

## **\$1 BILLION A YEAR OR BUST**

*Lofty goal set to help preserve Florida for generations to come  
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During the past several decades, Florida has purchased spectacular landscapes for preservation -- from dazzling beach dunes that cradle freshwater lakes to ancient scrub lands that shelter some of the state's rarest plants.

But the state's Florida Forever program, generating \$300 million annually for buying land and other conservation measures, expires at the end of the decade.

Instead of just gearing up to plead with the state Legislature to renew that funding, however, a coalition of environmentalists has launched a campaign with a far loftier goal.

The Florida Forever Coalition will attempt to secure an astounding \$1 billion a year during a decade to buy and protect critical pieces of prairie, forest, wetlands and desertlike scrub. The increase is needed to keep up with rising land costs, coalition members say.

Proponents of the idea want the additional money to come from the source that now provides for most of the state's current land purchases: documentary-stamp taxes on real-estate and legal transactions.

It would just be a bigger slice of the "doc" stamp cash that now goes primarily to the state's general-spending account for health, education and other services.

"There's no question that this is an ambitious effort," said Andy McLeod, interim state director in Florida for the Trust for Public Land, one of 16 groups in the coalition that includes Audubon of Florida, The Nature Conservancy and Defenders of Wildlife.

Several state representatives and senators said a request for \$1 billion a year will face stiff, but not impossible, competition.

"I don't know what the magic number is going to be," said Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland. "I personally think \$1 billion is a very reasonable request."

State Rep. Thad Altman, R-Melbourne, said one argument for increasing spending is to help ensure that Florida is livable in years to come.

"The overwhelming majority of people who live in this state say we need to do more to protect our environment," Altman said. "It sounds like a lot of money, but it's not when you consider the needs and benefits."

While Florida has been accused of allowing development to run amok across rural lands, the ongoing commitment to buy and protect land has done much to block the advance of bulldozers. The state has long had the most aggressive land-purchase and conservation program anywhere in the nation.

The Florida Forever program and the previous Preservation 2000 program in the 1990s have assembled more than 2 million acres of landscapes that will be treasured far into the future.

Today, about 27 percent of Florida land is under some form of conservation, including national forests, open spaces on big military bases, state lands and private lands that have been dedicated for preservation.

A number of scientists think that as much as 33 percent of the state should be under conservation for the long-term survival of native ecosystems.

But now, according to state officials, few of the largest, spectacular or pristine tracts are left. Most already have been set aside for preservation or carved up for rooftops and pavement.

Yet obtaining some smaller or less-pristine parcels will play a critical role in linking larger conservation parcels together, protecting rare species and recharging underground aquifers, which supply drinking water and feed springs, lakes and rivers.

To achieve those goals, a study this year by The Nature Conservancy recommends the state should acquire an additional 2.3 million acres -- which could cost nearly \$10 billion.

The classic example of future needs are efforts by state, regional and local governments to buy puzzle pieces of property between the Ocala National Forest and the Wekiva River.

More than 50,000 acres between the Wekiva River and the national forest are in public ownership, including the popular Wekiwa Springs State Park.

But the state park won't continue to be valuable as habitat unless corridors of natural land remain open to black bears, for example, migrating along the Wekiva River, St. Johns River and Ocala National Forest.

There's a huge difference between the more than 2 million acres bought since the early 1990s and the 2.3 million acres identified for future purchases: cost.

In 1990, the average price for an acre in Florida was nearly \$4,000. Today, that figure is nearly \$30,000, according to coalition figures.

In the past few years, skyrocketing real-estate prices have shriveled the buying power of Florida Forever.

"This is really being realistic about the price of land," said Vicki Tschinkel, director of The Nature Conservancy in Florida, which is part of the coalition and often assists the state in land purchases.

That was made clear last month when Gov. Jeb Bush and Cabinet members approved a \$50 million purchase of the 4,569-acre Joshua Creek Conservation Area in northeast Orange County and a small part of Seminole County.

That same land was sold for \$17 million less just six months earlier, a difference attributed in part to escalating real-estate prices.

