



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

# Questions You May Have

### **Why does the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service want to create a new refuge and conservation area in Florida?**

As Florida's population continues to grow, the grasslands and savannas of Central Florida are under development pressure. Some of the threats to the globally unique species found here — and the rural way of life the landscape supports — include fragmented habitats and reduced water quality and quantity. As the nation's leading conservation agency for wildlife and habitats, the Fish and Wildlife Service seeks to work with public and private land managers to create a cohesive vision for the landscape.

By creating a refuge and conservation area, the Service seeks to safeguard water supplies for millions of Central and South Floridians by protecting the headwaters of the Everglades; conserve one of the nation's prime hotspots for biological diversity; and help sustain a working rural landscape of ranches and farms. The Everglades' rural working ranch landscapes and water quality are critical components to a healthy Florida economy, and this initiative will work to ensure that they remain vital for our future.

### **What is the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area?**

The Service's Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area, authorized by Service Director Dan Ashe, is in its genesis. For the most part, it is a plan with lines on a map that allows the Service to negotiate with landowners willing to sell their properties or interest in their properties. Only landowners with property inside the Conservation Focal Area (see map) are eligible to sell their property outright to create the refuge. Those landowners also may choose to retain their ownership, while selling partial interest using such tools as conservation easements, leases, habitat conservation plans and cooperative agreements.



Landowners with property inside the Conservation Partnership Area (see map) are eligible to sell only conservation easements or other partial interest in their lands to create the conservation area. The Service will not be able to purchase those properties outright.

Participation is completely voluntary. Landowners with property inside either the Conservation Partnership Area or the Conservation Focal Area do not have to sell their land or their land rights to the Service. Additionally, the Service is limited to acquiring up to 50,000 acres of land to create the refuge, and up to 100,000 acres of conservation easements to create the conservation area.

The refuge was formally established on January 18, 2012, when The Nature Conservancy donated 10 acres at Hatchineha Ranch, south of Kissimmee, Florida, to the Service.

### **What is a national wildlife refuge?**

A national wildlife refuge is part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, a national network of habitats set aside to benefit wildlife, provide unparalleled outdoor experiences for all Americans, and protect a healthy environment. Wildlife refuges give wildlife top priority. Public use for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, interpretation and environmental education is a legally mandated priority when those uses are appropriate and compatible with refuge purposes.

Today, with the addition of the new refuge and conservation area, there are 556 national wildlife refuges and other units of the National Wildlife Refuge System, plus 38 wetland management districts.

### **What is a conservation area?**

For this project, the term "conservation area" means land in which the Service would hold an easement or some other partial interest in the land. The primary purposes would be to prohibit future development and provide habitat for a variety of plants and animals.



Ownership would remain with the private landowner, who would be able to continue using the land to farm, raise cattle, and for other purposes. Mutually agreeable conditions would be negotiated in a conservation easement to ensure the needs of the private landowner and the Service are both met in the easement.

### What is the conservation partnership area?

The conservation partnership area is a broad area of the Kissimmee River Valley within which the Service is able to negotiate with willing sellers to create the conservation area by purchasing conservation easements or other partial interest in up to 100,000 acres.

The designation of a conservation partnership area does not give the Service any special jurisdiction or control over these lands. Lands would become part of the conservation area only when and if they are purchased from willing sellers or placed under agreements with willing participants. Landowners who choose not to sell would continue to own and manage their lands as before. Others may choose to sell, donate, or enter into special agreements with the Service, and their lands would be added to the conservation area and managed by the landowners under the conditions of their easements or other agreements.

By identifying a larger area than needed to acquire up to 100,000 acres for a conservation area, the Service is able to respond to changing landowner interests, conditions and opportunities.

### What is the conservation focal area?

This is the area of six units identified in blue on the map. This is where the Service is authorized to negotiate with willing sellers to purchase up to 50,000 acres to create the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge.

The designation of a conservation focal area does not give the Service any special jurisdiction or control over these lands. Lands would become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System only when and if they are purchased from willing sellers or placed under agreements with willing participants. Some landowners may choose to sell only a conservation easement that could become part of the conservation area. Others may choose not to sell at all, and those landowners would continue to own and manage their lands as before. Still others may choose to sell, donate, or enter into special agreements, and their lands would be added to the refuge. These lands could then be managed for the protection of wildlife and habitat.

By identifying a larger area than needed to acquire up to 50,000 acres for a refuge, the Service will be able to respond to changing landowner interests, conditions and opportunities.

### I own property in the conservation focal area and/or the conservation partnership area, but I don't want to sell. What will happen?

Nothing changes for landowners who choose not to participate. The Service will only purchase lands and conservation easements from willing sellers. You will be largely unaffected, except for the fact that you might have the Service as a neighbor. Even if refuge lands were to surround private property, legal access to the private property would be maintained.

### How will the Service prioritize land acquisition, both for the refuge and conservation area?

Working with willing sellers, the Service will consider four criteria in determining which lands to protect first, as listed:

- Does buying the land – or a conservation easement on the land – connect existing conservation lands and create a wildlife corridor for plants and animals?
- Does the land consist of high quality habitats for rare, threatened and/or endangered species?
- Does the land contain wetlands that could be restored to improve water quality and water storage in the Everglades watershed?
- Does purchasing the land enable the Service to provide wildlife-dependent outdoor recreation and education?

### If I decide to sell a conservation easement to the Service, what would I not be able to do on my land?

Any restrictions on your land would be agreed upon by you and the Service during the conservation easement negotiation. In all cases, the Service is interested in acquiring development rights. Generally, on the portion of land that contains an easement, you and any subsequent owner would not be able to develop it or sell it for the purpose of developing it. You also would not be able to:

- Alter the natural topography or the natural water regime;
- Use your land in a way that damages the flora and fauna communities; or
- Convert native habitats to another use.





