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BEFORE THE
HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE, OCEANS AND INSULAR AFFAIRS
ON
THE PROPOSED ESTABLISHMENT OF THE EVERGLADES HEADWATERS
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE AND CONSERVATION AREA

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Good morning Chairman Fleming and members of the Subcommittee. I am Rachel Jacobson, Acting Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks at the Department of the Interior. As Acting Assistant Secretary, I oversee and coordinate policy for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and the National Park Service. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to testify about the Service's proposal to establish the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area to advance the goals of the multi-stakeholder Greater Everglades Partnership Initiative.

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. Encompassing more than 150 million acres of land and water, the Refuge System is the world's premier network of public lands devoted to the conservation of fish, wildlife and their habitats.

National wildlife refuges are found in every state. In total, the Refuge System now contains 555 refuges and 38 wetland management districts. The management of each refuge gives priority consideration to appropriate recreational uses of the refuge that are deemed compatible with the primary conservation purposes of the refuge, and the overall purpose of the Refuge System.

Genesis of the Everglades Headwaters Proposal

More than a dozen partners have been working together through the Greater Everglades Partnership Initiative to conserve one of eastern North America's last grassland and longleaf pine savanna landscapes, located in Central Florida.

The proposal was aimed at protecting the headwaters of the Everglades and designed to help protect a working rural landscape of ranches and farms and the habitat of this unique ecosystem.

Our partners in the Everglades Headwaters proposal include ranchers, the State of Florida, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service, the U.S.

Department of Defense, The Nature Conservancy, the National Wildlife Refuge Association, and others. The proposal builds on a long legacy of conservation values established in Central Florida, connecting existing conservation lands within the Kissimmee River Valley (Valley) including state parks, wildlife management areas, and the Avon Park Air Force Range. The Natural Resources Conservation Service recognized the importance of this landscape when Secretary Tom Vilsack recently committed \$100 million in financial assistance to acquire permanent easements from eligible landowners in four counties and assist with wetland restoration on nearly 24,000 acres of agricultural land in the Northern Everglades. This is among the largest commitments of funding Florida has ever received for projects in the same watershed through the USDA's Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) in a single year.

Our proposal to establish the 150,000 acre Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area is based on the best available science including studies from many of our partners, most notably the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and The Nature Conservancy. Two-thirds of the proposed Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area, or up to 100,000 acres, would be protected through conservation easements purchased from willing sellers. Private landowners would retain ownership of their land, as well as the right to work the land to raise cattle or crops. The easements would ensure the land could not be developed.

The Service would also purchase up to 50,000 acres outright from willing sellers to create the proposed national wildlife refuge where visitors could hunt, fish, hike and view wildlife. The Service has identified six areas where these refuge lands could potentially be purchased. In some cases, the refuge acquisitions would augment existing conservation lands, such as state parks and wildlife management areas.

It is important to note that this is a voluntary program. The Service will only purchase land or conservation easements from willing sellers. Florida ranchers and other landowners understand that we all have a stake in preserving the health of our land, water, and wildlife. For example, David Durando, a rancher in the proposed project area supports the creation of this refuge. Mr. Durando, who married into a family that includes both a Florida governor and long-time state senator, commented in support of the refuge as follows: "Our grandchildren are ninth generation Floridians. We would like to have the opportunity to entrust our way of life, their heritage, to them and future generations. I see the Everglades Headwaters National Refuge and Conservation Area as an opportunity that would allow us to do this. We would have the opportunity to help our state with its conservation plan and maintain our heritage now and for future generations just as those before us have done. My father-in-law, (State Senator) Doyle E. Carlton, Jr., always said, 'Whatever I have I am not taking with me. The earth is God's and the cattle belong to him.' Our family has a desire to be good stewards, managing and preserving all God has entrusted to us."

Public Involvement

Last January, the Service launched a three-month public scoping effort to seek broader input on shaping the Everglades Headwaters proposal. The Service received comments from more than 1,700 citizens who attended four public meetings. The Service also received more than 38,500 comments in writing during this scoping effort. The overwhelming majority of the public comments supported the concept.

The Service heeded the input received from the public in drafting the Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment for the proposed refuge and conservation area. In the proposal, the Service removed from consideration developed areas, areas where communal land ownership reduces development opportunity and areas where landowners said they were not interested in selling their properties. The proposal also includes a provision under which the Service would work with the FWC to manage hunting and fishing on refuge lands acquired. The state already manages outdoor recreation on wildlife management areas in the Valley, and we believe the refuge will provide ways to complement and expand those recreational opportunities.

