

SFWMD

Land Assessment

Kissimmee/Okeechobee Region

Additional Public Comments



The mission of the Florida Native Plant Society is to promote the preservation, conservation, and restoration of the native plants and native plant communities of Florida.

March 18, 2013

Ray Palmer, Real Estate Section Leader
South Florida Water Management District
3301 Gun Club Road
West Palm Beach, Florida 33416

Subject: Comments on Comprehensive Assessment of Kissimmee/Okeechobee Region Lands

Dear Mr. Palmer:

As stated in comments that we submitted regarding your assessment of lands in the Upper Lakes Region, the Florida Native Plant Society is generally supportive of your effort to surplus lands that do not advance the District's core mission. In contrast to our position that none of the lands assessed in the Upper Lakes Region should be considered surplus, the Pool D Floodplain Parcel and the CR-68 Residential Lots within the Kissimmee/Okeechobee Assessment Region may be appropriate to consider as surplus following additional evaluation.

The Pool D Floodplain Parcel's relatively small size, highly altered condition, lack of contiguity with other public land, absence of public access, and extensive adjacency with residential development greatly limit its long-term conservation value, particularly if it lies wholly outside the 100-year floodplain as shown in the assessment. However, we have concerns about the accuracy of the floodplain maps included in your assessments. For example, none of the Kissimmee Prairie lands are illustrated as floodplain, even though extensive areas within the Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park are subject to seasonal flooding and the Preserve's Unit Management Plan acknowledges that more than 8,200 acres of the Preserve are below the elevation of the Kissimmee's 100-year floodplain elevation. The inclusion of v zones on the floodplain maps is also confusing since such zones are typically restricted to coastal areas. We would appreciate receiving additional explanation of how your assessments identify floodplain.

Our support for potentially surplussing the CR-68 Residential Lots parcel pertains only to that portion of the property located between the protected swamp and the CR-68 right-of-way. We believe that all the other lands in the Kissimmee/Okeechobee Assessment Region should be retained in public ownership. Comments specific to some of the individual parcels are as follows:

Parcel 4Es – despite the altered condition of this land, and its isolation from the main body of the river restoration area, much of the parcel is within the floodplain and has significant habitat value.

Riverwoods - located in the floodplain and used as a staging area and for equipment storage in association with Kissimmee River restoration.

Ft. Basinger – even the portion outside floodplain should be retained given ongoing pineland habitat restoration and presence of the Florida National Scenic Trail.

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Pearce-Locket Estate – we recommend retention due to the parcel’s historical significance and suggest that the District continuing seeking a cooperator, e.g. the State Park Service, to manage the parcel as an historic site.

52-acre Hammock – in addition to apparent habitat value, this parcel is significant for its archaeological sites.

Chandler Slough Lofton Road frontage and Lamb Island Dairy – should be retained for public use value.

Istokpoga Floodplain Parcel - although much of this parcel is improved pasture located outside the floodplain and is not needed for river restoration, the entire parcel should be retained for its potential importance as an ecological greenway bridging the gap between the Lake Wales Ridge and the Kissimmee River Valley. The cost for the District to retain ownership can be minimized by continuing to lease the land for cattle grazing.

Yates Marsh Pasture Parcel – this parcel must be retained because it includes a section of the Florida National Scenic Trail.

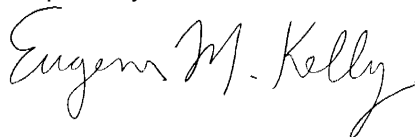
Paradise Run Pasture Parcel – although the assessment states that the improved pasture section of the property is outside the floodplain, the FEMA map contradicts this contention. The parcel also has important habitat value.

Telex Marsh – although this parcel should be retained in public ownership, the District could pursue transferring ownership to Okeechobee County so it could be incorporated into the neighboring county park.

Pool E Spoil Sites – the assessment does not indicate whether these sites might be needed for future spoil deposition or to meet another public need. If not, they might be appropriate to consider for surplussing, although the small size and physical isolation of the parcels may impart little market value.

Thank you for considering our concerns. We look forward to continuing participation in the District’s review of its lands.