### **As the Service acquires land to create the refuge and conservation area, will I be able to use it for activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking or bird watching?**

As soon as practically possible, the Service plans to open the refuge to public access. As outlined in the 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, the Service gives priority consideration to six wildlife-dependent public uses on national wildlife refuges: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation. The Service is working with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to help manage the hunting and fishing on any refuge lands as a State wildlife management area. The interim compatibility determinations outline the uses to continue on the refuge: hunting, fishing, environmental education and interpretation, wildlife observation and photography, research, off-road vehicle use (on designated roads and trails in support of hunting and research), camping, hiking, horseback riding, bicycling, and grazing.

The conservation area will remain in private ownership. Those landowners will not be required to open their properties to the public. They may continue to use their land for their own recreational purposes.

### **Will I be allowed to operate an airboat on the refuge?**

Airboat operation is allowed on the State's sovereign waters, including any that may be within lands that become part of the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge.

### **Will land use and zoning change within the refuge boundary?**

Zoning and land use regulations would continue under the jurisdiction of the appropriate local government.

### **How will tax revenues be affected if lands become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System?**

The Federal government does not pay property tax on land it owns, but two factors help offset this potential hardship to communities. First, refuge lands demand very little in the way of expensive services or infrastructure from local government and they generate tourism dollars. Second, under the provisions of the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act (Public Law 95-469), the Service annually reimburses counties to compensate for revenue lost as a result of acquisition of private property.

Payments under this Act will be made only on lands which the Service acquires in fee title. On lands where the Service acquires only partial interest through easement, all taxes would remain the responsibility of the individual landowner.

An example of how this has worked is at the nearby Lake Wales National Wildlife Refuge. In 2010, the Refuge Revenue Sharing payments for that refuge were approximately \$9 an acre. On The Nature Conservancy's Hatchineha Ranch in Polk County, the payments were less than \$2 an acre.

### **What is the cost estimate to acquire the entire 150,000 acres refuge and conservation area?**

Based on the latest real estate values, the estimate is about \$398 million.

### **How will acquisition of the refuge and conservation area be funded?**

The only funding sources the Service can draw from for land acquisition is the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund and the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). Everglades Headwaters is most likely to draw funds through the LWCF, which is mainly derived from the sale of offshore oil leases and is intended for land conservation.

Other sources of funding also are possible, including donations. From time to time, Congress also chooses to directly fund land acquisition.

### **How long will it take to piece together the refuge and conservation area?**

It could take the Service many years of working with willing landowners to acquire the majority of the land and conservation easements as envisioned. It is possible the Service may never acquire 100 percent of the full acreage.

### **What other estimated costs are associated with the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area?**

The one-time, estimated costs to create public use spaces and an office at the refuge would be about \$4.75 million, if all the proposed facilities are constructed. These costs, which could be spread out over many years, include construction of boardwalk trails and other public use sites (\$1.4 million), and construction of a visitor center, office and parking area (\$2.2 million).



In addition, the Service estimates that if the 150,000-acre refuge and conservation area is fully realized, the annual costs of operating and maintaining it will be about \$715,000.

Staffing, like operating and maintenance costs, will depend on how much of the refuge and conservation area has been acquired. Staff will be hired as needed and as funds are available. If the refuge and conservation area is fully realized, staffing needs are anticipated to be 12 employees, including a refuge manager, law enforcement officer, maintenance staff and an educational specialist.

### **What is the Greater Everglades Partnership Initiative?**

This is a land conservation partnership that the Service helped start two years ago in an effort to bring together federal, tribal, state, and local governments; ranchers and other landowners; non-governmental conservation organizations; and other stakeholders to protect, restore, and conserve key areas in South and Central Florida, from the Orlando metropolitan area to the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge. This largely rural area is one of the great grassland and savanna landscapes in eastern North America, and includes much of Florida's remaining intact habitats and working ranch lands.

The Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area is the first, specific proposal resulting from the partnership.

### **How does this impact the ongoing Everglades restoration efforts started by the State of Florida and the Federal government?**

The Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area builds on years of work by the State of Florida, the South Florida Water Management District, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and many others. Conserving the Everglades' headwaters is a critical building block toward full restoration.

The water that flows off the land in the conservation partnership area drains into Lake Okeechobee, a major source of the water flowing through the River of Grass. By conserving this land, we can improve the quality and quantity of water for millions of Central and South Floridians. It also supports the second goal of Everglades restoration: to restore wildlife habitat and protect rare species.

### **Last year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service announced it was spending \$100 million through the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) to acquire permanent easements from eligible landowners in the Northern Everglades Watershed. Is this project related to the Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area?**

The two projects are separate, but the WRP program and Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area are complementary and share similarities. The two agencies are coordinating in this landscape, as many of our goals overlap. Both agencies want to restore wetlands to protect water resources; create a wildlife corridor for wide-ranging animals such as the Florida black bear and Florida panther; and help support working landscapes.

The two agencies also are targeting the same general area for investment, overlapping in Highlands and Okeechobee counties. The WRP funds will be spent in Glades and Hendry counties. The refuge and conservation area includes Polk and Osceola counties.



Also, both programs are voluntary. Working with interested landowners, the two agencies offer the best options for permanent protection. Since WRP funds may only be spent on land where wetlands restoration is possible, a conservation easement with the Service may be the best option for some interested landowners. In other cases, the WRP easement may be more appropriate.

### **For more information**

#### *Internet*

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

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