The proposal, released to the public on September 7, is now in an extended public comment period that is scheduled to end on November 25. The comment period was extended at the request of local hunting conservation organizations. Since the four scoping meetings mentioned above, the Service has since held additional public meetings with 122 citizens attending, and it has received nearly 2,000 comments in this phase of the planning process. In addition, since the scoping process began, the Service has held 30 informational meetings with citizens and representatives from local governments and stakeholder organizations.

Restoring Habitat and Protecting Species

Our primary interest in creating a new national wildlife refuge and conservation area in Central Florida is simple math. Florida's population is expected to double to 36 million by 2060, increasing the development pressure on the grasslands and savannas of Central Florida. Some of the threats to globally significant species like the Florida black bear, the Florida panther, the Florida grasshopper sparrow and the Florida scrub jay, include fragmented habitats and reduced water quality and water quantity.

The proposed 150,000-acre refuge and conservation area would protect these threatened and endangered species by creating wildlife corridors, restoring wetlands and conserving the landscape. It will also protect up to 288 at-risk species found across the Valley. Through this voluntary program, we will be able to increase hunting and fishing opportunities, and provide ranchers a means of preserving their land in its current agricultural state. In addition, if a refuge is established, acquisitions would be made within the approved areas gradually over time, not all at once.

As stated, two-thirds of the proposal – 100,000 acres – would remain in private ownership with conservation easements, but importantly, these lands would stay on the local tax rolls. Cattle ranchers in the Valley have been extraordinary stewards of these lands, and we want to help them continue to hold on to this way of life even in difficult economic times. We need them; Florida’s cattle industry is one of the oldest and among the 15 largest in the country. Ranching is compatible with our mission to protect the globally unique habitats and species of the Valley, while maintain the area as a working landscape.

The remaining 50,000 acres would be purchased outright by the Fish and Wildlife Service to create a refuge, which would make possible additional wildlife-dependent recreation such as hunting, fishing, and birding. Unlike a traditional refuge, the Everglades Headwaters takes a new approach to conservation, mixing refuge lands with private ownership under conservation easements to fill in gaps across the landscape. The goal is to connect existing conservation lands to create wildlife corridors and healthy habitats; provide more opportunities to hunt, fish, hike and learn about wildlife; and improve the water quality and quantity in the upper Everglades watershed. The plan also provides landowners with different options to protect their properties rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all solution. In the proposal, we identified six target areas totaling 130,000 acres from which we would seek to purchase up to 50,000 acres for the refuge from willing sellers. These lands are included in a larger area, approximately 816,000 acres, that has been identified to place up to 100,000 acres under conservation easements from willing owners.

Quality of habitat and connectivity to existing conserved lands will drive our acquisition priorities. We believe a more connected landscape is needed, one that provides a wide range of quality habitats to support Federal and state-listed species and native wildlife diversity. We also want to improve water quality, quantity and storage capacity in the Upper Everglades watershed and provide additional opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation. The draft Environmental Assessment for the Land Protection Plan demonstrates that these objectives could be met through the establishment of the proposed Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area.

This proposal reflects broad support among private landowners, the ranching community and other partners who share the goal of conserving the region’s mosaic of sandhill and scrub habitat, freshwater wetlands, prairies, pine flatwoods and pastures.

For example, one of the land owners in the proposed project area is Mike Adams, a third generation rancher. At the news conference in September to announce the draft proposal, Mr. Adams described the proposal as a, “win-win for families, also a win for the community, also a win for the wildlife... Our future generations will appreciate what we do here today.”

Lt. Col. Charles “Buck” MacLaughlin agrees. As the commander of the Avon Park Air Force Range, which is located in the middle of the project area, Lt. Col. McLaughlin said the proposed

refuge would help buffer one of the nation's largest aerial and gunnery ranges against encroachment, and at the same time, would serve the dual purpose of protecting Florida's landscape and species that occur nowhere else on the planet.

Funding for the Everglades Headwaters proposal

The public scoping process now underway will help identify ways to develop the refuge to best meet all interests. The Service will begin to work with willing sellers only if this proposal goes forward after scoping and additional planning. Several landowners in the Valley have expressed interest in donating lands for this project, which would reduce the overall cost. Given the fluctuation in land values, it is difficult to say at this time what the appraised values for land acquisition and easements from willing sellers will be at the time we enter into the transactions. Considering those unknowns, the Service may seek annually funds from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and, to a lesser extent, the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund to acquire a combination of lands and conservation easements. We expect it will take several years for the Fish and Wildlife Service and our partners in the Greater Everglades Partnership Initiative to complete this project

If the project proceeds as proposed, the Service projects it will initially need up to \$450,000 annually to operate and maintain the refuge. These operational costs will cover salary for three FTEs, habitat restoration, prescribed fire activities, facility maintenance, inventory and monitoring of habitat and species, and invasive species control. In several years' time, as the refuge becomes more fully operational, this budget would likely increase as noted in the Draft Land Protection Plan.

