

STATEMENT of PRINCIPLES

Governing Board Vows to Protect Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has continuously failed to meet the commitments it made in a 2002 contract with the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) by allowing the spread of Old World climbing fern in the District-owned 144,000-acre Water Conservation Area 1 (WCA-1). The USFWS uses most of this water conservation area for its Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge. The spread of this invasive fern poses an ecological threat that could destroy the ecosystem of this land that is part of the traditional Everglades. The USFWS's failure to protect this taxpayer-owned property cannot be tolerated. The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) Governing Board is prepared to terminate the contract if the USFWS does not secure the funding necessary to control invasive plants on the property. In response to public questions, the Governing Board has adopted this Statement of Principles regarding the management of WCA-1 if the contract must be terminated because USFWS refuses to ask Congress for funds to meet its contractual obligations.

1. In conjunction with our partners the Governing Board will devote sufficient resources to control the spread of Old World Climbing Fern and properly manage taxpayer lands.

- SFWMD, working with other agencies, will control Old World Climbing Fern and take any steps necessary to protect the taxpayer lands.
- Over the past 20 years, under USFWS management, the spread of Old World Climbing Fern has increased by 600 percent in the Refuge. During the same time period, state-managed conservations lands have controlled the spread of Old World Climbing Fern.
- State agencies have invested nearly \$12 million since 1999 to combat invasive plants in the Refuge because of an overarching commitment to the health of the Everglades.



2. The Governing Board will NOT close District lands within the Refuge to public access or recreational enjoyment.

- Public access for nature-based recreation occurs on all public land the SFWMD owns. *Florida Statute Sec. 371.1391 (2016)*.
- Districtwide, the Governing Board guarantees public access for recreation on more than 641,000 acres of land it owns.
- Over the past 10 years, the Governing Board has increased the amount of District-owned land open for public recreation by 123,000 acres.
- For many years, SFWMD has partnered with groups like the Audubon Society to provide recreational opportunities such as birdwatching tours on District-owned lands including stormwater treatment areas.
- SFWMD will maintain recreational opportunities on the entire WCA-1 site.

3. Unlike the USFWS, the Governing Board will NEVER charge the public to access District lands within the Refuge.

- SFWMD does not charge entrance fees for public access to hundreds of thousands of acres used for recreation. For example, the DuPuis Recreation Management Area in Martin County is a multi-use treasure. The public can use miles of trails and many campgrounds on District-owned lands without charge. The same applies to the WCA-1/ Loxahatchee Refuge Property.

4. No actions by the Governing Board will affect property owned by the USFWS. All Refuge facilities are located on lands owned by the United States. If the contract to manage District-owned lands is terminated for default, the USFWS is welcomed to continue offering services on lands owned by the United States.

- The USFWS owns approximately 1,200 acres that is part of its Refuge east of the L-40 Levee with features that include a visitor center and boardwalk. ([See attached maps](#))
- Whatever the Governing Board's decision, these features will continue to be owned by the USFWS and operated as they please.

5. The Governing Board will take the necessary steps on District lands to protect the Refuge's ecosystem for plants, wildlife and public use and enjoyment and support scientific research on these District-owned lands.

- The District will implement prescribed fire, wildlife monitoring or other programs to protect this critical piece of the Everglades ecosystem.
- The District will encourage and permit water, soil and biological research.
- The District will encourage universities and other research entities to conduct research efforts.