Respectfully,



Eugene M. Kelly, Policy Chair
Florida Native Plant Society
Policy@fnps.org

March 18, 2003

Mr. Ray Palmer
Real Estate Section Leader
South Florida Water Management District
P.O. Box 24680
West Palm Beach, FL 33416-4680

Dear Mr. Palmer,

The second round of lands being made available by the SFWMD for review for possible surplusing includes a suite of extremely hydrologically and ecologically significant lands in the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes, along the Kissimmee River and extending south to Lake Okeechobee. These lands are grouped under the general heading of Kissimmee/Okeechobee Assessment Region. The Nature Conservancy appreciates the opportunity to comment on the possible surplus of these important lands, lands that for the most part (approximately 99% of them) well meet the South Florida Water Management District's core mission of balancing and improving water quality, flood control, natural systems and water supply. There should be no surplusing of any lands acquired and managed by the SFWMD (or its partners) that are needed for water quality enhancement, including retention/storage and treatment and that contribute to reducing nutrient loads to Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades system. As well, lands that comprise large, contiguous holdings – i.e., landscape-scale, watershed and headwater wetlands – and that contribute to connectivity in this important region of the District, should not (and cannot) be seriously considered for any kind of surplus action. The Nature Conservancy was instrumental in bringing forth many of these lands for conservation and restoration efforts and we are intimately familiar with the natural resources and ecological attributes of this suite of properties having conducted de novo field investigations over the past 20+ years to document their overall significance.

Kissimmee Chain of Lakes

These parcels are indispensable for the SFWMD to conduct its business and complete its core mission. The District acquired the parcels to obtain the rights necessary to increase water stages in and around the lakes to make the Kissimmee River restoration possible – a goal and endeavor that is absolutely central to this District's core mission. As well, numerous species of imperiled wildlife such as whooping cranes, sandhill cranes, wood storks, snail kites, ospreys, and many other wading birds and raptors utilize the shoreline communities within the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes. Perhaps no lands owned by the SFWMD are more important to Everglades restoration and the South Florida economy – through water quantity and quality protection – than the suite of lands herein considered for potential surplus since they form an integral portion of the headwaters of the Everglades ecosystem.

Many, if not most, of these lands were sought for protection and restoration by the District beginning in 1990 through the Save Our Rivers program when scientists and engineers from the District and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers working on the Kissimmee River Restoration Project determined that not enough water would be available in the upper Chain of Lakes to provide year round base flow for the restored river. It was estimated that an additional 100,000 acre-feet of water storage was required to provide longer durations and seasonal variability of flow to restored river in the lower basin. The recommended solution was to raise the existing lake regulation schedule from 52.5' to 54.0'. It was necessary to acquire real estate interests on land around lakes Kissimmee, Cypress, Tiger, and Hatchineha in eastern Polk and southwestern Osceola counties to complete these vital restoration efforts, efforts crucial to the water supply of the Kissimmee River, Lake Okeechobee, the Everglades and the residents and agricultural interest of South Florida. Additionally, most of these properties are in the floodplain (various stages and designations) and encompass much important wildlife habitat and species as demonstrated by data from the FFWCC.

Most of the acquired lowlands have been used for many years as improved cattle pasture, but the District has been gradually restoring these areas to marsh and wet prairie. These natural grasslands are well suited to accommodating cattle, wildlife, and the recreating public. Consequently, the district has been able to maintain much of the area in agricultural production, while simultaneously improving thousands of acres of lakeshore habitat, and vastly increasing the area available for public recreation.

In 2010, the FWC established hunting and public use regulations over the area. Since 2004, the District has built 2 shelters, 15 campsites, 2 airboat crossings, and a large boat ramp facility to accommodate public use in the area. These investments and the infrastructure must be retained for the good of the public in terms of water quality and supply, enormous contributions to the economy through water protection and agricultural productivity and their recreational benefits (e.g., boating, airboating, hunting, fishing, canoeing/kayaking, and primitive tent camping), including tourism and eco-tourism. The District staff has done an outstanding job of evaluating these lands, restoring many of them and leasing others out, where appropriate, for cattle leases that also assist with overall management.

As stated above, many of the lands -- or interests therein -- were acquired because they fell below the 54.0' contour and they were necessary to be in public ownership in order to raise the water levels to supply water essential for the restoration of the Kissimmee River. Many of the sites are either floodplain swamps (e.g., Lake Marion Creek, London Creek where they flow into Lake Hatchineha) and were acquired to support the higher water stages in the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes to provide adequate flow to the restored sections of the Kissimmee River or were regulatory acquisitions as mitigation for wetland impacts by nearby land development. The Rolling Meadow tract, for example, supports the natural systems management function of the District by being a large-scale mitigation funded restoration project. This site supports water supply by allowing for higher stages in the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes, and by restoring the hydrology and removing the drainage to a large marsh system. The site also supports water quality concerns by removing a nutrient heavy use (a former sod farm with intensive fertilizer requirements) from the upper Kissimmee/Okeechobee watershed.

