time of tight budgets?**

The Service anticipates funding for this project would most likely be provided through the [Migratory Bird Conservation Fund](#) and the [Land and Water Conservation Fund](#). These funding sources are not derived from traditional tax revenues. The funds are collected from the sale of [Federal Duck Stamps](#), entrance fees from specific national wildlife refuges, import duties on arms and ammunition (Migratory Bird Conservation Fund), and offshore oil leases (Land and Water Conservation Fund). Funding from these sources is intended to support the conservation of land nationwide.

**What does an approved acquisition boundary mean?**

An approved acquisition boundary identifies important and sensitive resource areas that the Service seeks to protect in perpetuity. Landowners within an approved acquisition boundary retain all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of private land ownership. After the Director approves an approved acquisition boundary and funding is secured, the Service can make offers to purchase land or enter into management agreements with landowners wishing to add their lands to the Refuge System. Lands do not become part of the Refuge System unless purchased from a willing seller or placed under a management agreement with the landowner.

**Does land use regulation increase within an approved acquisition boundary?**

No, landowners within an approved acquisition boundary retain all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of private land ownership, even if the Service has acquired an interest in the land surrounding them. Private lands remain under the owner's control and are subject to local land use regulations unless the owner sells the property to the Service. Service management of access, land-use practices, water management, hunting, fishing, and general use within an approved acquisition boundary is limited to the lands that the Service has acquired from willing sellers.

**How will I benefit if a refuge/conservation area is established?**

Refuges and conservation areas enhance the quality of life for residents by preserving the region's ecological value and aesthetic beauty. Communities also benefit from open space that

does not burden the municipal infrastructure but still provides revenues under the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act. Landowners within an acquisition boundary wishing to sell their properties may benefit from our Acquisition Program. Other benefits include increased opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation on fee-title lands, which may attract visitors to the area, increasing tourism revenues earned by local businesses.

**Will Service land acquisition help or hurt my community?**

Communities benefit from Service lands in many ways. Nearby refuge lands enhance the quality of life for local residents by preserving the region's aesthetic beauty, providing open space, and offering numerous wildlife-dependent recreational and educational opportunities on fee-title lands. Bird watchers, photographers, educators, researchers, hunters, anglers, and hikers visit fee-title lands that allow their particular use. Public use programs attract visitors each year to national wildlife refuges. Public uses of refuge lands must undergo public assessment and be compatible with the refuge's purpose.

Nearly 500 national wildlife refuges and wetland management districts are open to the public across the United States, hosting some 65 million visits yearly, most offering free admittance year-round. These visitors can be an important source of revenue for the local economy. In doing so, they support regional economies to the tune of \$3.2 billion per year and support more than 41,000 jobs.

Large-scale restoration programs, which often occur as Service lands are being established, can infuse millions of federal dollars into the local economy. Many those funds stay within the local economy as local contractors are brought in, equipment is purchased, and workers who spend their paychecks in the locally are hired. These dollars can benefit local economies and increase tax receipts for local governments.