

Greater Everglades Partnership Initiative, Florida



Introduction

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and its partners are advancing a collaborative approach to address landscape-scale land protection efforts in south-central Florida. This new approach is described as the Greater Everglades Partnership Initiative (Initiative), which will help conserve the land, water, and wildlife resources of the Greater Everglades landscape (Figure 1). In order to facilitate analysis across this vast landscape, this large geographic area was divided into three Study Areas and the current proposal focuses on Study Area one:

- (1) the Everglades Headwaters area,
- (2) the Fisheating Creek area, and
- (3) the area around the Florida Panther NWR and Caloosahatchee River.

The Greater Everglades landscape is a vast approximately 4.5 million-acre region of wilderness and working ranch lands that extends from the outskirts of the Orlando metropolitan area south through the Kissimmee River valley to Lake Okeechobee and southwest to Florida Panther NWR and Big Cypress Preserve. This area is one of the great grassland and savanna landscapes of eastern North America. Still largely rural, this area is a mosaic of seasonally wet grasslands, longleaf pine savannas, and cattle ranches that sustains one of the most important assemblages of imperiled vertebrate



USFWS/Garry Tucker



George Willison

wildlife in the southeast U.S. and a large portion of the unprotected natural habitat remaining in peninsular Florida.

This partnership initiative would help conserve a rural working ranch landscape; protect and restore habitat; protect, improve, and restore water quality and wetlands benefiting residents and visitors in South Florida; and connect a matrix of existing conservation lands and important wildlife corridors, supporting Everglades restoration efforts.

This Initiative embodies the Service's landscape-scale, partnership-driven approach to land conservation and management, and provides a framework for the Service to engage multiple federal agencies, State agencies, counties and other local governments, non-government organizations and land trusts, private landowners, and citizens in the process. The conservation proposal would allow the partners to be able to put the best wildlife adaptation strategies into action on the ground, forming the linkages, corridors, and habitat core necessary to assist species to adapt to changing climate conditions.

Specifically, this Initiative has a vision for:

- Working cooperatively with ranchers and other landowners to protect wildlife, habitat, and a rural working agricultural landscape;
- Planning for a proposed new 150,000-acre refuge, the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area, including landowner and local communities in the planning process;
- Applying multiple ecosystem service instruments, such as conservation easements, leases, and landowner assistance grants and agreements, as well as fee title acquisition and wetland, conservation, and mitigation banks;
- Connecting to existing conservation lands and lands set aside through Habitat Conservation Plans;
- Simplifying the regulatory permitting processes for lands identified within the proposed study areas;



NPS/Rob Bennetts

- Supporting the principals of the President's America's Great Outdoors Initiative;
- Implementing Conservation Service Centers, a one-stop-shop for members of the public to engage with multiple agency and organizations for all their conservation needs; and

Partners within the Greater Everglades Landscape

Current Partners

Federal Government

- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service
- U.S. Air Force, Avon Park Air Force Range

State Government

- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- South Florida Water Management District
- Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
- Florida Division of State Lands

Non-Governmental Organizations

- The Nature Conservancy
- National Wildlife Refuge Association

Potential Partners

Federal Government

- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Tribal Governments

- Seminole Tribe of Florida
- Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida

State and Local Government

- Southwest Florida Water Management District
- St. Johns River Water Management District
- Florida Department of Community Affairs
- Florida Division of Historic Resources
- Southwest Florida and East Central Florida Regional Planning Councils
- Additional State Agencies and Local Governments

Non-Governmental Organizations/Individuals

- Florida Farm Bureau
- Florida Cattleman's Association
- Ranchers
- Key Community Leaders

Key Elements of the Greater Everglades Partnership Initiative

The Initiative would converge, build, and compliment multiple public and private conservation activities within this landscape to protect habitat for imperiled species; restore water quality and filtration functions, groundwater recharge, and hydrological systems that will materially benefit residents of south Florida; provide a new model for working with large family ranches and landowners to help sustain the rural and ranching way of life in Florida; increase opportunities for wildlife conservation education and youth engagement by establishing a new national wildlife refuge near major population centers; and promote Florida tourism and travel industries.