The Nature Conservancy was quite active in this region and proposed several of the project areas herein under consideration for possible surplus: Rolling Meadows, Catfish Creek, Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park. Several of the lands are important habitat for the federally endangered Florida grasshopper sparrow. As a general rule that should be considered as part of this exercise, any large, contiguous and connected system of lands in the region should be retained not only for the conservation of habitat and wildlife but for the hydrological benefits they provide to South Florida and an economy dependent upon a steady and reliable supply of clean, freshwater. It is our opinion, with the exception of a few small, scattered parcels in this region, 99% of the lands owned by the District should not be considered for surplus/disposition. For example, the District acquired a flowage easement around most of Tiger Lake to support raising water stages for the benefit of the Kissimmee River restoration. There were several parcels where the fee simple interest was acquired and where the fee simple interest satisfied the needs of the restoration project, but it is likely that the acquisition of a flowage easement, consistent with the majority of the lands around Tiger Lake, would have been adequate. Therefore, even if a few small tracts are targeted for surplus, they should have a retained conservation/flowage easement and be utilized only for non-ground disturbing agriculture such as cattle grazing.

Kissimmee River

The Kissimmee River Restoration Act passed in 1976 allowed for the initial studies and planning for the restoration of the river. The Save Our Rivers program, created in 1981, was infused with dedicated funds from the documentary stamp tax in 1985 and from Preservation 2000 in 1990. A plan was developed and recommended, and The Kissimmee River Restoration Project was authorized by Congress in the 1992 Water Resources Development Act as a joint partnership between the District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The project was designed to restore over 40 square miles of river/floodplain ecosystem including 43 miles of meandering river channel and 27,000 acres of wetlands. To complete the restoration – consistent with laws and the District's core mission – it was necessary to acquire sufficient rights in the land within the 100-year floodplain.

An early demonstration project to support the feasibility of the river restoration occurred over a portion of the Kicco site. While much of Kicco lies outside of the portion of the river floodplain that will be backfilled, it was necessary to acquire it because of the upstream impact from increased flows from the Chain of Lakes to the restored river. The over-drained marshes in Blanket Bay Slough and Kicco have significant restoration potential that could support water quality, water supply, flood control, and natural systems restoration. As part of the Kissimmee River's watershed, Kicco contains a large area of flatwoods on the south end, many scattered oak hammocks, several cypress sloughs, marshes, wet prairie, and dry prairie. The site shares a border with the Avon Park Air Force Range and helps to buffer this important military installation and its vital war-fighting training mission from encroachment of incompatible uses. Endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers are found in the flatwoods and the dry prairie could support the endangered grasshopper sparrow if they become more widely established within Avon Park.

The District acquired the portion of the Kissimmee Prairie Preserve (and State Park) within the floodplain as the northernmost stretch of the Kissimmee River restoration. The District and the State jointly acquired, and share title to, the vast native prairie system (designated as globally imperiled) east of the floodplain that serves as the watershed for this significant stretch of the Kissimmee River. The expansive landscape of sloughs and prairies serves a significant water supply function, and the portion that lies within the floodplain supports the Kissimmee River restoration. The Kissimmee Prairie contains major expanses of important wet and dry prairie. The site supports a plant biodiversity that is among the highest found in North America. The endangered grasshopper sparrow's core range is within this prairie system. The Nature Conservancy was intimately involved in the deal to bring much of this land into conservation and public ownership and the importance of conserving and restoring this landscape and watershed to the economy, residents and agricultural interests of South Florida cannot be overstated.

The restoration of the Kissimmee River has been a central feature of the District's core mission since the District was created in 1973. This restoration project soundly encompasses all of the District's core mission functions with significant contributions to flood control, natural systems restoration, water quality, and water supply. It is absolutely imperative to retain all of the lands whose acquisition was so carefully thought out for many years after the destruction of the Kissimmee River ecosystem and before its importance to South Florida's water balance was generally known or appreciated. To date, the restoration has been a huge success, is a nation-wide ecologically imperative, and provides massive public recreational benefits. As well, the project and these lands are critical for Lake Okeechobee and Everglades restoration, including South Florida's water supply, quality and the economic engine of the entire region.

It is possible that some of the scattered individual parcels could be surplused or sold with a retained conservation easement for non-destructive, non-row crop, agricultural practices (e.g., cattle grazing). Even if outside of the floodplain of the Kissimmee River, however, most of these properties support varied public access and recreation usage that is important to the region's economy and public enjoyment.

For example, Lamb Island Dairy and a few of the CR 68 Residential Lots might actually be surplused but with more study required depending on the funding source utilized to acquire them. As well, part of the Istokpoga floodplain tract (i.e., that area outside of the actual floodplain) might also be surplused, but only for continued agricultural usage for cattle grazing with a retained conservation easement. Because these lands could be part of an important wildlife corridor and could have increased public access and usage, at the very least a conservation easement restricting activity to agricultural usage should be in place prior to any such surplus. The same may be said for Pool E and Paradise Run parcels, but they should be – in the main – retained in public ownership (albeit with some portions having a conservation easement allowing benign agricultural uses like cattle grazing) for their long-term conservation, restoration and hydrological values for the entire ecosystem, as well as much public access and use. The Paradise Run "Pasture Parcel" could be one site actually surplused (albeit with a retained conservation easement) for private cattle ranching. But it must be remembered that even improved pasture lands provide outstanding wildlife habitat for several species of rare and declining grassland bird species (e.g., Florida grasshopper sparrow, Florida sandhill crane,

crested caracara) and provide excellent buffer lands for various and ongoing District activities that are central to its core mission.

