

Dear Conferees,

The undersigned organizations urge you to follow the budget recommendations below in order to protect Florida's lands, waters, and wildlife.

Florida Forever

The state of Florida allocates resources towards land conservation predominantly through revenue tied to growth, development, and real estate transactions. However, amidst this growth two costly phenomena ensue: first, an acceleration in environmental degradation, and second, an intensified need for mitigation efforts to counteract these damaging impacts. We respectfully implore the Florida Legislature to provide sufficient funding to effectively contend with the relentless onslaught of development pressures and sustain our conservation endeavors.

Florida's budget must include a minimum of \$500 million allocated for the Florida Forever program, the state's exemplary, transparent, and established process for conservation land acquisition. Further funding should be provided for fee-simple and less-than-fee-simple acquisitions, such as the Rural and Family Lands Program.

Additional funding sources to offset the cost of land acquisition, restoration, and management, such as gaming compact proceeds, must be used to supplement, not supplant, current conservation efforts.

Florida's budget should reflect the urgency with which we need to acquire conservation land to secure Florida's future and continue the momentum that began with record funding in the 2023 legislative session. This urgency is underscored by the fact that, with 1,000 people moving to Florida each day, our population is expected to increase by almost 5 million, or 23%, by 2040. This population growth has the potential to devastate Florida's unique ecosystems through habitat loss and fragmentation. Without careful planning and adequate, reliable funding for land conservation, Florida is on track to lose 1 million acres of natural and agricultural land by 2040 due to development.

Springs Restoration

Florida's budget must include a minimum of \$150 million for springs restoration to slow the continued degradation of Florida's springs, rivers, and groundwater resources. Springs restoration has been continuously underfunded compared to other environmental priorities in Florida, typically receiving only \$50 million per year, the minimum allowable under Florida Statutes.

The \$50 million currently proposed in the state budget is not enough to make any meaningful difference to the health of Florida's springs and springfed rivers. In fact, at this funding level we have seen spring health decline since the passage of the Florida Springs and Aquifer Protection Act as spring flows continue to decrease and pollution levels increase. This is not surprising as

the cost to restore Rainbow Springs, just one of thirty Outstanding Florida Springs, is estimated to be more than \$4 billion.

Florida's springs are important cultural landmarks and economic drivers in rural areas; they are the flow that feeds our rivers like the St. Johns, Suwannee, Santa Fe, and Withlacoochee, as well as the coastal estuaries where these rivers meet the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico; and they are our window to the Floridan Aquifer, the source of two-thirds of Floridian's drinking water. If we continue to fail to provide adequate springs funding we will lose much more than just Florida's springs.

Everglades Restoration

Florida's budget must include full funding for Everglades restoration. The Florida House budget, which matches Gov. Ron DeSantis' proposed spending plan, allocates \$614 million in grants and aid to local government - fixed capital outlay for Everglades restoration projects. Of this, \$550 million would be distributed to the South Florida Water Management District for ongoing Everglades restoration projects.

The Senate budget, by contrast, allocates \$307 million for Everglades-related grants and aid to local governments. Should the Senate budget vision prevail, Florida would fall behind on the cost share of Everglades projects, which could force the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to halt construction on federal Everglades projects. The Legislature must adopt the House spending plan so that progress on Everglades restoration can continue.

Hurricane Restoration Reimbursement Grant Program and Resilient Florida

Funding for this program, enacted in the aftermath of Hurricanes Ian and Nicole, must be terminated at the end of FY 2023-2024. In 2022, SB-4A appropriated \$50 million to impacted beachfront property owners who were able to receive up to \$150,000 per property for eligible projects. Last year, the Legislature extended the program through July 1, 2024, and increased the available funding to up to \$300,000 per property for eligible projects. Now, the House is proposing to increase available funding up to \$600,000 per property for eligible projects and further extend the program through the end of FY 2024-2025.

This program provides grants to private beachfront property owners to carry out dredge and fill projects, as well as temporary and permanent armoring projects, to protect their private properties. The Legislature's ongoing funding of private coastal armoring is an unconstitutional expenditure of public funds without serving a public purpose, and must be ended immediately. Any purported benefits of coastal armoring are solely to private property owners. Conversely, the beachgoing public and Florida's coastal public trust resources will be significantly harmed by taxpayer-funded coastal armoring.