Service Efforts within the Greater Everglades Landscape

The Service manages several national wildlife refuges within the Greater Everglades Initiative landscape, including Lake Wales Ridge, Caloosahatchee, and Florida Panther NWRs. Further, there are multiple ecosystem services instruments such as Conservation Banks, Wetland Mitigation Banks, and Habitat Conservation Plans that contribute to overall conservation efforts in the area. The current proposal seeks to establish a new refuge, the Everglades Headwaters NWR.



USFWS/Larry Richardson

Partner Efforts within the Greater Everglades Landscape

Beyond the Service's interest in existing and proposed conservation lands within this landscape, other Tribal, federal, State, and local conservation agencies and non-governmental organizations manage existing conservation lands within this landscape and have identified goals, objectives, and projects similar to those identified in this Initiative for conservation in this area. While numerous partner activities are occurring in this landscape, key partner efforts are listed for Natural Resources Conservation Service, The Nature Conservancy, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, the South Florida Water Management District, National Wildlife Refuge Association, and the U.S. Air Force.

National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA)

- Support Service efforts to conduct the planning and analysis to propose new national wildlife refuge(s) and to propose expansion(s) of existing national wildlife refuge(s) throughout the three study areas.
- Support and conduct education and outreach activities to build awareness and understanding of conservation activities within this landscape.
- Bring together various interests and tools to support conservation activities within this landscape.
- Further the NWRA's Beyond the Boundaries Initiative within this landscape.
- Promote the Greater Everglades Partnership Initiative as an example of effective cooperation amongst a variety of public and private interests.



USFWS/Garry Tucker



USFWS/Larry Richardson

The Nature Conservancy (TNC)

- Goal to protect and connect 850,000 acres of high quality habitats on private lands through fee acquisition of key parcels and conservation easements on ranches.
- Goal to restore 150,000 acre-feet natural wetland hydrology to contribute to the restoration of the Everglades ecosystem.
- Improve the sustainability of the ranching industry using conservation easements, payments for ecosystem services, and other tools.
- Work with Natural Resources Conservation Service Farm Bill programs to restore the Everglades ecosystem
- Increase wetland restoration targets in the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, Lake Okeechobee Watershed Project.
- Develop an ecosystem services program that will provide incentives for dispersed water storage, carbon storage, and wildlife habitat restoration and increase the sustainability of ranching in the Northern Everglades.

Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

- The Northern Everglades is a priority area for USDA's Florida NRCS program.

- In FY 2010 NRCS funded the Fisheating Creek Special Project which brought about 26,080 acres in the Initiative area into the Wetlands Reserve Program.
- In FY 2011 approximately 45 new Wetland Reserve Program and Grassland Reserve Program applications total approximately 37,000 acres in the proposed new refuge area.
- In FY 2011 NRCS signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the South Florida Water Management District to work together to implement Farm Bill programs.

Avon Park Air Force Range, U.S. Air Force

- Manage 106,000 acres within this landscape, including wildlife and habitat management activities and outdoor public recreation.
- Evaluate partnership opportunities under the Readiness and Environmental Protection Initiative.



Jim Godwin

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)

- Develop and implement landscape-scale conservation planning documents, including Florida's Wildlife Action Plan, Closing the Gaps, and Cooperative Conservation Blueprint.
- The Cooperative Conservation Blueprint is focusing on the Greater Everglades area as a pilot region in which to identify consensus priority natural resource areas with incentives and policies to enhance their conservation.
- Participate as core partner on the Peninsular Florida Landscape Conservation Cooperative.
- Administer and award funding through the Family Ranches Program.
- Concentrate Farm Bill funding to create focal areas for conservation easements.
- Focus acquisition efforts on high priority tracts.
- 25-year history of land acquisition within the Initiative landscape through Preservation 2000 and Florida Forever programs.
- Manage approximately a quarter million acres of public lands in the Greater Everglades region, such as Babcock Webb, Three Lakes, Fisheating Creek, and Lake Wales Ridge wildlife management areas.
- Co-manage the Babcock Ranch Preserve, a private-public partnership on nearly 75,000 acres within this area.