Lake Okeechobee Watershed

Although we realize that this name is likely just for record-keeping and organizational purposes, it is a misnomer since many more of the lands north of Lake Okeechobee are also part of and constitute a significant portion of the watershed for the lake. Passed in 2000, the Lake Okeechobee Protection Act (Section 373.4595, Florida Statutes) established a restoration and protection program for the lake. This program addresses the reduction of phosphorus loading to the lake from both internal and external sources. The strategy has involved regulatory controls, voluntary public/private partnerships, and the construction of large storm water treatment areas on district-owned lands.

These tracts have varied uses revolving around water treatment, retention/storage and research and technology development and on methodologies for reducing nutrient loads to Lake Okeechobee. The vast majority of these properties are vital to the core mission of the District and those portions of various parcels that are not directly necessary for such vital work are already leased out for cattle grazing and other light forms of agriculture. As a good example, the Lakeside Ranches tracts lie along the east side of Lake Okeechobee. They were acquired to provide treatment for water coming off of the nearby agricultural lands to reduce the amount of excess nutrients entering the lake. The first storm water treatment cell has now been completed. Wetland treatment cells often attract a wide variety of wildlife. Additionally, there are portions of the site that are forested and will be left outside of the footprint of the treatment cells. These include small stands of cypress, oak hammock, and pine flatwoods that will be important roosting and nesting areas for wildlife utilizing the treatment cells. The forested wetlands are being restored as mitigation for wetland impacts associated with the construction of the storm water treatment project. As can be seen from these statements, there is a lot more to considering the surplusing of land than may initially meet the eye of an uninformed or casual observer of these lands and issues.

As well, the Lake Okeechobee Islands were acquired by the District in the 1950s and 1960s after the completion of the Herbert Hoover dike and the Central and South Florida Project for flood control and protection. The land was necessary to obtain the rights necessary to maintain the water within the lake in accordance with the approved regulation schedule. As such, the surplusing of any of these tracts and lands seems unwise and unwarranted.

A few small areas might be surplused contingent upon perpetual conservation easements in place that allow the District to maintain its ongoing programs and activities and allow only compatible uses of the adjacent lands. For example, the small triangular outparcel of land bounded by SR 710, SE 58th St., and SE 48th St within the Nubbin Slough project area is vacant and degraded improved pasture that fell outside of the designed footprint of a water quality treatment cell. It is possible after further review, input and consideration that an isolated parcel such as this might actually be suitable for outright surplus – unless needed as a staging area, buffer, equipment storage or facilities development. In general, however, lands that may be seriously considered for any kind of surplus action should be viewed through a lens of retained conservation easements,

transfer to government partners, and/or appropriateness for cattle grazing leases. It is apparent that the District is already forward looking in its responsibilities and is duly considering alternative uses and sources of revenue generation and auxiliary management scenarios.

Unassociated Parcels

It appears as if the majority of these often smaller and scattered/disjunct tracts are managed in conjunction with another public/governmental entity to provide public access (i.e., boat ramps) to other District or state-owned lands. As such, they should be retained as providing an important public service and contributing to the District's core mission. Only one, the St. Cloud Field Station parcel may be suitable for surplus, but, again, with a retained conservation easement in place because of the bald eagle nest on site. It is also of note that the entire Kissimmee/Okeechobee region (as herein defined by the SFWMD and the subject of this round of surplus reviews) is highly significant for bald eagles as the area fledges more young eagles than any other area within lower 48 states. As such, lands supporting these kinds of habitats – even margin – if supporting eagle's nests or even potential foraging lands should be conserved as they fit well with the District's core mission.

In closing, The Nature Conservancy would like to state that District staff should be commended for the thorough information, excellent resource descriptions and significance of the tracts, reasons for acquiring the land or interests therein and current restoration, management and public use activities and facilities (including many excellent site condition photographs and pertinent maps) that were made available for this review. These materials provide a very sound basis for reviewing the status and appropriateness of any surplus consideration for these lands and well-demonstrate (or occasionally not) the importance of these properties and their overall compliance with the District's core mission.

If you have any questions or comments regarding our assessment of the parcels in the Upper Lakes Management Region, please feel free to contact Richard Hilsenbeck at rhilsenbeck@TNC.ORG or at (850) 222-0199.

