



Photo Courtesy of David Moynahan Photography



A number of tools are available to local governments and landowners in Florida that may be tailored for preserving and supporting agricultural interests, native habitats and wildlife.

Among these tools are comprehensive plans, zoning and land use ordinances, and a host of federal and state rural lands and wildlife conservation incentive programs.

Florida's agricultural areas and working landscapes have an important role to play in conserving wildlife habitat. Many agricultural lands, as well as the people who maintain and depend upon these areas, are inextricably linked to an ethic of land stewardship and wildlife conservation. A number of tools are available for rural landowners, planners and land managers to promote both natural habitats for wildlife as well as continued economic farming and forestry viability. This chapter discusses a number of resources available to help achieve habitat preservation and restoration, while protecting long-term productivity of agricultural lands. These include cooperative efforts such as government cost-share programs, agricultural conservation easements, rural land stewardship options, agritourism and land conservation, restoration and management techniques.

STARTING POINTS

Basic Tools for Local Governments – Agricultural wildlife management entails landscape-level consideration of wildlife populations and habitats both on the farm and off, keeping habitat patches, connecting corridors and maintaining linkage to species genetic reservoirs a part of the plan. A number of tools are available to local governments and landowners in Florida that may be tailored for preserving and supporting agricultural interests, native habitats and wildlife. Among these tools are comprehensive plans, zoning and land use ordinances, and a host of federal and state rural lands and wildlife conservation incentive programs. The county comprehensive plan is an excellent place to begin planning for wildlife habitat and agriculture. The plan serves as a legal framework for local land use decisions and zoning ordinances made by a county or municipality. Florida's agricultural landscapes are often heavily influenced by decisions made in comprehensive plans.

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David Moynahan; Matthew Paulson;
David Moynahan; Miguel Aleyva and the
Florida Wildlife Federation

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Wildlife Conservation and Restoration in Agricultural and Rural Areas

The Agriculture Stewardship Program in Hillsborough County is giving a unique boost to environmental and agricultural protection. This program establishes a means to pay farming interests for a set time frame to keep their lands in agriculture, maintaining agricultural viability and protecting natural resources. Hillsborough County's farming economy and culture centers on the production of 88 percent of the state's strawberries, 11 percent of its tomatoes, and locally produced tropical fish.

CASE STUDY**Hillsborough County: Proactive Wildlife Habitat Protection and Agricultural Viability**

The Agriculture Stewardship Program in Hillsborough County is giving a unique boost to environmental and agricultural protection. This program establishes a means to pay farming interests for a set time frame to keep their lands in agriculture, maintaining agricultural viability and protecting natural resources. Hillsborough County's farming economy and culture centers on the production of 88 percent of the state's strawberries, 11 percent of its tomatoes, and locally produced tropical fish (Source: Clouser & Gran, 2007).

Facing a rapid population increase and associated conversion of agricultural lands to developed areas, the county sought independent measures to help protect agriculture uses and associated wildlife habitat, corridors, and buffer zones between urban and natural areas. The Agriculture Industry Development Program provides grant payments, funded through general revenue, to agricultural landowners in exchange for leasing a 10-year "agricultural use" easement on their property. Those enrolled in the program can receive an annual grant payment totaling 75 percent of taxes paid on the agricultural value of land. This formula was based on a cost of services study showing that, on average, agricultural interests required only 25 cents worth of services for each dollar spent in taxes (Source: Clouser and Gran, 2007). As the program is based on a first come, first served basis, it does not ensure prioritized enrollment of the most environmentally sensitive or most developable land.



Pelicans and Sebastian Inlet sunset.

In its first year, 223 applicants enrolled, covering approximately 9,000 acres of agricultural lands. The program was then capped, and other interested applicants have been placed on a waiting list, pending additional future funding. This program merits further study and may provide a helpful model for other local governments to devise strategies beneficial both to the local rural economy and wildlife habitat communities.

Photo Courtesy of Maria Gonzalez and the Florida Wildlife Federation

Another excellent starting point for farmers and landowners is the Florida Cooperative Extension Service, administered by The University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Science (UF/IFAS) and Florida A&M University (FAMU). The Florida Extension Service is a partnership between state, federal and county governments serving to provide scientific knowledge and expert advice to the public. Extension offices operate in each of Florida's sixty-seven counties. Twelve Research and Education Centers (RECs), several Research and Demonstration Sites (RDSs), and several other offices are located throughout the state.