Assurances for Wildlife-Dependent Recreation

As we noted earlier, we are working with the State of Florida to provide public access on proposed Headwater refuge lands for hunting and fishing opportunities. Indeed, as the project develops, the Service and FWC will put in place a Memorandum of Understanding related to the management of hunting and fishing activities on the proposed refuge. Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Commissioner Ron Bergeron stated that his agency is a "willing partner that can provide public hunting access on public lands acquired in fee-simple by the Service, something we find as imperative".... Mr. Bergeron went on to say, "We certainly see valuable conservation merits in targeting critical lands that support a rich diversity of natural resources."

In the case of privately owned lands subject to conservation easements, wildlife-dependent recreation and public access would be left to the discretion of individual landowners.

Anticipated Impact on Local Counties Tax Base

Through the National Wildlife Refuge Fund, counties and local governments may be compensated for lost revenues from the 50,000 proposed acres that maybe acquired in fee title by the Service. The Refuge Revenue Sharing Act (16 U.S.C. 715s), as amended, allows us to offset the tax losses by annually paying the county or other local unit of government an amount that often equals or exceeds that which would have been collected from approved compatible economic uses on refuges, including taxes if in private ownership. The source of funds for refuge revenue sharing payments are derived from the net receipts collected from the sale of various products or privileges from all refuge lands such as grazing leases or timber sales, plus additional appropriated funds. The Refuge Revenue Sharing Act provides a formula to share economic use receipts to offset the loss of land within the counties or local governments tax base. Specifically, the law requires that the revenue sharing payments to counties or local government for our purchased land will be based on the greatest of: (a) 3/4 of 1 percent of the market value; (b) 25 percent of the net receipts; or (c) 75 cents per acre. Fair market value is based on appraisals that are to be updated every 5 years. All lands administered by the solely or primarily by the Service – not just refuges – qualify for revenue sharing payments.

The revenue sharing appraisal is based upon current fair market values of the various land types in the county or counties where each refuge is located. This appraisal values the refuge land by comparing it to the same, or similar, sales of land in the local area. As a result, refuge land is valued at its highest economic potential based on the surrounding real estate market. That means refuge land is valued on a variety of potential uses, including commercial property, beachfront development, timberland and farmland. The revenue sharing appraisal compiles all the values found on each refuge to produce an overall per acre value for that refuge.

By way of example, in south central Florida, Lake Wales Ridge National Wildlife Refuge comprises both lakefront and non-lakefront lots that have the potential for residential development and as such are valued at a much higher price than nearby agricultural lands. The refuge contains 1,689 and 172 acres respectively in Highlands and Polk Counties— which are two of the same counties within the four County Everglades Headwaters project area). The total revenue sharing payments made to these counties in 2010 were \$16,406 to Highlands County and \$1,605 to Polk County. This equates to an average Revenue Sharing Payment of \$9.52 per acre.¹ By comparison, the privately owned Hatchineha Ranch in Polk County generated less than \$2 per acre in property taxes in 2010.

In addition to potential gains from revenue sharing agreements, refuges are economic boons for their neighboring communities, generating roughly \$4 for every \$1 of federal investment, according to a Service analysis entitled *Banking on Nature 2006: The Economic Benefits to Local Communities of National Wildlife Refuge Visitation*. That study found that refuge visitors generated \$1.7 billion of annual sales to local economies, of which 87% was spent by travelers

¹ This data is provided by the Service's Finance Center and represents the actual payments made to the individual counties.

from outside the local area. The ripple effect from these visitors created over 27,000 jobs and more than \$543 million in employment income.

Supporting the Goal of Everglades Restoration

The proposal to establish the Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area complements overall efforts to restore the Everglades and directly supports two of the three Everglades restoration goals established by the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force, comprised of state, federal, tribal and local representatives. Establishment of the proposed conservation partnership area provides significant opportunities to restore habitat and recover key species, and will help to protect and restore native prairies and freshwater wetlands that naturally store water—the most critical component of the Everglades ecosystem. Additionally, wetlands serve an important function of removing pollutants including nitrogen and phosphorus, which both contribute to degraded Everglades water quality.

The Everglades make up one of America's and the world's most incredible wild places. Everglades National Park was accepted as a biosphere reserve in 1976, inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1979, and was designated a Ramsar site (Wetland of International Significance) in 1987. The Everglades is one of the most ecologically diverse ecosystems on the planet, which is why the ongoing national effort to restore the area known as the “River of Grass” is so important.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this Subcommittee to talk with you about this important project. I look forward to answering questions you may have.