



While Lawmakers Debate Florida Forever Funds, Millions Of Acres Could Be Developed

WFSU | By [Kate Payne](#)

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Kate Payne Via WFSU

Florida lawmakers and Governor Scott are \$50 million apart when it comes to funding the state's signature land buying program. But whether it's 50 million or 100 million, the state has backed out of such proposals before, zeroing out funding for Florida Forever three years in a row. Meanwhile millions of acres of land could be at risk of development.

Senator Rob Bradley of Orange Park says his chamber will be committed to conservation this session. And as the Senate's new budget chief, he's in a position to follow through on that. He says lawmakers should listen to the 75% of voters who decided to use tax money for conservation land in 2014. He wants to spend \$100 million a year on Florida Forever to do just that.

"Senators I look forward to working with all of you to make sure we fulfill what I think is a pact that we have with the voters to take care of land acquisition," Bradley said.

But Governor Rick Scott wants to put forward only \$50 million for Florida Forever, half of what Bradley wants. He says other environmental programs deserve more funding.

"If you look at all these things, our parks, our beaches, all these things we're focused on, where we believe we can have the biggest impact," Scott said.

"There are two million acres identified to be protected on the Florida Forever priority list. A conservative value of those is about \$5 billion."

With \$50 million worth of wiggle room, it's too soon to say what kind of deal lawmakers and the governor will make, if any. Meanwhile, the backlog of proposed Florida Forever projects continues to grow. Will Abberger is with the Trust for Public Land.

"There are two million acres identified to be protected on the Florida Forever priority list. A conservative value of those is about \$5 billion. So that begins to give you a sense of the immense need," Abberger said.

One of the newest additions to the Florida Forever priority list is a massive, nearly 40,000 acre conservation easement along the Upper Apalachicola River. Dan Tonsmeire is the Apalachicola Riverkeeper.

“So it’s a very important piece. Part of what we’re trying to do is work on reconnecting some of the river to the floodplain, or connecting the river to some areas of the floodplain where there’s been some impacts in the past, from dredging and that kind of thing,” Tonsmeire said.

Tonsmeire says the proposal would close the gap in a patchwork of conservation lands that would almost completely surround the river.

“It actually fills in a huge gap that has been sought by the state for many years,” Tonsmeire said.

“As you stand on those bluffs at night and to look out over that river and not to see lights, not to hear roads...there are almost no places left like that in Florida.”

Jim Karels says the region is stunning, and nearly untouched by civilization. He directs the Florida Forest Service.

“As you stand on those bluffs at night and to look out over that river and not to see lights, not to hear roads. A few airplanes flying over, but there are almost no places left like that in Florida,” Karels said.

But if lawmakers don’t fund Florida Forever, the program’s trust fund will continue to dwindle. And without the money to close the deals, private landowners will be free to build condos, strip malls and parking lots, even after the state has singled out the areas for protection. David Clark is the state lands director at the department of environmental protection.

“Putting a property into the Florida Forever program does not put any kind of restriction on it. So yes absolutely. Those landowners own those properties and they can do anything that’s inured with them with private property rights,” Clark said.

And Clark says some landowners aren’t interested in selling.

“Those landowners own those properties and they can do anything that's inured with them with private property rights.”

“Not every landowner within those projects are willing sellers. I know that seems contrary to, well wait a minute, they’re in Florida Forever. Yes there in Florida Forever, because perhaps an NGO has applied to have this large landscape put into the Florida Forever program,” Clark said.

There are millions of acres of land on the priority list, scattered all across the state. Looking at a backlog of that size, \$100 million is a drop in the bucket, let alone \$50 million. But Kent Wimmer with Defenders of Wildlife says the state has to start somewhere.

“It’s not going to be enough but it’s what we need to get these major land conservation projects done,” Wimmer said.

Senator Bradley’s proposal to allocate \$100 million annually passed its first committee stop on November 6th. There’s plenty of time for that number to change as lawmakers prepare for the 2018 legislative session, which starts in January.

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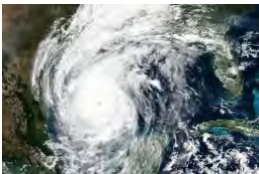


Kate Payne

As a Tallahassee native, Kate Payne grew up listening to WFSU. She loves being part of a station that had such an impact on her. Kate is a graduate of the Florida State University College of Motion Picture Arts. With a background in documentary and narrative filmmaking, Kate has a broad range of multimedia experience. When she's not working, you can find her rock climbing, cooking or hanging out with her cat.

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