Sincerely,



Greg Knecht
Director of Protection



LAKE OKEECHOBEE - Torry and Kraemer Islands
Presented by
Ashley T. Tripp

The Glades communities of Palm Beach County have directed their economic development efforts in developing their communities' tourism industry which depends on the vitality Florida's largest freshwater lake, Lake Okeechobee. Over the past decade, 20 million dollars have been invested toward enhancing Torry Island (Belle Glade), South Bay and Pahokee marinas and campgrounds. Concurrently, Lake Okeechobee experienced such extreme environmental factors, including the severe hurricanes of 2004-05 and record breaking low water levels (2007 record minimum: 8.82'), that has detrimentally affected the islands natural habitat negatively impacting recreation uses. The local tourism industry has identified four areas of needed improvement in order to increase recreational uses:

1. Control Overgrowth of vegetation on Kraemer, Torry and Ritta Islands - When the southeast islands of Lake Okeechobee located in Palm Beach County became dry during the 2007-2011 droughts, it became ecologically imbalanced as it became an exposed seedbed for invasive vegetation significantly affecting the historical ecology and wildlife habitat. The southeast islands and their surrounding bay areas are world renown for fishing, hunting and airboat ecotours.

Significant decrease of habitat stability = decrease of tourists and revenue

2. Maintain Torry Island's Lake Okeechobee Scenic Trail (L.O.S.T.) – Event venues (i.e. hiking, biking, running) that utilize the trail have had to reroute participants from utilizing the pedestrian paths due to the overgrowth of maiden cane which has discouraged some events from reoccurring. Also, with the rehab of the Herbert Hoover Dike, this too has discouraged visiting opportunities for “hikers and bikers” to this region of Lake Okeechobee.

No recreationalists = no revenue

3. Implement management of islands, interior water channels and State Road 717 (aka Twin Bridges Road) – control vegetation overgrowth especially of invasive plants. The water channels need vegetation control and possibly dredging in order for marine craft to navigate. State Road 717 on Torry Island needs to have potholes repaired and the road banks need to be sloped and sodded. By repairing this road, recreationalists will be able to walk or bike on path to view the island's wildlife and utilize SFWMD chiki hut.

4. Replanting of trees – The removal of the trees has denuded Lake Okeechobee of its scenery and natural beauty that provided habitat for birds, especially the bald eagle, shade for fishermen and recreationalists, and shore erosion. Enhance areas on islands by replanting indigenous trees and maintaining replanted areas with “routine” maintenance.

To: South Florida Water Management District submitted to sfrankli@sfwmd.gov

From: Hilary Swain Archbold Biological Station

Date: March 18 2013.

This comment refers to all sites in the Kissimmee/Okeechobee Assessment. Based on material at

<http://www.sfwmd.gov/portal/page/portal/xweb%20protecting%20and%20restoring/land%20assessment>

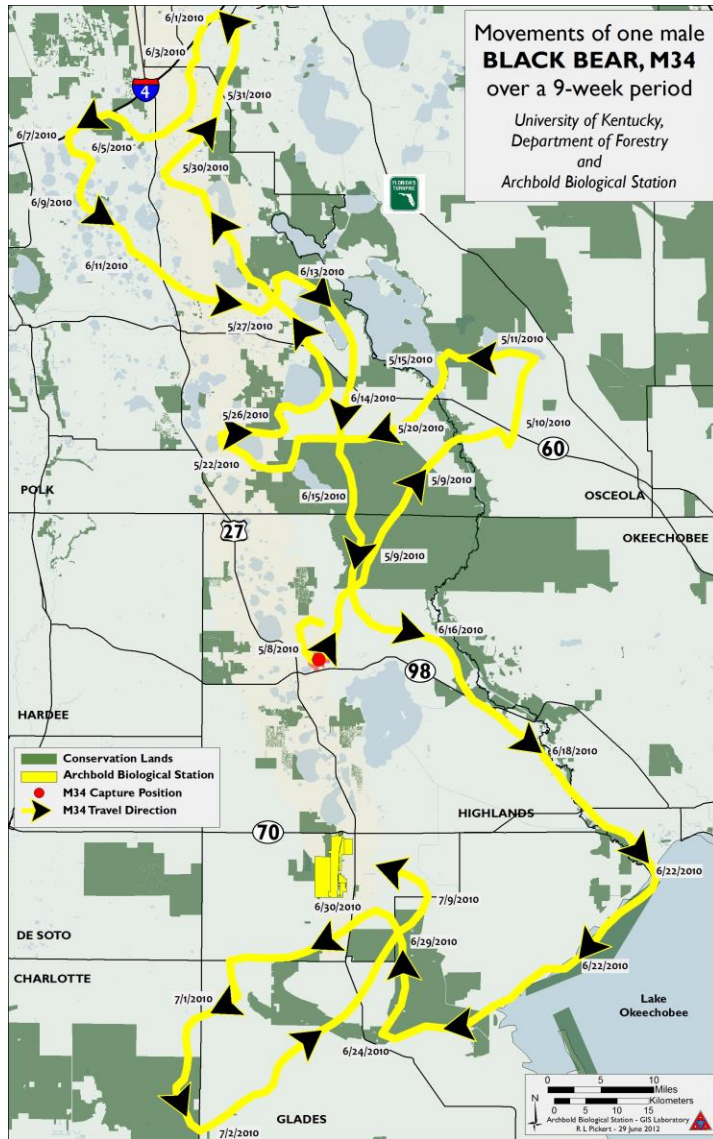
Many of these comments are a repeat of Archbold comments submitted earlier in February 2013 for the Upper Chain of lakes Assessment