They can provide farmers, landowners, planners, local government officials and other members of the public with valuable information on Florida agriculture and its relationship to wildlife habitat conservation, including agriculture and resource conservation classes, computer networking, consultations, demonstrations, educational materials, field days, meetings and workshops, and numerous resources to assist agricultural interests with beneficial solutions. Florida County Extension Service and offices can be found online at <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/map/index.html>.

Cost-Share Programs – Rural landowners and farmers can make large strides forward in implementing wildlife habitat conservation practices through participation in government programs that provide “cost-share” for practice implementation and specific technical assistance. Cost-share programs are government/sponsored financial assistance packages developed to support agricultural interests. They are intended to ease the financial burden of costs associated with wildlife management, conservation and restoration. These programs are used by many agricultural landowners in Florida to conserve wildlife habitat while simultaneously fostering agricultural productivity, efficiency and overall land health.

FEDERALLY FUNDED FARM BILL PROGRAMS

The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill) offered agricultural landowners a variety of tools to help protect, restore and enhance essential soil, water and wildlife resources, as well as maintain the economic viability of farms. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and its affiliates the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Farm Service Agency (FSA), and the Forest Service (FS) each work in conjunction with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) and the FFWCC to provide technical and cost-share assistance to landowners. This assistance may be provided in exchange for implementation of habitat and natural resource management practices, the placement of environmentally sensitive lands under conservation easement, or other types of land protection agreements (Source: www.wildlifeandag.wec.ufl.edu). Several of the programs most commonly employed by Floridian agricultural interests are discussed below.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) – WHIP is geared primarily toward farmers and ranchers who seek to improve or provide high quality wildlife habitat on their upland, wetland, riparian or aquatic habitat areas. The program provides technical assistance and cost-share payments to landowners under agreements that are usually 5 to 10 years in duration. The program is administered by USDA and NRCS through federal funding from the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC).

In addition to private lands, eligibility extends also to tribal lands, federal land (if the primary benefit is incurred by private or tribal lands), and state and local government land on a limited basis. WHIP enrollment emphasizes:

- Land serving as home to wildlife species that are experiencing severe decline or significant reductions.

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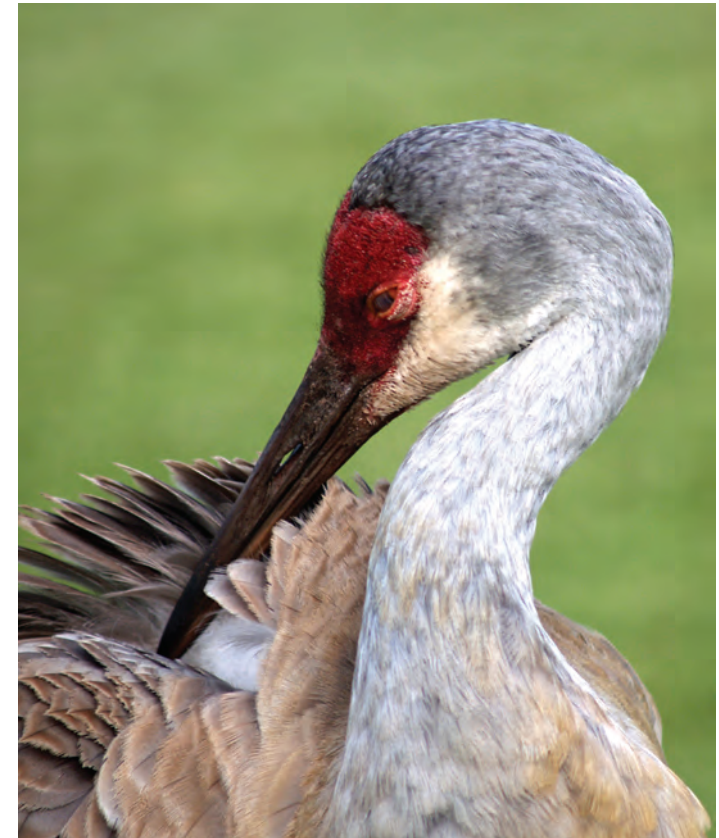
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WHIP can help farmers and landowners by providing technical assistance, up to 75 percent cost-share assistance, and reimbursement payments of as much as \$10,000 per landowner per year for the duration of a contract. Assistance may be provided in exchange for commitments to: monitor habitat practices; review management guidelines to promote habitat development; provide brush management; create wildlife openings and corridors; improve fish streams; and provide basic biological or engineering advice on land management practices for targeted species.