USFWS/Garry Tucker

Vince Lamb



- The Landowner Assistance Program has several focal areas within the Initiative landscape.
- Partner and coordinator in efforts for Everglades Headwaters and related conceptual NWR projects.

Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS)

- Administer the Rural Family Lands Protection Program, which allows for joint federal and State funding of conservation easements.
- Implement Watershed Restoration Act, which compliments and expands Clean Water Act activities to improve water quality within Initiative landscape.
- Administer 900,000 acres within this landscape that are signed up for Best Management Practices as part of FDACS' water quality program.
- Projects completed cooperatively through USDA incentive programs, such as Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) and Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQUIP).

South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD)

- Implement Dispersed Water Management approach to keep water on the landscape.
- Administer pilot projects on working ranch lands to improve water quality and water storage.
- Administer 10-year conservation easements to support water resource goals and objectives within this landscape.
- Restore hydrology within the Greater Everglades landscape.

Project Description: Proposed Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area

The first phase of the Greater Everglades Partnership Initiative is the proposal to establish the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area. See Figure 2 for the Everglades Headwaters Study Area. The other two study areas will be

evaluated in future detailed planning and would likely include large scale easements, water protection buffers, expansions to existing NWR(s), and connectivity to other conserved areas.

The Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area proposal examines a large and diverse landscape that has generated broad conceptual support from local ranchers, urban residents, and the environmental community, as well as amongst federal, State, and local partners. Establishing an Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area would help:

- Protect, restore, and conserve important habitat for 88 federally- and State-listed species and State Species of Greatest Conservation Need, including Florida panther, Florida black bear, Audubon's crested caracara, Florida scrub-jay, Florida grasshopper sparrow, red-cockaded woodpecker, whooping crane, Everglades snail kite, wood stork, and Eastern indigo snake;
- Protect, restore, and conserve exemplary habitats, such as wet and dry prairie, Florida sandhill and scrub, and scrubby and mesic flatwoods, as well as multiple wetland types, including cutthroat seepage slope wetlands; and
- Protect, restore, and conserve the headwaters, groundwater recharge, and watersheds of the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes, Kissimmee River, and Lake Okeechobee, which will improve water quantity and quality in the Everglades watershed, complementing the work of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and protecting the water supply for millions of people.

Schedule for the Proposed Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area Project

Given the widespread interest and involvement in this landscape, this project is on an accelerated schedule, with a draft document anticipated for public review and comment this summer and with a final document anticipated for this fall.

Conduct Public Scoping

January-February 2011

Develop Draft Land Protection Plan and NEPA Document

March-May 2011

Conduct Public Review and Comment on Proposal

June 2011

Develop Final Plan

August-September 2011

For More Information

Internet

The Service has posted information on the Internet about this project. Please select the Everglades Headwaters Proposal under the Current Land Acquisition Projects at:

<http://www.fws.gov/southeast/planning/>.

Email

Please send email questions or comments to: EvergladesHeadwatersProposal@fws.gov.

Mail

Please mail comments to:
Proposed Everglades Headwaters NWR
and Conservation Area
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
PO Box 2683
Titusville, FL 32781-2683

Fax

Please fax comments to: 321/861 1276

Service Contacts

The Service contacts for more information regarding this project are:

Charlie Pelizza
Refuge Manager; Pelican Island, Archie Carr, and Lake Wales Ridge NWRs
772/562 3909 x 244

and

Cheri Ehrhardt
AICP, Natural Resource Planner
321/861 2368

USFWS/Garry Tucker



Figure 1. Greater Everglades Landscape with the Three Study Areas:
 (1) Everglades Headwaters, (2) Fisheating Creek, and (3) Florida Panther/Caloosahatchee River