Instead of underwriting harmful coastal armoring activities, the state should terminate the Hurricane Restoration Reimbursement Grant Program and revert those funds to Resilient Florida. While this program has enjoyed robust levels of funding since its inception, the

proposed budget is a marked decrease from \$300 million to \$200 million for eligible resiliency projects. In the wake of Hurricanes Ian, Nicole, and Idalia, the state should be doubling down on its resiliency investments to ensure that Floridians and critical infrastructure in vulnerable areas are adequately protected from the impacts of flooding, sea level rise, and storms.

Urban Fertilizer Ordinance Moratorium

Florida's budget and implementing bills must allow last session's moratorium on local urban fertilizer ordinances with blackout periods to sunset on June 30, 2024. Last year, the Legislature funded a University of Florida/Institute of Food & Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) evaluation of urban fertilizer ordinances and used it to impose a year-long moratorium on new protective ordinances. The studies referenced in the UF/IFAS report, released in late December 2023, revealed that urban fertilizer ordinances have a positive impact on water quality. The report also made clear that urban fertilizer controls should continue to be under the purview of local governments, something the Florida Consumer Fertilizer Task Force concluded way back in 2007, when it found that a watershed-by-watershed approach, as opposed to one statewide rule, was required to protect local waterfront economies from urban fertilizer pollution. The final recommendation in the UF report was for more research to be conducted over a long period of time. But in the case of urban fertilizer ordinances, which have spurred markets for alternative lawn care products and allowed landscape managers to successfully continue their work, it makes no sense to spend additional tax dollars to confirm what we already know. We urge you to let the moratorium sunset and allow local governments to protect their waterfront businesses, property values, and quality of life.

IFAS Fertilizer Rate Study (1543A)

Funding for continuing the IFAS Fertilizer Rate Study must include a requirement that new fertilizer application rates are compatible with achieving water quality goals adopted by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. Agriculture is one of the leading sources of nutrient pollution to Florida's waters, including being responsible for more than two-thirds of addressable nutrient pollution to Outstanding Florida Springs. Agricultural producers are granted a presumption of compliance with state water quality standards by 403.067(7)(c)3., Florida Statutes, for implementing Best Management Practices.

Ongoing IFAS research, funded by the Legislature, to develop new agricultural fertilizer rate recommendations fails to account for the impact of increased fertilizer applications on Florida's waters. Should these recommendations be adopted by the Department of Agricultural Consumer Services, as part of updated agricultural best management practices, it would result in a massive increase in pollution to Florida's waters, outweighing anything the state has done over the past 20 years to reduce nutrient pollution.

Sincerely,

Brittany Bernstein
Deputy Director
Florida Conservation Voters

Mike Cliburn
Treasurer
Friends of the Wekiva River

Gil Damon
Director
The Downriver Project

Matt DePaolis
Environmental Policy Director
Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation

Kim Dinkins
Policy Director
1000 Friends of Florida

Stacey Gallagher
Policy Coordinator
Sea Turtle Conservancy

Anthony Gaudio
President
Wakulla Springs Alliance

Emma Haydocy
Florida Policy Manager
Surfrider Foundation

Judith Hushon
Natural Resources Chair
League of Women Voters Florida

John Jopling
President
Ichetucknee Alliance

Casey Darling Kniffin
Conservation Policy Director
Florida Wildlife Federation

Jen Lomberk
Chair
Waterkeepers Florida

Mia McCormick
Advocate
Environment Florida

Mark Perry
Executive Director & CEO
Florida Oceanographic Society

Laura Reynolds
Director, Hold the Line Coalition
Vice President, Friends of Biscayne Bay

Brad Rimbey
Vice President
Homosassa River Alliance

Lisa Rinaman
Riverkeeper
St. Johns Riverkeeper

Eve Samples
Executive Director
Friends of the Everglades

Ursula Schwuttke
Director
Withlacoochee Aquatic Restoration, Inc.

James Scott
Chapter Chair
Sierra Club Florida

Gil Smart
Executive Director
Vote Water

Ryan Smart
Executive Director
Florida Springs Council

Joanne Tremblay
President
Our Santa Fe River, Inc.