- Beneficial land management practices for wildlife not otherwise subject to funding.
- Special wildlife and fishery habitats identified by state and local partners and/or tribal interests.

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Ocala Wildlife Management Area, Preening Sand Crane

Photo Courtesy of Hal Hill

CONSERVATION PLANS OF OPERATION AND WILDLIFE HABITAT DEVELOPMENT PLANS

Conservation plans are often developed with the help of technical expertise, including NRCS conservationists and FFWCC biologists.

A conservation plan of operations may incorporate aerial photography and diagrams, and soil and vegetation descriptions and maps to help formulate a list of management decisions, locations and schedules for implementing chosen actions. Information sheets addressing implementation steps are included. Participants are required to certify that they have carried out their plans each year. Benefits to developing a conservation plan of operations include to:

- Clearly define how to effectively maintain the productivity and health of water, soil and other farm resources.
- Protect, enhance and restore wildlife habitat through specifically defined practices and directions for their long-term progression and continuation.
- Comply more readily with environmental regulation requirements.
- Improve eligibility for other government cost-share programs.
- Protect or increase productive value of farmland and its habitat and wildlife values for future generations.

More information on Conservation Plans of operation can be found online at www.fl.nrcs.usda.gov/documents/WhatisaConservationPlan.pdf.

WILDLIFE HABITAT DEVELOPMENT PLANS

Wildlife Habitat Development Plans are often included as an element of conservation plans of operation under USDA programs and requirements. The habitat development plan designs projects which create or enhance wildlife habitat by providing food or cover and are applicable on any landscapes suitable for wildlife habitat or the larger natural community. Plans vary according to the specific location of their application, but usually take into account:

- The landowner's long-term objectives and goals regarding wildlife on their properties.
- The requirements for optimum targeted wildlife habitat.
- The adaptability of plant species identified as habitat beneficial to the climate, soils, and moisture conditions on the site where the habitat is to be established.
- The effects caused by location, installation and management may have on subsurface wildlife resources.
- A supplemental management plan to improve or create wildlife habitats and vegetative areas where invasive plant species pose a threat to the desired plant community (NRCS, 2007).

More information on WHIP and Wildlife Habitat Development Plans can be accessed online through the USDA website or online at www.fl.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/flwhip.html.

A "conservation plan of operations" is a tool used by the USDA to help farmers better manage natural resources on their properties. These plans identify, organize and guide management practices to protect natural resources and wildlife and promote effective farm production.

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FSA evaluates candidates for CRP contracts on eligible lands according to an Environmental Benefits Index (EBI). Index data for a specific area is collected by FSA and may cover such factors as: wildlife habitat benefits resulting from maintaining or improving vegetative cover; water quality benefits from implementing various land and/or crop management practices; erosion reduction practices; and air-quality improvements, and other factors.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) – The Wetlands Reserve Program is a voluntary program offering landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on their property. Through the NRCS, the USDA provides technical and financial support to landowners undertaking wetland management and restoration efforts. The program offers landowners opportunities to establish long-term wetland conservation and wildlife protection practices, with a much lesser financial burden than attempting such efforts on their own. The program's goal is to assure the greatest possible degree of wetland functions and values, along with optimum wildlife habitat on every acre enrolled in the program.

Landowners may participate in the WRP in one of three forms:

1. A 10-year restoration cost-share agreement providing up to 75 percent of the costs for identified beneficial practices, as well as technical assistance to implement approved wildlife and other natural resource protection practices.
2. A permanent agricultural easement including up to 100 percent of costs to restore wetlands.
3. A 30-year agricultural easement, at 75 percent of the payment for a permanent easement.

For both permanent and 30-year easements, the USDA pays all costs associated with recording fees, charges for abstracts, survey and appraisal fees, and title insurance. WRP is widely used in Florida. Its success may be attributed to generous cost-share and easement allowances and focus on wetlands in a state housing many coastal and inland swamp habitat areas.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) – The Conservation Reserve Program is administered by the USDA and FSA, and is geared primarily toward non-forestry agricultural interests such as row-cropping farms and livestock ranches, for which contracts



Photo Courtesy of George Vellidis, University of Georgia

Buffered stream and wildlife corridors.

are created to last anywhere from 10 to 15 years. While the program is administered by FSA, some technical support functions may be provided by the NRCS, Florida forestry agencies, local soil and conservation districts, and private sector providers of technical assistance.

