



November 13, 2008

Governor Charlie Crist
PL-05 The Capitol
400 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

Dear Governor Crist:

As you consider budget reductions proposed by the Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Recreation and Parks (state parks), we request that you carefully consider their potential impacts on resource management at some of Florida's most important natural areas. In a recent memo to staff, Parks Director Mike Bullock announced that nineteen state parks would be "temporarily closed." The memo also identified another three parks managed as state parks for other agencies to be returned to those agencies. Before continuing I wish to note that this letter is not intended in any way to express concern about the leadership of DEP by Michael Sole and the Division by Michael Bullock. These are excellent agency leaders clearly struggling to make do with inadequate resources.

Florida's parks and other conservation lands are held in trust for the people of Florida. Holding land in trust means a commitment to good management and responsibility for stewardship of vulnerable natural resources. Many parks were created to protect unique Florida plant and animal communities.

The current budget situation is daunting, and we recognize that no agency will be immune from the belt-tightening necessary to help our state weather this economic downturn. Managing recreational use and public access while protecting valuable natural resources is a very important part of our state parks' mission. For this reason, the division's proposal to reduce expenses by limiting recreational access at selected parks can cut costs without diminishing resource protection. Nevertheless, some of the "temporary" park closures proposed by state parks could also have serious implications for Florida's rarest natural communities and wildlife.

Reducing staff to caretaker levels in many parks cannot reasonably be expected to fulfill resource stewardship responsibilities. Properties that contain rare and critical resources, or require frequent and regular management to maintain their ecological health may suffer without adequate attention.

For example, Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park in Okeechobee County was acquired to protect the largest intact remnant of Florida's globally imperiled dry prairie ecosystem. It is the largest of only three sites in the world that still support the federally endangered Florida Grasshopper Sparrow. This species has suffered dramatic declines in recent years and its persistence requires that managers conduct labor-intensive summer burns on half the Prairie—

more than 20,000 acres—each year. If the Prairie’s staff is reduced to caretaker levels, these prescribed fire needs, even with periodic burn team help, will probably not be met. The preserve’s additional obligations including monitoring the Prairie’s 54,000 acres for lightning-ignited wildfires; maintaining fire lanes and perimeter fencing; patrolling its more than 50 miles of boundaries for poaching, trespassing, dumping and arson; identifying and eradicating exotics; as well as monitoring the health of the Prairie’s sparrow population will also be compromised. Staff at Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park are already making commendable efforts to manage these remarkable resources, while struggling with existing staffing and budget limitations. It is our concern that this and many other state park properties will suffer unacceptable degradation from neglect, if assigned only one or two caretaker staff.

Similarly, Egmont Key represents an important natural resource for imperiled beach-dependent birds in Tampa Bay. Reversion of this property to the National Wildlife Refuge system may provide some cost-savings, but the short timeframe proposed would not give the federal cooperating agency sufficient time to find the resources to replace the important functions the state park currently provides at Egmont. The current cooperative agreement between the refuge system and State Parks provides Egmont Key with a staffed presence to manage the more than 170,000 annual boater visits to the island, and protect the island’s unique historical and natural resources, including nesting marine turtles and extensive shorebird and seabird colonies. Without this presence, the park’s sensitive resources would be left without on-site, round-the-clock management, and the island would be vulnerable to trespass and resource abuse.

The decision as to which parks should be temporarily closed appears to have been made based on which parks attract the least paid attendance—and accordingly, which park closures would inconvenience the fewest visitors and result in the least decline in admission revenues. This is a reasonable approach. However, we ask that these reductions not be at the expense of the resource management needs of these properties.

Allowing these properties to decline through management neglect in order to realize short-term savings will result in the need for expensive restoration efforts later, and may, in some cases, irreparably harm the natural resources these properties support.

Extirpation of the federally endangered Florida Grasshopper Sparrow from Kissimmee Prairie and the abandonment of the globally important nesting bird colony at Egmont Key are likely if management at these parks is reduced.

As noted above, most state lands are held in trust for the people by the Board of Trustees, and state land managers struggle even under current staffing levels to maintain their ecological health. We urge you to consider the impact of additional staffing reductions on the state’s ability to adequately manage these sensitive public trust resources.

Sincerely,



Eric Draper
Deputy Director/Policy Director

Cc: Michael Sole
Michael Bullock