



THE CONSERVATION FUND

EVERGLADES TRUST

Alliance of Florida Land Trusts



CONSERVANCY Of Southwest Florida

rails-to-trails conservancy



January 9, 2007

President Ken Pruitt
Office of the Senate President
409 The Capitol
404 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1100

Dear Senator Pruitt:

Congratulations on assuming leadership of the Florida Senate. We're delighted to work with you over the next two years as you pursue the Senate's priorities.

As you prepare to address your priorities in the 2007-08 state budget, the member groups of the Florida Forever Coalition encourage you to consider the benefits of accelerating the pace of the Florida Forever Program.

As you know, the land conservation programs funded through Florida Forever have already obligated current fiscal year appropriations. Yet, a considerable backlog of conservation lands, park priorities and restoration projects await additional state funds. Opportunities to protect vital conservation lands may be lost to other buyers under the current pace of acquisition.

It is our hope to double the state's commitment to land conservation funding over the next two fiscal years in order to spend down the remaining \$1.2 billion in Florida Forever funds in order that a new, more robust program of land conservation can commence.

Specifically, we propose that the Senate provide authority for the issuance of \$600 million, or double the usual \$300 million, in bonds to pursue Florida Forever conservation projects this fiscal year and next. Along with a statutory change, this would be accomplished by an appropriation in the amount of \$60 million by the Legislature this year, and then the same action next year.

If funded, as traditionally done through bonds, the additional required debt service would have minor impact on this year's state budget and would result in virtually the same long-term impact on the state budget. We urge you to recommend using the bonding capacity of Florida Forever at a faster rate than that anticipated when the program was created in 1999. Originally, Florida Forever anticipated a \$300 million annual rate of spending, but did not prohibit using the remaining \$1.2 billion approved bond capacity more quickly.

In fact, accelerating Florida Forever makes good fiscal sense and allows more conservation benefits. The present temporary slowdown in the real estate market, coupled with continued development pressure, has provided us with an unusually good opportunity. The state should act at once to secure priority lands and take advantage of the potential increase in the number of landowners willing to sell their land for conservation.

Last year the Florida Legislature generously approved \$735 million in land conservation funds. The results were a remarkable suite of conservation successes including Babcock Ranch, Everglades restoration projects, springs protection, military base buffers and much more.

We believe current legislative leaders will agree the benefits of the projects that can be quickly completed with accelerated Florida Forever funding represent an extraordinary opportunity.

We invite you to begin the discussion of how to preserve priority conservation lands by proposing the doubling of the bond sale in 2007, with the effect of more than doubling the conservation benefits.

Thank you very much for your consideration. We look forward to working with you, Senator Saunders and the leadership team you have put in place to increase the conservation impact of the Florida Forever program.

Alliance of Florida Land Trusts

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305-371-6399
www.audubonofflorida.org

Conservancy of Southwest Florida
239-262-0304
www.conservancy.org

The Conservation Fund
850-386-8683
www.conservationfund.org

Defenders of Wildlife
727-580-9585
www.defenders.org

Everglades Trust
www.evergladestrust.org

Florida Chapter of the American
Planning Association
850-201-FAPA
www.floridaplanning.org

Florida Chapter of the American
Society of Landscape Architects
www.flasla.org

Florida Native Plant Society
321-271-6702
www.fnps.org

Florida Recreation & Park Association
850-878-3221
www.frpa.org

Florida Trail Association
877-HIKE-FLA
www.floridatrail.org

Florida Wildlife Federation
850-656-7113
www.fwfonline.org

The Nature Conservancy
407-682-3664
www.nature.org/florida

1,000 Friends of Florida
850-222-6277
www.1000fof.org

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy
www.railtrails.org

The Trust for Public Land
850-222-7911
www.tpl.org/floridaforever

The Wilderness Society
www.tws.org