The program serves to encourage wildlife habitat creation or restoration as well as natural resource protection such as planting diverse vegetation habitat between crops to provide essential vegetative cover, prevent erosion, etc. The program has proven successful in Florida as well as in several other states through marked improvements in targeted wildlife populations.

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Eligible lands include croplands (including field margins) that are planted or may be considered planted to an agricultural commodity for 4 of 6 previous crop years, and which are physically capable to be planted in a normal manner as an agricultural commodity. CRP also extends its services to marginal pastureland, suitable for use as wildlife-protecting riparian buffer, or for other water quality protection purposes. The cost-share rate for CRP can provide up to 50 percent of state average installation costs, as well as "annual rental" subsidies of as much as \$50,000 per year for the duration of a contract.

Rental payment rates are based on the relative productivity of soils for their intended purpose, as well as the dry land cash rent or cash-rent equivalent. These rates may be adjusted by a participant prior to making an agreement, or offered at a lower rental rate than the maximum allowable, to increase the likelihood that the landowner's proposal will be accepted or renewed. Enrollment in CRP also requires the development of a management plan for the land subject to cost-share agreement, involving prescriptive practices as a part of a master conservation plan of operations (Source: www.fsa.usda.gov, 2007).

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) – The Environmental Quality Incentives Program, administered by the USDA and the Florida branch NRCS office, offers financial and technical assistance to eligible participants to implement wildlife and natural resource friendly management practices on agricultural lands. It provides a broad voluntary conservation program for farmers and ranchers to promote general environmental, wildlife habitat and natural resource quality, and agricultural production as cooperative and compatible goals.

EQIP operates on one-year minimum to ten-year maximum contracts that provide for incentive payments and agreements to share the costs of implementing conservation practices. Once a plan is developed for an EQIP contract, it is reviewed and may be approved by the local NRCS district and then implemented.

In Florida, any land used for agriculture and/or agricultural production may be eligible to participate. Preference is given to land having more sensitive environmental resources, and to lands best suited to implement techniques and land uses. The program can share costs up to 50, 75 or even 90 percent (dependent on approved resource and habitat concerns) of costs associated with intended conservation practices, as well as reimbursements to a maximum of \$10,000 per landowner per year (Source: www.fl.nrcs.usda.gov, 2008).

NON-FARM BILL FEDERAL INITIATIVES

Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program – Sponsored by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Partners Program provides financial and technical assistance to private agricultural and non-agricultural landowners who commit to implement practices that meet the needs of Federal Trust Species in Florida. It places emphasis on providing conservation leadership and partnerships, encouraging public understanding and participation, and cooperating with other federal USDA programs to achieve the best possible benefits for participating landowners.

The program is open to all habitat types to conserve or restore wildlife habitat in the form of vegetation, hydrology and soils associated with imperiled species and ecosystems. It may encompass longleaf pine, tropical forests, bottomland hardwood, native prairies, rivers and streams, marshes or otherwise requisite habitat for rare, declining or protected species. The Partners Program employs locally-based field biologists, (often FFWCC biologists), who work in conjunction with private landowners and others to plan, implement, and monitor their projects. Partners Program field staff help landowners find other sources of funding and help them through the permitting process, as necessary. This personal attention and follow-through is a significant strength of the Program that has led to national recognition and wide support.

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FLORIDA'S FEDERAL TRUST SPECIES

Florida is home to a wealth of plant and animal species, some of which are identified as threatened or endangered based on significant reductions in their populations. These species often become imperiled as a result of habitat degradation or loss caused by human activities. The USFWS may place a species on a Federal Trust list, based on a species receiving status as threatened or endangered and the severity of its situation. The list is prioritized by the level of danger faced by each species.

Listed species are targeted in many government habitat protection initiatives, such as cost-share programs. Private lands which contain habitat necessary to support and encourage population growth of targeted species are often given precedence in the allotment of federal aid opportunities. A few of the species highlighted in Florida's efforts to protect species in danger of severe population loss or extinction are: West Indian manatee, Florida scrub jay, Eastern indigo snake, Gulf sturgeon, fat three-ridge mussel, Florida salt marsh vole, key deer, Florida panther, flatwoods salamander, red cockaded woodpecker and many others.

A complete listing of Florida's Endangered and Threatened Federally Listed Species can be found online at www.fnai.org/ranks.cfm.



