



**Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area**

*Polk, Osceola, Okeechobee, and Highlands Counties, Florida*

January 2012



**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

**Establishing the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area**

*Polk, Osceola, Okeechobee, and Highlands Counties, Florida*

**Refuge Contact Information**

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Cattlemen move a herd across their Polk County ranch along the shores of Lake Kissimmee.  
 Photo credit: Carlton Ward Jr / CarltonWard.com



**Ken Salazar**  
*United States Secretary of the Interior*

### Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area

"This initiative is aimed at preserving a rural working ranch landscape to protect and restore one of the great grassland and savanna landscapes of eastern North America."

*Interior Secretary Ken Salazar*

### Everglades Headwaters Conservation Partnership

Working together through public-private partnerships is the key to conserving Central Florida's great grasslands and prairies, the remnants of a once vast ecosystem.

The 150,000-acre Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area is the collaborative vision of multiple partners to add the conservation pieces needed to forever protect the Kissimmee River Basin's natural resources. As such, this project has few peers in the National Wildlife Refuge System. Working with private landowners and public entities, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will use a combination of refuge land and easements to connect existing pockets of conservation areas. The goals are to create wildlife corridors, protect rare species, restore wetlands and provide outdoor recreation, while supporting working ranches.

To accomplish these common goals, the Service is committed to developing long-term partnerships with local communities, landowners, ranchers, recreational users, local businesses, organizations,

and the public, as well as with local, State, Tribal, and Federal agencies. Together, we can conserve the best of the Everglades Headwaters for future generations to enjoy, with its abundant wildlife, clean water and rural heritage.

### Existing Conservation in the Kissimmee River Basin

The network of existing conservation lands within the Kissimmee River Basin includes State parks, State wildlife management areas, the Avon Park Air Force Range, The Nature Conservancy's Disney Wilderness Preserve, and agricultural lands.

### Wildlife, Habitats, and the Conservation Need

The Kissimmee River Basin has a long history of cattle ranching, farming and forestry. Its mosaic of sandhill and scrub, freshwater wetlands, prairies, pine flatwoods and pastures support iconic Florida species, including the Florida black bear, Florida panther, Florida grasshopper sparrow and Florida scrub-jay. Hundreds of other rare species also call this area home, some of which exist nowhere else in the world.

As Florida continues to grow and develop, these natural resources and rural way of life are under pressure. The threats include water pollution, urban development and fragmented habitats. As the nation's leading conservation agency for wildlife and habitat protection, the Service is working with public and private land managers, as well as other partners, to realize a cohesive vision for the landscape.

### Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment

The Land Protection Plan (LPP) and the Final Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area



**Savannah landscape of Central Florida**  
*Photo credit: George Willson*



**Eastern Meadowlark**  
*Photo credit: Carlton Ward Jr / CarltonWard.com*

were signed by Service Director Dan Ashe in January 2012. Director Ashe's approval of these documents authorizes the Service to begin negotiating with landowners to acquire land or interest in land, thereby establishing the refuge and conservation area.

The LPP will guide the establishment of the refuge and conservation area. The LPP outlines the resource protection needs; presents the methods the Service could use in working with conservation partners and interested landowners to accomplish these needs; and details a layout of the lands that could be included in the project, including conservation protection priorities for the refuge and conservation area.

The Final EA analyzes the anticipated impacts of the alternatives, addresses public comments and identifies the preferred alternative. Based on these points of consideration, it concludes with a "Finding of No Significant Impacts." After sufficient lands and conservation easements have been acquired, another intensive planning effort will take place to develop a long-range management plan called the Comprehensive Conservation Plan.



**Florida black bear**  
*Photo credit: Carlton Ward Jr / CarltonWard.com*

### Vision

To conserve, protect, and manage one of the great grassland and savanna landscapes of eastern North America for current and future generations, protecting the important wildlife and habitats of the working rural landscape of Central Florida's Kissimmee River Basin that is home to abundant fish and wildlife resources; that is vital to restoration and protection of the water quality and quantity for the Everglades ecosystem; that is resilient to the effects of global climate change; and that offers outdoor recreational opportunities important to the region's economy.

### Goals

- Create a more connected conservation landscape by providing healthy habitats between existing conservation areas. These wildlife corridors will allow habitats and species to shift in response to urban development and global climate change.
- Provide a wide range of quality habitats to support migratory birds, federally and State-listed species, State designated Species of Special Concern, and native wildlife diversity.
- Improve the water quality, water quantity, and water storage capacity of the upper Everglades watershed in support of Everglades restoration goals and the water needs of Central and South Floridians.
- Provide wildlife-dependent recreation and education. Refuge visitors of all abilities will enjoy opportunities for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation, while increasing knowledge of and support for conservation of the important grassland and savanna landscape of the headwaters of the Everglades.

### Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area

The 50,000-acre refuge could potentially be located in up to six units. The Service has identified a larger area, called the Conservation Focal Area (outlined by the blue areas on the map), within which to purchase these refuge lands. This larger area will allow the Service to respond over time to changing landowner interest and opportunities as they arise.

The conservation area will consist of up to 100,000 acres in partial interest, such as conservation easements that prohibit development. This land will remain in private ownership, and the landowners will continue to control activities on their lands. The map identifies a larger area, called the Conservation Partnership Area (outlined by a dotted line on the map), within which the Service will purchase and establish the conservation area.

This is a voluntary program. Landowners are under no obligation to sell their properties or easements on their properties to the Service.



**Children experiencing outdoor wildlife education.**

### Next Steps

Piecing together the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area will likely take years, if not decades. The primary source of Federal funding will come from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which is derived largely from off-shore oil and gas leases. Other ways land and easements may be acquired include donations, leases and agreements as the Service works with private landowners and conservation groups.



**Cattle ranchers rounding up a cow and calf along the shores of Lake Kissimmee.**  
*Photo credit: Carlton Ward Jr / CarltonWard.com*

As the Service negotiates with willing landowners interested in selling their land or interest in their land, high priority will be given to native habitats on which wetlands exist and can be restored to benefit fish and wildlife.

As the refuge is established, public uses that can occur on the refuge may include:

- Hunting and fishing;
- Environmental education and interpretation;
- Wildlife observation and photography; and
- Hiking and horseback riding.

Other activities supporting these uses include: primitive camping and off-road vehicle use on designated roads and trails in support of hunting and research; and boating to support fishing access. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will co-manage refuge lands under the State wildlife management area program to offer hunting and fishing opportunities.

The Service will manage the refuge to:

- Provide habitat for threatened, endangered and resident wildlife species;
- Fill wetland drainage ditches to restore historic water storage capacity;
- Provide breeding grounds for waterfowl;

- Conduct prescribe burning and allow grazing to remove excess vegetation and restore native plant communities;
- Control invasive species through manual, mechanical, and/or chemical means; and
- Protect cultural and historical resources for the public to enjoy.

The conservation area will provide important opportunities for conservation, while at the same time maintaining the ability of the ranching community to persist. Only those lands in which the Service acquires partial interest will be subject to the terms and conditions of the easement, agreement or other tool(s) that will be used. Those lands chosen as part of the conservation area will provide vital connectivity and buffers for the refuge and other conservation lands within the Kissimmee River Basin.



**Dan Ashe**  
*Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

"Collaboration with the State of Florida and other partner agencies, organizations, and landowners is the hallmark of this effort and key to its success."

*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Director Dan Ashe*