How much time is left to buy more environmentally sensitive lands depends on how fast the state sprawls. The pace varies from blistering in some years to modest in others.

McLeod of the Trust for Public Land said the coalition has no specific strategy in place yet for winning approval of

additional land-buying money.

One approach may be to make a formal push for that money as early as next year's legislative session.

Those details will be discussed this week at the Public Land Acquisition and Management Partnership Conference in Jacksonville.

The gathering, which starts today, is expected to draw politicians, state officials, environmental leaders and professionals in land acquisition -- many of the same people who will usher the \$1 billion proposal into public and legislative debate.

"It's going to be a very important audience," McLeod said.

#### **[Illustration]**

PHOTO: Babcock Ranch cowboys Cody Milburn and his dad, David Milburn, herd cows at the ranch near Punta Gorda and Lake Okeechobee this summer. BOBBY COKER/ORLANDO SENTINEL FILE PHOTO: An immature scrub-jay sits on a branch along the Lake Wales Ridge in Polk County. ED SACKETT/ORLANDO SENTINEL FILE PHOTO: Joshua Creek Conservation Area near Orlando, which consists of 4,569 acres, was purchased by the state for \$50 million. ST. JOHNS RIVER WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT PHOTO: A deer bolts at the sight of people at Babcock Ranch in July. The land was bought by the state for \$308 million. BOBBY COKER/ORLANDO SENTINEL FILE . MAP: TREASURED TERRAINS The most expensive tracts bought by the state's Florida Forever and Preservation 2000 programs take in varied habitat from the Panhandle to South Florida. 1. Babcock Ranch Price: \$308 million Acres: 67,618 Features: Variety of natural habitats, working cattle ranch, fills gap for unbroken span of public land between Lake Okeechobee and Gulf of Mexico. 2. South Walton County Ecosystem Price: \$84 million Acres: 687 Features: Dunes next to freshwater lakes, links 3 state parks, endangered Choctawhatchee Beach Mouse. 3. Silver Springs recharge area Price: \$76 million Acres: 4,471 Features: Recharges underground aquifer that feeds Silver Springs, sinkholes, extensive wildlife habitat. 4. Levy County forest and sandhills Price: \$64 million Acres: 42,520 Features: Is now Goethe State Forest, large stands of old-growth longleaf pine flatwoods, many protected species, including gopher tortoises, indigo snakes and red- cockaded woodpeckers. 5. Pinhook Swamp Price: \$59.9 million Acres: 57,379 Features: Establishes link between Okeefenokee Swamp and Osceola National Forest, a mosaic of flatwoods, swamps and open waters. 6. Green Swamp Price: \$53.5 million Acres: 5,066 Features: In area of highest recharge for the Floridan Aquifer, key tributaries to the Withlacoochee River, nearly 1,000 acres of longleaf pine forest. 7. Joshua Creek Conservation Area Price: \$50 million Acres: 4,569 Features: Remote wilderness at edge of Orlando metro area, enhances conservation of wildlife corridor along St. Johns River, provides key link in Florida National Scenic Trail. 8. Catfish Creek Price: \$38 million Acres: 5,830 Features: Includes significant section and views from Lake Wales Ridge, 19 rare plants and animals, Lake Pierce shoreline. 9. Tate's Hell Swamp Price: \$38 million Acres: 37,358 Features: Connects Apalachicola River and Ochlockonee River, dwarf pond cypress swamps, Creek Indian battle site. 10. Fisheating Creek Price: \$37.4 million Acres: 41,596 Features: Panther habitat, only undammed tributary to Lake Okeechobee, wide variety of plants. 11. Twelve Mile Swamp Price: \$20.1 million Acres: 21,898 Features: Natural landscape in area of intense growth, black-bear habitat, large bird rookery. 12. Kissimmee Prairie Price: \$16.8 million Acres: 38,315 Features: Critical habitat for imperiled grasshopper sparrow, sprawling landscape of nearly pristine prairie laced with streams. SOURCES: Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Sentinel research ORLANDO SENTINEL

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