

**Testimony of Bishop M. Wright Jr.
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Florida Everglades Restoration
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Testimony on Florida Everglades Restoration Plan

Members of the House Sub-Committee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs House Committee on Natural Resources thank you for inviting me to present testimony on behalf of 26,000 registered Airboaters in the state of Florida to you today.

My name is Bishop Wright Jr. and I live in West Palm Beach, Florida. I am here representing the Florida Airboat Association as its President. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to tell you about the impacts facing my family, and the Sportsmen's community as a result of federal actions. Also, I want to suggest some common sense federal actions that can positively address the deplorable situation.

First of all Airboaters are not the type of people who condone "A lock the gate" land management philosophy that doesn't allow Florida citizens to enjoy their public lands and waterways.

The following are examples of why we will never support this type of harmful, unfair and un-American so-called land stewardship.

#1. The history of federal permitting of "recreational activities" on national wildlife refuge in Florida:

Water Conservation Area One, also known as Arthur R. Marshall. The South Florida Water Management District leases Loxahatchee Wildlife Refuge, to the US Fish and Wildlife Services. It is managed entirely differently than Conservation Areas two and three located in the same area. For the last 20 years airboat recreation has been prohibited under the wildlife refuge philosophy of protecting the resources. On conservation area 1, the "lock-em-out" federal land management philosophy of USFWS has resulted in an_invasive exotic vegetation infestation of_over 70% of the refuge.

Yet in the other two Conservation Areas, managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, which embraces recreational airboating, hunting and fishing, exotic vegetation has been virtually eradicated. The difference between the USFWS refuge and the commission-managed lands is simple; airboaters and sportsmen serve as the eyes and ears and the whistleblowers for the land. When citizens are allowed to access the land and enjoy an area, they develop a close connection with the land, and become actively involved in its management. They don't and won't allow the land to be degraded and become infested with exotic species, which choke out the native species.

With No Access areas such as Loxahatchee Arthur R. Marshall Conservation Area the result is: There are no eyes and ears on the land or water, which means no whistleblowers; so the wildlife and its habitat will always suffer when this happens. Despite all of its treasures, the refuge is in serious danger of quickly becoming an exclusive haven for invasive plants, Like the Melaleuca tree; Old World climbing fern (Lygodium Vine), and the Brazilian Pepper also known as Florida Holly. These are all rapidly growing non-native species, which are quickly overgrowing the native flora and are not compatible with the native wildlife.

In 1951, a license agreement between the South Florida Water Management District and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act, enabled the establishment of the 143,874-acre Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge. Hunting and public access to federal land was the mitigation for drainage and development of land in the Everglades. To the south and southwest of the refuge lay Water Conservation Areas 2 and 3, and Everglades National Park the only remaining portions of the Everglades fresh water marsh.

Water Conservation Areas 2 and 3 (WCA 2 & 3) are signature Everglades Sawgrass marsh, interspersed with tree islands. Ownership is mixed, with State, South Florida Water Management District and private ownership. The State leases portions of its land to the Micosukee Indian Tribe. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission manages the land to allow traditionally used vehicles like swamp buggy or boats to access to the area; the interior marshes are accessed by airboat, and the levees are also used for bicycle and

hiking. With all of its multi-users, there is fishing, foraging and hunts for alligator, waterfowl, deer and small game. There is little to no exotic vegetation on its 671,831 Acres of land. This land is managed for sportsmen to be able to preserve the wildlife and habitat.

The sportsman took the initiative to get certified to apply herbicide we also worked with the State employees to kill or remove these exotic invasive plants. As we hunted and explored the area we have access to we reported to the land managers of the area where these plants were located which allowed them to send their employees to eradicate these plants. Today without the ability to access nearly 80% of the BICY these plants will now go unchecked, unreported and become even an bigger problem for the habitat and Federal Government.

Conservation areas two and three are perfect samples of how conservation area one should be managed because they are perfect examples of why human recreational access does not harm the land.

Many conservationists are glad that the US Fish and Wildlife Service was only granted a 50 year lease because it was not until they dealt with the lack of land management by USFWS that they saw a situation they could not ignore. If any state agency was managing land this way their lease would've been taken back. But because it was federal manage lands, their lease was renewed. However, it was renewed with a lot shorter time frame because of the terrible way the USFWS managed the land during its first 50 years of management.

At the hearings, when it became time to renew the lease, there were thousands of people asking the South Florida Water Management District not to renew the lease back to the USFWS because of their mis-management practices.

What was everybody so up in arms about other than the fact that the area was being taken over by exotic vegetation? Burkett Neely was the USFWS Land manager. We believe his actions show his apparent goal during the 17 years he was in charge was to keep people out by making things as uninviting as possible. He ignored complaints about the refuge. Thankfully, he retired in 1998. All of the things he took away in a decade and a half have still have not been replaced.

The boat ramps at the Hillsboro Recreation Area at the south end of the refuge at Lox Road have been in disrepair for more than a decade; (1990); there are underwater obstructions that can destroy an outboard motor which are unmarked; and the canals are often choked with weeds.

USFWS stopped the Bass clubs from holding tournaments, took away the special use permit that allow airboats to operate by permit only on designated trails within the refuge.

The only hunting opportunity available was waterfowl and it was less than half of the area. This area holds a lot more opportunity for hunting than the 10% of available opportunity we are getting. Alligator, Deer and small game hunting opportunities should be available here like the other conservation Areas.