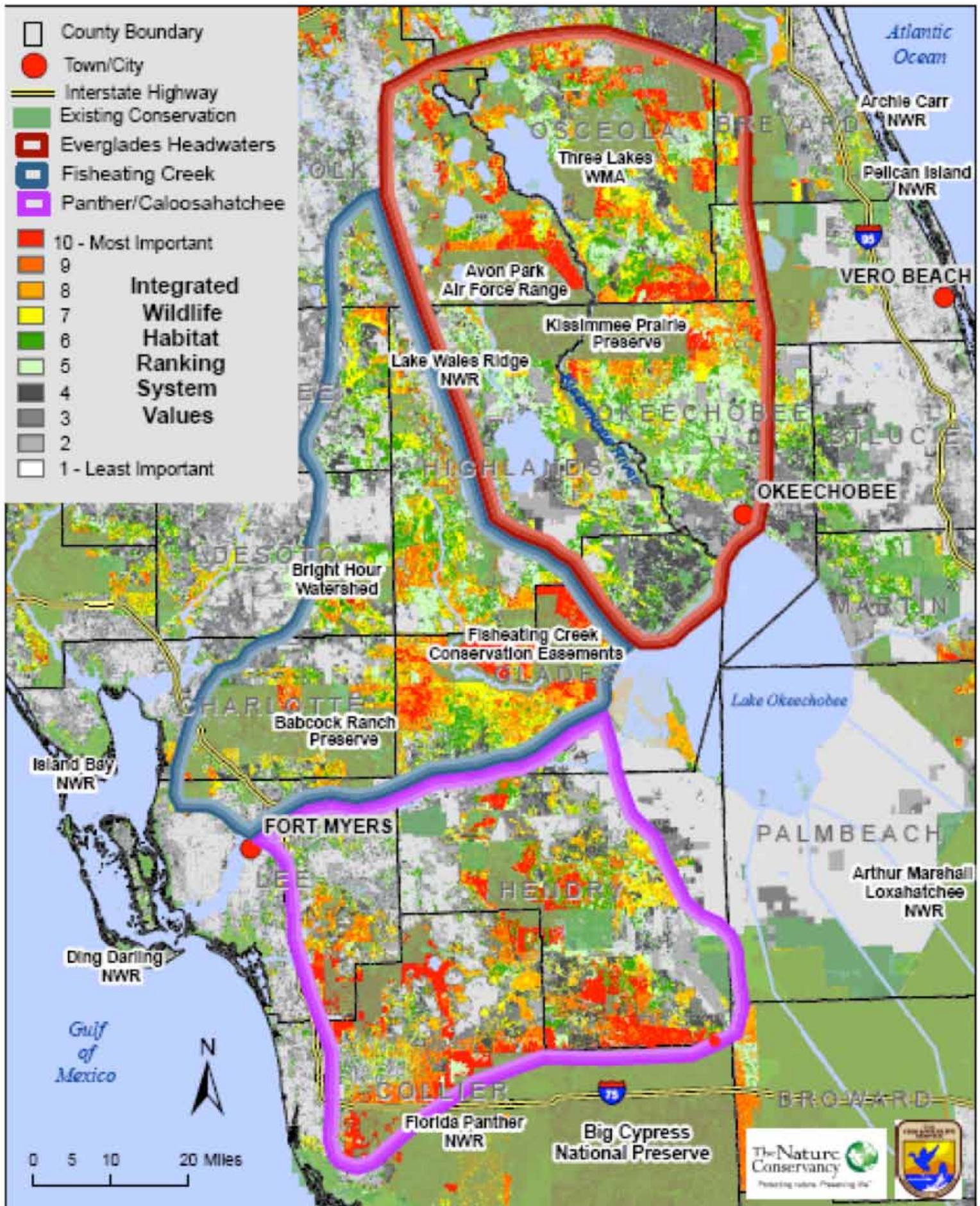


Figure 2. Geographic Area of Interest for the Establishment of the Proposed Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area