Archbold Biological Station, Venus Florida is an internationally recognized ecological research and conservation center based in the Northern Everglades.

Although there is extensive documentation presented, Archbold could not ascertain a clear scientific process or comparative basis by which SFWMD prioritized any of these sites – some seem essential with ongoing restoration projects, others seem to hold great potential for restoration and are “waiting in the wings” for funding, and a few seem to be parcels that may be surplus to requirements and potentially useful for other purposes. It seems an onerous task for the public to have to plough through all these documents and sites and do the initial screening. Archbold did not have the resources to analyze all these sites separately in terms of relative contributions. It might be far more helpful if SFWMD staff would select the few locations that fall into the third category above, complete a rationale for their selection, and then present to the public for comment? The previous set of Upper Chain sites provided for comments seemed to be the reverse process, but equally inexplicable (a subset of sites selected all of which seems worthy of being kept as public lands without any rationale for their choice). IN this case we seem to be dealing with actual acquisition boundaries and not CERP planning boundaries as in the last batch?

Again Archbold recommends that SFWMD utilize a detailed regional study conducted for the Central Florida Regional Planning Council by the same organizations that prepared CLIP and statewide analyses used by SFWMD (Tom Hctor, Geoplan Center, FNAI, TNC). The report, Heartland Ecological Assessment Report 2010, was emailed by Archbold to SFWMD as part of the earlier Feb 2013 comments submittal. This analysis contains far more detail than the statewide analyses, and is a refined regional approach and covers much of this area. It shows most sites picked for this Kissimmee Okeechobee section seem to play a central role in themes that tie directly to SFWMD core mission: Florida Black Bear Habitat, Florida Panther Habitat, Riparian Greenways, Ecological Network, Groundwater Priorities, Smokesheds, Rare Species Habitat Conservation Priorities, Riparian Buffers, Conservation Buffers, Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas, Natural Communities, Greenways, Wetlands, Potential Natural Areas, and Landscape Integrity.

The Northern Everglades (specifically lands draining south into Lake Okeechobee) have a lower proportion of publically owned lands (approximately one fifth) than south of the lake, and has experienced a higher per cent loss of wetlands than south of lake. Hence surplusings of public lands in this area has greater consequences in terms of diminishing protected area networks.



It is critical to review all sites in this region in a landscape context. These Kissimmee Okeechobee sites play a key role for connectivity of species and contiguity of ecosystem processes within the entire network of public lands in this region, including lands managed or owned by other agencies/or easements on private lands. In terms of natural resources – wildlife connectivity for large animals such as bear, panther, bobcats, otters – these proposed lands play an important role. See for one example the tracked route of a representative male Black Bear M34 who travelled many of these sites along the Kissimmee River on his 500-mile 2-month trip through this region in 2010.

In terms of water storage, water quality and flood protection. Prudent planning would suggest it would be preferable to conduct selection of surplus sites in conjunction with/ or as a recommendation stemming from developing the subbasin plans (required by the 2007 Northern Everglades Plan, as is underway for subbasins in this region. Some of these SFWMD public lands were

identified and listed on tables in earlier documents published by SFWMD as being important for meeting the one-million-acre feet target retention for the Northern Everglades. Extreme caution is merited when considering surplusings existing public lands that may end up being the most cost effective and strategically located for later floodplain restoration, and for enhanced water retention. Analyses of the contribution of public lands to meet sub-basin goals is critical – a strategic and well-thought planning and modeling analyses for sub-basin plans should PRECEDE and be completed before selecting sites for potential surplus. Archbold would recommend that all of the listed properties should be retained in public ownership as conservation lands. Further analyses should be conducted as part of the subbasin planning process, with public review, to allow for a rigorous and transparent surplusings review process.

