

Conserving Florida's Land and Water for Future Generations



Background

Florida has long been a leader in land and water conservation. Florida Forever and its predecessor Preservation 2000 have been the nation's most successful state land conservation programs, protecting over 2.4 million acres of critical water resources, natural areas, wildlife habitat, parks, greenways, and trails. Restoration of the Florida Everglades is the most comprehensive ecological restoration in the world's history. The state's land managing agencies and water management districts have done a tremendous job of restoring degraded natural systems, including the state's longleaf pine forests, the Upper St. Johns River watershed, and Rookery Bay. Until recently, our elected officials and policy-makers have viewed these conservation and restoration projects as priorities. Since 1991, for nineteen years, the Florida Legislature provided \$300 million annually for Florida Forever and its predecessor program, Preservation 2000. Similarly, the state annually set aside \$100 million to match federal funding for Everglades restoration.

But state funds for land and water conservation have been drastically cut. Since 2009, only \$23 million has been provided by the Florida Legislature for Florida Forever. This is a 97.5 percent reduction in funding. State appropriations for land management and ecological restoration, including the Everglades, have suffered similar declines.

Florida Voters Support Land and Water Conservation

Since 1994, Florida voters have approved five of the six amendments to the state constitution relating to conservation and the environment -- an 83 percent passage rate. The average Yes vote percent for these successful conservation amendments was 68 percent.

One hundred Florida city and county land conservation measures have been on local ballots since 1988; 82 have been approved -- an 82 percent passage rate. Voters in almost every major urban county in Florida have approved dedicated funding for land conservation and parks, many by overwhelming margins in excess of 70 percent.

Support for land and water conservation has been bi-partisan. Governors Graham, Martinez, Chiles, Bush, and Crist all supported Preservation 2000, Everglades' restoration, and funding for land management. Democratic and Republican leadership in the Florida Legislature have supported funding for land and water conservation until 2009.

Land and Water Conservation Needs

Florida's drinking water sources and its rivers, lakes, and streams are threatened by continued degradation. Our natural systems, including those already in public ownership, will continue to decline and be unable to provide the benefits our state depends on without adequate funds for management and restoration. The current Florida Forever priority list identifies almost 2 million acres in need of protection. This does not include water management district or local government land acquisition needs.

Given the priorities of the Governor and composition of the Legislature, the only politically feasible way to secure significant funding for land and water conservation, management, and restoration is by taking this issue directly to the Florida voters through a constitutional amendment to create dedicated funding.

Goal: Dedicated Funding for Land Conservation, Management, and Restoration

Our goal is to establish a dedicated funding source for land conservation, management, and restoration through a state constitutional amendment designating one third of the existing documentary stamp (doc stamp) tax revenues. Based on

current projections, this would provide over \$5 billion for conservation and restoration of land and water resources in Florida over the next ten years.

This would not be a tax increase. The constitutional amendment would dedicate one third of the existing doc stamp tax proceeds (paid when a house or other real estate is sold) to conservation and recreation land acquisition, land and water management, and restoration of degraded natural systems. This amendment would impose no new regulations. Land would be acquired from willing sellers on a voluntary basis only. Management and restoration activities would be performed on public lands and in cooperation with willing private land owners.

In 2013, state bonds previously sold for Preservation 2000 will be paid off, making \$259 million in doc stamps funds available for other uses. This proposed constitutional amendment would maintain the historical purpose of these funds, namely land and water conservation in Florida. If these funds are not set aside for land and water conservation by the legislature -- which appears highly unlikely -- or by this proposed constitutional amendment, they will be diverted to other purposes. Once these funds are appropriated for other uses it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to reclaim them for conservation.

Strategy:

Citizens Initiative - Place a constitutional amendment the November 2014 ballot through the initiative petition process, using volunteer and paid signature gathers, to collect 1 million signatures to meet the required 676,811 verified signatures. The state’s top constitutional law experts have drafted and reviewed the constitutional amendment ballot title, ballot summary, and text to assure it will pass review by the Supreme Court.

Ballot Measure Campaign - Run a statewide campaign to secure voter approval -- 60 percent required -- of the constitutional amendment. The campaign will include a combination of paid TV and radio advertising, direct mail, social media and traditional grassroots outreach. Our April 2011 public opinion survey of Florida voters shows the amendment could win in November 2012, IF we can secure adequate funds to run an effective campaign to educate voters about the measure.

Phase	Timeframe	Purpose	Estimated Budget
Phase 1 - Feasibility Research	November, 2010 – January, 2012	Feasibility Research – Polling, Legal Research, Ballot Language Development	\$100,000 <i>Funded</i>
Phase 2 - Infrastructure Development and Initial Signature Gathering to Qualify for Supreme Court Review	February, 2012 – October, 2012	Obtain 10% of required valid signatures (67,681) to qualify for Supreme Court Review	\$550,000 <i>Partially Funded (15%)</i>
Phase 3 - Completion of Signature Gathering	November, 2012 – November, 2013	Obtain remaining 90% of required valid signatures (609,130) to qualify for the ballot	\$2.125 million
Phase 4 - Campaign	December, 2013 – November, 2014	Campaign to persuade voters to approve the measure	\$7.175 million
Total Budget			\$9.95 million

THIS WOULD BE THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VOTE IN FLORIDA ON LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN OUR LIFETIMES.