



Proposed Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area

The Service is pleased to announce the availability of a draft planning package for the proposed Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area formerly referred to as a portion of the Southwest Florida Landscape Conservation Design (LCD) Study Area or the proposed Southwest Florida Conservation Area.

The planning package includes a draft Land Protection Plan, Environmental Assessment, and Conceptual Management Plan for the proposed Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area. The proposed action would enable the Service to protect environmentally sensitive lands by working with willing landowners through strategic acquisition of both fee-title and less-than-fee conservation easements. This proposed Conservation Area contains unique natural communities and wildlife species that are under threat from rapid human population growth, land use changes, and effects of climate change. This Region harbors large intact natural communities and rural landscapes essential to the Florida panther and a host of other Federal and State listed species, and At-risk species. Working with our partners, the proposed Conservation Area can assist with protecting both the Everglades and Charlotte Harbor watersheds. Important opportunities exist to protect large natural communities and working landscapes and preserve ecological connections which can address many of the Region's biodiversity and water resource conservation goals.

The Service conducted public scoping in March and April of 2023 regarding the purpose and need for the Service to engage in conservation protection within southwest Florida. Over 2,600 comments were received on the concept of the Service potentially establishing a conservation area to protect ecological priorities within a wildlife corridor expanding from Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge and Big Cypress National Preserve north of the Caloosahatchee River to Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area. This concept was based on an LCD completed in July of



Working ranchhands. Credit Carlton Ward

2022 which examined ecological importance, pending threats, and protection opportunities within a 7-million-acre Study Area. Input received during the scoping period was used to develop the proposed draft planning package which includes a draft Land Protection Plan, Environmental Assessment, and Conceptual Management Plan.

During the planning process, the Service refined the LCD Study Area to a 4-million-acre proposed Conservation Area where the Service could seek to purchase less-than-fee-title conservation easements and fee-title land acquisition from willing landowners. Private landowners who elect to participate would continue to control activities on their lands. The conservation easements would ensure the land could never be developed in perpetuity.

Lands in which the Service purchases fee-title from willing sellers, could be open for compatible public recreational uses such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation and could provide cultural, traditional, and medicinal use opportunities for Tribal nations. The total amount of fee-title acres purchased by the Service can not exceed 10% of the proposed Conservation Area's total acreage. Details of the proposal, including maps, are available as part of the Draft Planning Package which can be found at <https://www.fws.gov/project/everglades-to-gulf-conservation-area>.



Indigo bunting. Credit Larry Richardson/USFWS

Conservation Area Goals and Objectives

Four overarching goals were developed for the proposed Conservation Area. Goals address a functional conservation landscape; habitat for fish and wildlife; water quality, quantity, and storage; opportunities for Tribal Nations, and wildlife-dependent recreation, as listed.

1. **Protect, Restore, and Manage Habitats for Fish and Wildlife.** The proposed Conservation Area would aid in the maintenance and recovery of Florida panther populations and protect many rare and endemic species, over 70 Federally and state-listed Threatened and Endangered species, such as the Florida scrub-jay, Audubon's crested caracara, wood stork, Florida bonneted bat, Everglade snail kite, Eastern indigo snake and sand skink, thereby protecting natural communities found only in south Florida and species adapted to Florida's unique subtropical environment. In addition, the Service would conserve important rural landscape mosaics,

including ranchlands, to combat habitat fragmentation and protect wildlife corridors essential to many species' viability and adaptation responses to climate change. Important wildlife corridors essential for listed species viability and adaptation opportunities in response to climate change would be provided. The proposed Conservation Area would also provide opportunities to restore important wetlands, provide water storage, and improve water quality for the Greater Everglades, Myakka River, Peace River, Fisheating Creek, and Caloosahatchee River watersheds, and coastal estuaries including Charlotte Harbor.