March 18, 2013

RECEIVED

Mr. Ray Palmer
Real Estate Section Leader
South Florida Water Management District
3301 Gun Club Road
West Palm Beach, Florida 33406

MAR 25 2013

LAND MANAGEMENT
SECTION

Dear Mr. Palmer:

Thanks to the SFWMD Land Assessment Team for the opportunity to comment on the District's assessment for lands in the Kissimmee/Okeechobee Region. With land considered key to successful implementation of its core mission to provide for flood protection, ecosystem restoration and aquifer recharge for water supply, the District's history of acquisition (easements and fee title) has been dedicated to state and regional project support. District documents state that the "potential alternative uses (of District owned lands) contribute to the agency's core mission of balancing and improving water quality, flood control, natural systems and water supply."¹ These alternative uses need a comprehensive and thorough examination as to the long-term value that these lands might hold without which there would be major concerns with the timing and scope of the land assessment process in the Kissimmee/Okeechobee Region.

As mentioned in my earlier comments regarding the Upper Basin of the Kissimmee River, South and Central Florida are facing an influx from our northern neighbors and what seems to be certain inundation of our urbanized coastal regions. With these eventualities the interior of Florida, specifically the greater metropolitan Orlando area, are poised for exponential additional growth through internal migration. Expanded potable water conservation and smarter water management will be essential to addressing these supply issues. District lands have a critical role to play in these efforts.

The following estimates, delivered at the February 2013 Central Florida Water Initiative Steering Committee Meeting by Tom Bartol, St. Johns District's Bureau of Water Supply, show 2035 future demands of approximately 310 additional MGD over 2010 water use²:

Use	MGD	Approximate % of Demand
Public Water Supply	218	70
Landscape, recreation, aesthetic	32	10
Agriculture	29	9
Commercial, institutional and industrial	22	7
Power Generation	5	2
Domestic Self Supply	4	1

¹ http://www.sfwmd.gov/portal/page/portal/xrepository/sfwmd_repository_pdf/q_and_a_land_assessment.pdf

² http://cfwiwater.com/pdfs/2013_02-01/minutes.pdf. Pgs., 3-4.

Increase by County	MGD
Orange	116
Osceola	91
Polk	50
Lake	38
Seminole	16

Increase by District	MGD
SJR	136
SF	128
SWF	49

As discussed at the March 12, 2013 lands assessment meeting in Kissimmee, the Defenders of Wildlife, Florida Chapter, has examined the District's parcel portfolio and determined that all but one lies within the Priority 1 or 2 classification of the UF Center for Landscape Conservation Planning/FNAI Critical Lands and Waters Identification Project 2.0 (CLIP) that provides the basis of the FWC Cooperative Conservation Blueprint (CCB) Project. These rankings place the parcels in the two highest priority levels receiving the most conservation attention. The outlier is the Okeechobee Boat Ramp and is listed on the imperiled species list.

These designations are in addition to and in support of the US Fish and Wildlife Service Strategic Habitat Conservation designations that are afforded to many of these areas. Sustainable and diverse fish and wildlife populations depend on the protection of these lands for which they were purchased with various state, local and federal funding programs. As you know, there are several initiatives underway in the Kissimmee/Okeechobee Region that deal with overall water management and where control of property rights could affect ultimate success for specific projects:

- Central Florida Water Supply Initiative,
- Kissimmee Basin MFL development,
- Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area,
- Kissimmee River Restoration,
- USACE post- construction KRR/SFWMD KCOL re-modeling/planning,
- SFWMD efforts to develop water reservations for the KCOL/Kissimmee,
- Lake Okeechobee Protection Plan compliance,
- DACS BMPs - Audubon requests additional water management features,
- Lake Okeechobee BMAP development, and;
- Lake Okeechobee BMAP development, and;
- The Florida Water and Climate Alliance work on Climate Change.

The success of each of these is dependent on flexibility and interagency collaboration that works to resolve issues of storage and aquifer recharge so crucial to water quality and supply. Divesting hard fought land/easement acquisitions (at a time when population projections and climate science indicate startling and negative impacts to water supply and quality in the region) should be deferred until all these other factors can be considered at the watershed level, not as individual and unrelated projects.

We need leadership at the highest levels of state governance to organize a coordinated approach to restoration of the overall Everglades system that finally begins at the top of the system. SFWMD staff members, under the leadership of Temperince Morgan, did a terrific job in the Lake Okeechobee Technical Plan. Refocusing on this approach is sensible watershed management and one that requires holding onto existing conservation lands until final plans for additional storage and restoration can be executed.

It's time to get back to the effort that will provide landscape scale watershed restoration, protection of conservation and agricultural lands, water quality improvements for the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes, the Kissimmee River, Lake Okeechobee and ultimately the St. Lucie/Caloosahatchee river systems and their downstream estuaries. This is where we need to be focused and it needs to be a coordinated effort starting at the Headwaters of the KOE ecosystem.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and understand that with these comments, I speak only for myself as a resident and concerned citizen of the Kissimmee Basin.

