

Important Conservation Easements Established in Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area

Florida Ranchers 'Lead the Way' on Conservation

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National Wildlife Refuge Association →

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ORLANDO, Fla., Feb. 19, 2016 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- More than 5,300 acres of critical ranch, farming, wildlife habitat, flood protection area and water storage lands have been added to the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area south of Orlando, thanks to several recent conservation partnerships formed by Florida ranchers, sportsmen, state and federal agencies and non-profits.

The Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area was formally established in 2012 in coordination with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, ranchers and sportsmen.

Using \$12.5 million in Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) dollars, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has secured 4,214.99 acres in conservation easements and acquired 1,502.26 acres.

"This is land and water conservation at its best," said David Houghton, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association. "Florida's ranch families are leading the way in terms of how Florida's natural resources are being protected for future generations."

Five properties were involved in the recent acquisitions: the Hatchineha Ranch owned by the Nature Conservancy, Adams Ranch, Camp Lonesome, Tiger Cattle Company and the Idols Aside property.

Together, these conservation easements and fee acquisitions will protect habitat for iconic Florida wildlife such as the Florida panther, Florida black bear, gopher tortoise and the highly endangered Florida grasshopper sparrow.

These latest acquisitions also leverage additional investments being made by the Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the State of Florida.

"The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is deeply committed to partnering in a collaborative effort to deliver conservation of rural working lands that promotes environmental connectivity, species protection, and increases opportunities to deliver appropriate and compatible public uses," said Bill Miller, Project Leader for the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

"These conservation easement partnerships leverage resources and enhance efforts to protect Florida's natural habitat while helping farmers and ranchers keep their land in agriculture," noted Roney Gutierrez, assistant state conservationist for the Natural Resource Conservation Service's Florida Easements Program.

The Everglades Headwaters Refuge and Conservation Area was envisioned to use a unique combination of conservation easements, which leave land in private ownership and on the tax rolls, and land acquisition from willing sellers.

The result is a landscape-scale conservation area from the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes to Avon Air Force Park that will protect habitat for more than 30 threatened and endangered species, restore important wetlands in the Greater Everglades, and help sustain Florida's ranching economy.

"These landowners are true leaders in conservation," Houghton said. "They are forming new collaborations with state, federal and non-profit partners that will benefit millions of Floridians who depend on clean and reliable water coming from the Greater Everglades, as well as dozens of species whose futures are in the balance as their habitat disappears."

"It's an honor for Adams Ranch to protect land as part of the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge," said Mike Adams, President of Adams Ranch, Inc. "We take pride in our management of Florida's natural resources as well as our cattle, and conservation easements will allow our succeeding generations to enjoy this heritage as well."

"The Conservation Trust for Florida congratulates the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in its efforts to build a network of conservation lands in the Kissimmee River basin that will protect scenic landscapes, water resources and the ranching heritage for future generations" said Susan Carr, president of the Conservation Trust. "Families like the Adams are leaders in the ranching industry, which is important to our economy. Their dedication to keeping these large ranches intact will preserve Florida's unique ranching lifestyle and provide essential habitat for wildlife."

Two Florida state agencies played a major role in the effort; the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

"This Northern Everglades Headwaters project is protecting historic, environmentally intact, ranchlands in the path of development so that Florida may enjoy its agricultural successes and secure its landscapes and open space," said Jim Karels, director of the Florida Forest Service, a state partner that oversees the state's Rural and Family Lands Protection Program.

"The Department of Environmental Protection is committed to working to acquire land to protect our state's water and natural resources," said David Clark, acting director for DEP's Division of State Lands. "We are proud to partner with the many stakeholders to protect the lands around the Everglades Headwater National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is authorized to acquire up to 50,000 acres as national wildlife refuge lands, as well as up to another 100,000 acres in conservation easements, all within the refuge and conservation area boundary.

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge Association is to conserve America's wildlife heritage for future generations through strategic programs that protect, enhance, and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System and the landscapes beyond its boundaries.

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