2. Provide Science-Driven

Landscape-Level Conservation. The proposed Conservation Area would contribute to protection of a functional conservation landscape composed of a mosaic of natural communities and ranchlands that would prevent further habitat fragmentation, provide functional habitat for wide-ranging listed species, and facilitate watershed and prescribed fire management. The proposed Conservation Area would allow the Service to protect and restore water resources within multiple watersheds to improve water quality and quantity; maintain and enhance ecological integrity, recreation, and the economy; and improve and secure water supplies, benefiting humans and wildlife. The landscape-scale ecological priorities within the proposed Conservation Area are identified with the best available ecological and spatial data based on conservation science, landscape ecology, and spatial analysis.

3. Conserve Important Lands and Waters for the Benefit of All People. Visitors to the proposed Conservation Area fee-

title lands would enjoy opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreation which may include hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation, while increasing knowledge of and support for conservation. Fee-title lands could also provide cultural, traditional, and medicinal use opportunities. Willing landowners could protect their private land through conservation easements and stewardship programs while providing important ecosystem services for all people. The Everglades and southwest Florida watersheds require protection of remaining functional wetlands and floodplains, and restoration of hydrology to avoid further impairment and improve water quality and supply including Charlotte Harbor, an essential economic engine for south and southwest Florida.

4. Promote Conservation Partnerships Working with Adaptive and Flexible Tools and Strategies.

Collaboration in science, education, research, and land acquisition (including conservation easements) would facilitate the development of new partnerships and strengthen existing partnerships with natural resource organizations, private landowners, government agencies, Tribal Nations, and local decision-makers. The partnerships would help inform land management decisions and encourage continued responsible stewardship of natural and rural landscapes essential for listed species protection, associated natural resources, while facilitating resiliency and adaptation to climate change.

Objectives associated with the proposed Conservation Area would:

- Assist with the restoration of the Everglades.
- Enhance the viability and recovery of the Florida Panther and over 70 other threatened and endangered species and 17 At-risk species.
- Protect and restore watersheds and coastal estuaries for ecological integrity, water supply, recreation, and the economy especially the Caloosahatchee River watershed, Fisheating Creek watershed, the Peace River watershed, the Myakka River watershed, Okaloacoochee Slough, Corkscrew Swamp, and Charlotte Harbor.

- Maintain unique natural communities and species adapted to the unique subtropical environment.
- Conserve habitat diversity and complexity.
- Improve and increase resiliency.
- Facilitate protection of a regional scale wildlife corridor through the protection of a functional landscape mosaic of natural communities and ranchlands.
- Facilitate resiliency and adaptation to climate change through protection and restoration of freshwater flows into coastal wetlands and protecting coastal to inland connectivity to provide a functional retreat for coastal species.
- Complement other conservation initiatives.
- Foster existing partnerships and seek new partnerships.
- Conserve cultural sites and landscapes.
- Provide cultural, traditional, and medicinal use opportunities on fee-title lands.
- Provide wildlife dependent recreational opportunities on fee-title lands.

Schedule for Establishing the Proposed Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area

Conduct Internal and External Scoping
March – April 2023

Develop Draft Land Protection Plan and NEPA Document
Spring 2022-Late Summer 2023

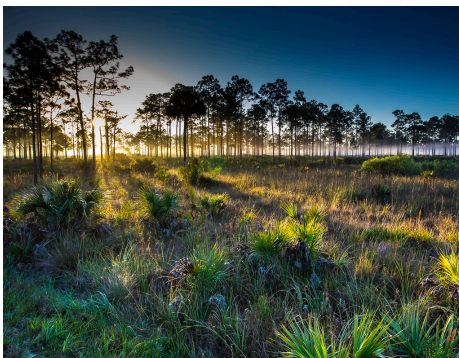
Conduct Public Review and Comment on Proposal
September - October 2023

Evaluate the Comments and Develop Final Plan for Approval
November - December 2023

For more information:

<https://www.fws.gov/project/everglades-to-gulf-conservation-area>

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Sunset. Credit Larry Richardson/USFWS