Respectfully,



Kimball Love
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March 18, 2013

RECEIVED

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LAND MANAGEMENT SECTION

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Mr. Ray Palmer, Real Estate Section Leader
South Florida Water Management District
3301 Gun Club Road
West Palm Beach, FL 33406
rpalmer@sfwmd.gov

RE: South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), Land Assessment of the Kissimmee -Okeechobee Region and Remaining SFWMD Assessment Regions

Dear Mr. Palmer:

Thank you for the opportunity to review the 2013 SFWMD's Land Assessment that it is conducting on all of the SFWMD's full-fee owned lands. Recently, in a letter dated February 18, 2013, (attached) Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) staff provided a review of the 2013 SFWMD Land Assessment for the Upper Lakes Region. FWC staff has also completed a review of the 2013 SFWMD Land Assessment for the Kissimmee-Okeechobee Region along with a determination of how FWC will consider the Kissimmee-Okeechobee Region Land Assessment and scheduled upcoming SFWMD land assessments.

In FWC's February 18, 2013 letter, we provided a description of the ongoing comprehensive assessment of the SFWMD's fee simple land ownerships, an ecological overview of the Upper Lakes Region, a synopsis of each unit's fish and wildlife resources, a description of public use and ongoing FWC resource and operational management activities, as well as comments about the results of our review.

This review letter will cover our review approach for the Kissimmee- Okeechobee Region Lands Assessment and scheduled upcoming SFWMD assessments of its fee-simple lands. Rather than provide a fish and wildlife resource and associated public uses analysis of the entire landscape of SFWMD fee-owned conservation lands, FWC has determined that it will be far more efficacious to only review those lands subsequently selected by the SFWMD for a potential surplus or change of use designation.

While we appreciate the reasons for and the importance of the overall assessment of SFWMD fee-owned lands, we believe this approach will be more beneficial to both the SFWMD and FWC. Such an approach will allow FWC to provide a calibrated analysis of lands that are proposed for disposition or a change in use since an overall general analysis lacks the targeted specificity that is necessary to analyze any potential impacts that may result from a proposed surplus or change in use designation on SFWMD lands.

Moreover, we have determined that additional landscape analysis will likely result in somewhat similar results described in our February 18, 2013 letter. Given the general similarity of fish and wildlife habitats, suite of rare and imperiled focal species that occur within much of the SFWMD fee-owned lands assessment boundary, FWC has projected that similar assessments of remaining regions in the SFWMD lands assessment will produce, in a general sense, comparable results even though the exact type of habitats and associated suite of rare and imperiled focal fish and wildlife species will vary from region

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to region as will the number and types of public uses, such as hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, boating, hiking, etc., vary within the overall lands assessment boundary.

It is clear that much, if not most, of the SFWMD fee owned conservation lands throughout each of the five regions identified in the ongoing 2013 SFWMD land assessment (approximately 750,000 acres) contain important fish and wildlife resources that harbor many rare and imperiled species of fish and wildlife along with more common wildlife. These SFWMD lands also provide many important fish and wildlife based public recreational opportunities for Florida's citizens and visitors that correspondingly generate substantial economic benefits for the State of Florida as described in our February 18, 2013 letter on this assessment.

Accordingly, for those reasons outlined above, FWC will refrain from evaluating and commenting on the ongoing SFWMD fee-owned land holdings' assessment at this time. However, upon completion of the overall lands assessment, further review of any lands proposed for a surplus or change of use designation is warranted.

As indicated in our letter of February 18, 2013, FWC understands the SFWMD is currently assessing Water Management District fee-owned properties to determine those that are most important to their core mission. Consequently, FWC understands that the SFWMD lands assessment may recommend that some of those lands are no longer needed for the purposes for which they were acquired and, therefore, may be recommended for a potential surplus or change in use designation.

Therefore, to aid in your decision-making process, FWC respectfully requests the opportunity to evaluate any fee-owned lands proposed for disposition or a change in use designation to determine potential impacts to fish and wildlife resources and to cooperatively work with your staff to ensure that such impacts be avoided or reasonably minimized.

Again, we appreciate the opportunity to review the 2013 SFWMD Land Assessment process and are looking forward to working with the SFWMD throughout review of lands and, more specifically, in the future analysis of any SFWMD lands proposed for disposition or change in use designation. If you need any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact Jane Chabre either by phone at (850) 410-5367 or at FWCConservationPlanningServices@MyFWC.com. If you have specific technical questions regarding the content of this letter, please contact Gary Cochran at (850) 487-9185 or by email at Gary.Cochran@MyFWC.com.

Sincerely,



Scott Sanders, Director
Office of Conservation Planning Service
Mb/gc