EVERGLADES COALITION

Resolution in Opposition to Removing the Southeast U.S. Distinct Population Segment of the Wood Stork from the List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife Under the Endangered Species Act

WHEREAS, the Wood Stork (Mycteria americana) is a unique and iconic bird species that is native to the southeastern United States and the Greater Everglades ecosystem; and

WHEREAS, the Wood Stork is an important indicator of ecosystem health throughout the Greater Everglades and is used as a performance measure to detect the restoration of Everglades ecosystem functions; and

WHEREAS, the Wood Stork has received protections under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) since 1984 due to significant declines in stork populations caused by habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation; and

WHEREAS, in February 2023, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed delisting the Wood Stork from the ESA, citing population increases and improved annual productivity in some breeding regions; and

WHEREAS, the Everglades has seen half of its wetlands destroyed by human drainage and destructive fill, including more than seventy percent of the shallow seasonal wetlands and wet prairies which are vital to successful Wood Stork and other wading bird survival; and

WHEREAS, such wetland losses have imperiled storks, diminishing nesting viability and success to such a continued extent that the Everglades population of storks has yet to meet the USFWS's nesting productivity recovery criteria; and

WHEREAS, the most recent South Florida Water Management District Wading Bird Report (2021) demonstrated a continued trend of minimal nesting throughout the Western Everglades, including the Corkscrew Colony which was historically the largest in the United States, a region critical for Wood Stork recovery throughout the Everglades system; and

WHEREAS, the over-drainage of Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary and surrounding Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed by downstream canals, withdrawals for agriculture, and withdrawals for public water supply has demonstrated the susceptibility of Western Everglades wetlands to development impacts and underscores the need for increased wetland protections within historic Wood Stork foraging areas; and

WHEREAS, this hydrologic change, combined with regional wetland loss, has reduced food availability for Wood Storks while increasing the vulnerability of their nests to predators; and

WHEREAS, Wood Stork populations have increased throughout the northern extent of its range, but it is unclear whether these outposts can survive long-term because much of this new habitat is on private coastal wetlands with poor regulatory protections and relying on intensive artificial water level manipulation; and

WHEREAS, Wood Storks are still facing many threats to their survival, including habitat loss, degradation, fragmentation, and water management practices that affect prey availability, particularly in the Western Everglades and Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary; and

WHEREAS, the Wood Stork's population has not fully recovered, especially in the Everglades ecosystem, and the species faces significant new and emerging threats that could cause further declines including those associated with climate change and human population and development expansion; and

WHEREAS, protections under the ESA are critical to ensuring Wood Stork survival and the conservation of its habitat; and

WHEREAS, the ESA has been successful in protecting and recovering many threatened and endangered species, including the bald eagle, using strong science-based recovery plans; and

WHEREAS, the proposed delisting of the Wood Stork is premature and could jeopardize the species' full and sustainable recovery.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED ON APRIL 17TH 2023:

The Everglades Coalition, with nearly 60 organizations dedicated to protecting and restoring America's Everglades, urges USFWS to maintain the current protections for the Wood Stork and its habitat under the Endangered Species Act to ensure the long-term survival of the species.

AND BE IT ALSO RESOLVED:

USFWS should also revise its biological assessment of the species' status, recognizing Wood Stork recovery depends on realized habitat restoration and protection, which are yet to be achieved. Those achievements and the expected positive and sustainable response of this species, including especially in the Everglades, should be the time to consider delisting the Wood Stork.

Mark Perry
Co-Chair

Kelly Cox
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