



November 28, 2014

Governor Rick Scott
The Capitol
Tallahassee, Fl. 32399

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RE: Adams Ranch and Camp Lonesome Ranch Conservation Easements, Rural and Family Lands Protection Program

Dear Governor Scott:

The Cabinet Agenda for December 9 includes the proposed purchase of two important conservation easements in the Northern Everglades. Audubon recommends approval of both the Adams Ranch and Camp Lonesome Ranch easements.

One easement, to be purchased from Adams Ranch, is 1,536 acres. This proposed easement is located just south of Lake Marion, approximately 37 miles southeast of St. Cloud. The proposed easement is adjacent to an Adams Ranch tract previously placed under a conservation easement, and is also located within the proposed Adams Ranch Florida Forever project boundary.

The second easement is proposed to be purchased from Camp Lonesome Ranch, and consists of 322 acres. This parcel is located 15 miles south of St. Cloud, and is within boundary of the Big Bend Swamp/Holopaw Ranch Florida Forever Project.

In addition to being important cattle operations, the lands within these prospective easement areas contain an assemblage of important and biologically diverse imperiled wildlife, rare native Florida prairie and range lands, and a landscape-sized wildlife corridor connecting other managed lands. These easement tracts contain wetlands and sloughs that drain into Lake Marion and eventually the Kissimmee River System and intact dry prairie/pine flatwoods habitats.

Both of these easements are located within the established Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge Area boundary. Important species that will benefit from habitat protection resulting from these easements include the Bald Eagle, Crested Caracara, Sandhill Cranes, and potentially the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow.

Assuring that the lands within the proposed easement areas remains in agricultural use under the terms of the easements will aid in the long term protection and restoration of Lake Okeechobee, the Everglades, and the St. Lucie River and Caloosahatchee River estuaries by precluding the conversion of ranchlands to developed areas that increase runoff. In order for restoration of Lake Okeechobee, the Everglades and estuaries to succeed, the headwaters area

of the Kissimmee River must be retained in ranching, conservation, and similar low impact uses.

Economic pressures on ranch-owning families typically result in decisions to break up large tracts of land and sell portions of ranches for development purposes. Many of the ranches in the Northern Everglades are at risk in this regard. The purchase of conservation easements resolves this threat to continued ranching for many ranch owners.

Audubon Florida believes the State of Florida, through the Department of Environmental Protection, Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and the South Florida Water Management District should be pursuing a group of coordinated strategies in the Northern Everglades. These strategies include significantly increased capacity for easement and land purchases through the Rural and Family Lands and Florida Forever programs, reworking canals and water control structures to hold additional runoff in the headwaters area, establishing water reservations and minimum flows for the Kissimmee River Restoration Project, enhancing agricultural Best Management Practices, the construction of Dispersed Water Management projects in collaboration with private landowners, and construction of new water storage impoundments compatible with the ecosystem.

Each of these strategies will require significant increases in funding. In addition to the approval of these important easements on the agenda December 9th, we hope that you will work to expand the capacity of DEP, the South Florida Water Management District, and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services so that the potential for conservation, water quality improvement, and the retention of agricultural lands in the Northern Everglades can be fully realized.

Sincerely,



Eric Draper
Executive Director

CC: Attorney General Pam Bondi,
Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam
CFO Jeff Atwater