USFWS took total ownership of half the levy on the south end, which separates conservation area one from conservation two, with the promises they were going to build a nicer boat ramp in conservation two for Airboaters, provide paved parking and make other changes, we reluctantly said "yes" to this change. After USFWS received ownership of the land the Airboat community got less than a third of what they were promised along with our new boat ramp. 15 years later, we're still waiting for paved parking that was promised in return for the ownership of over 12 miles of levy.

At the end of the process, yes USFWS were granted another lease but not for 50 more years. They only got the lease because it was the federal government and no one wanted to step on big brothers toes. And, yes some improvements have been made but the sportsman's community feels there's more room for more improvement to be made which we were promised.

#2. What assurances would the FAA need from USFWS to be convinced that access will be granted on these areas in the future?

So why am I here so unthankful that you want to spend the \$700,000,000 to protect the resource and habitat?

FAA's belief is that until substantial changes to the Endangered Species Act are accomplished, the Headwaters Refuge will only provide a gateway for extremist environmental organizations to further abuse the original intent of the law (Provide examples like Panther Refuge which provides no hunting opportunity USFWS lands).

FAA contends it is doubtful USFWS will ever have necessary funding in order to do the multiple NEPA planning requirements to open the land to the public. (Provide examples like Lake Wales Ridge of un-opened USFWS lands). It is evident that Congress has kept the purse strings tight regarding USFWS and will continue to do so.

FAA knows from decades of experience that few if any promises being made to our delegates by Federal officials will ever be realized. That is because of the gateways provided in Federal law to organizations dedicated to preventing most if not all enjoyment of Federal lands by traditional users/sportsmen. FAA members are for the most part all traditional users of these type lands. This is why we request that any fee simple lands acquired or purchased be managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission. This is our only hope to see traditional use continue and to provide the eyes and ears necessary to provide the early warning if an area is becoming threatened..

USFWS held four hearings on the attempt to create a 100,000-acre conservation area where they want to pay landowners to keep their land as it is. Most of it is cattle country. They also want to buy the fee simple lands from the landowners and create a 50,000-acre refuge out of it.

Hundreds of people showed up at each meeting where three of the four meetings or standing room only. The majority of speakers in the room collectively opposed this project. These were Florida citizens speaking at the podium. As of right now we have 28 refuges in the state and only 7 allow hunting. Out of those 28 refuges, there is no valid reason at all that we can find for them not to allow hunting on at least 5 more refuges immediately, so this new refuge they are proposing we can only believe will be off limits also. No matter what they promise, Floridian hunters and sportsmen cannot allow the Federal government to lock up any more land.

Where were all of these people after the plan was proposed at the following two meetings? USFWS's intentional scheduling of Hearings to conflict with major fund raising events of opposition organizations (The FAA) caused sportsmen not to be able to attend one of the meetings. The other meeting was held on national hunting and fishing weekend, which was created many years ago for the fourth weekend of September every year. This was the meeting I spoke at. Unfortunately that morning at the boat ramps there were more hunters launching their vessels to go hunting than the total number of people attending the meeting. I joined the majority of speakers in the room collectively opposed this land grab.

What would FAA need from USFWS to be convinced that access will be granted on these areas in the future? We cannot change history or the past. However, the future must go in a different direction if there is ever going to be a future between the Recreational users and USFWS!

#3. Establishing a new Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area on benefits to restore the Everglades.

Because of the ranching practices today how clean are the headwaters and what purpose will conservation easements serve to clean the Headwaters of the Everglades? Because of the Orlando Waters going south into the Kissimmee chain of lakes there is a big risk downstream prior to entering the Everglades that these already degraded waters will be harmful to the Everglades. FAA has tested the waters on the Kissimmee chain of lake where landowners already have conservation easement and even Those landowners would not let their grandchildren swim in the Waters surrounding their properties because of the pollution they have created.

FAA understands the only places you find serious efforts to improve the environment are those with strong economies. If you kill off the sources of private sector of income and wealth you end the chance to improve the environment. So, why is the USFWS clueless?

- Sportsmen support more jobs in Florida than Disney World (85,000 jobs vs. 61,000). With less impact to the environment.
- Annual spending by Florida sportsmen is more than twice the revenues of Miami based Burger King (\$4.8 billion vs. \$2.05 billion). With less impact to the environment.
- Annual spending by Florida anglers is three times greater than the cash receipts from the state's orange crop (\$4.4 billion vs. 1.2 billion). With less impact to the environment
- Florida sportsmen spend \$1.1 billion annually on outboard boats and engines to get them onto the water and around the marshes for fishing and hunting.
- More Florida resident's fish and hunt each year than attend Miami Dolphins, Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Jacksonville Jaguars games (2 million vs. 1.6 million).

FAA believes the only benefit from this plan is to stop urban sprawl; and, create better water quality; more land will hold more water for the future.

FAA believes that if the huge purchase of land was closed to public use, there will not be a watchdog to see all of USFWS abuse or degradation to the land that is going to occur behind the locked gates.

By the way if you're coming to Florida to visit the Everglades. The only way to see it is by Airboat. This way you will be in the middle of it, the heart of it. *But to do so means you won't be visiting any federal land.*

An updated version of an old Japanese saying is appropriate here: "If there's no eye to behold the beauty, what is the good".