Photos Courtesy of Joanne Davis, 1000 Friends of Florida and Mark Lotz, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Furthermore, the Partners Program has priority ranking factors to guide project selection. These give preference to projects that:

- Improve habitat for Federal Trust Species, including migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, inter-jurisdictional fish, marine mammals, and other declining species.
- Complement activities on National Wildlife Refuge System lands, or contribute to the resolution of problems on refuges that are caused by off-refuge practices.
- Address species and habitat priorities that have been identified through US Fish and Wildlife Service planning teams (with our partners), or in collaboration with state fish and wildlife agencies.
- Reduce habitat fragmentation or serve as buffers for other important federal or state conservation lands.
- Result in self-sustaining systems that are not dependent on artificial structures.

Priority is often directed toward projects that link private lands to important federal lands (such as refuges), have cooperative agreements spanning longer time periods, and incorporate multiple partners, cost sharing, and the greatest cost effectiveness (Source: Environmental Conservation Online System at http://ecos.fws.gov/ecos_public/index.do, 2007).

STATE FUNDED WILDLIFE HABITAT COST-SHARE PROGRAMS

Several state funded cost-share programs are also available to Florida rural land interests.

Landowner Assistance Program (LAP) – The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission’s LAP is a voluntary, incentive-based approach to create public-private conservation partnerships. The FWC’s LAP staff work with public and private

landowners across the state to conserve habitat for native wildlife species by providing technical assistance to landowners and through a variety of incentive-based programs.

Pursuant to Florida’s Wildlife Action Plan, partnerships with private landowners are promoted to implement conservation actions that are compatible with the landowner’s land use objectives that strive to reduce treats to important wildlife habitat. FWC’s LAP staff will prepare habitat management plans or prescriptions for landowners, oftentimes working in cooperation with other state and federal natural resource conservation agencies. In addition to technical assistance, staff work with landowners to complete the documentation necessary for financial assistance offered through FWC programs such as the Landowner Incentive Program and Common Species Common Program, as well as federal programs such as Partners for Fish and Wildlife and FARM Bill Conservation Programs are provided.

Another important element of FWC’s LAP is recognition of landowner’s who are demonstrating good wildlife conservation on their properties. Often, this recognition is provided during LAP workshops and field days.

Please visit www.myfwc.com/LAP for more information on how the FWC’s Landowner Assistance Program can assist you.

Forest Land Enhancement Program (FLEP) – The Forest Land Enhancement Program is funded by the USDA and administered by the Forestry Division of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS). It offers cost-share assistance for private non-industrial forest landowners in Florida to help forest owners manage for wildlife habitat, timber production, recreation, aesthetics, listed species and water quality. The program offers as much as 75 percent cost share for applicants, and includes but is not limited to such practices as site preparation, tree planting, and prescribed burning activities (Source: www.fl-dof.com/forest).

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC) sponsors the LIP to conserve habitat for native species by maintaining or enhancing associated habitat resources on private lands. The program focuses on identification and implementation of prescribed fire land management, mechanical and chemical vegetation treatments, native vegetation restoration, and creation of forest openings, hydrology enhancement projects, and installation of nest structures.

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The Forest Stewardship Program is overseen by the FDACS Division of Forestry. It is geared toward private forest landowners of at least 20 acres (or a group of landowners pooling resources to meet the acreage limit) who agree, on a long-term basis, to adhere to management objectives that address wildlife habitat and other natural resource bases, economic viability, conservation of resources, and social, environmental and ecological responsibility.

Photo Courtesy of Ginger L. Corbin, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service



A prescribed burn.

Forest Stewardship Program – The Forest Stewardship Program is overseen by the FDACS Division of Forestry. It is geared toward private forest landowners of at least 20 acres (or a group of landowners pooling resources to meet the acreage limit) who agree, on a long-term basis, to adhere to management objectives that address wildlife habitat and other natural resource bases, economic viability, conservation of resources, and social, environmental and ecological responsibility. It is designed to encourage the state's private non-industrial forest landowners to practice stewardship through:

- Encouraging private non-industrial forest landowners to manage their properties according to multiple-use concepts.
- Increasing public awareness of important amenities provided by Florida's forestlands, especially non-industrial private forestlands, to all citizens of the state.
- Improving coordination among public and private natural resource agencies and groups to better serve landowners in

the state and achieve common goals.

Landowners who hire a private natural resource consultant may be eligible to receive assistance with plan preparation expenses, depending on available funding. In many cases, the landowner may have no out of pocket expense for the Stewardship Plan. Furthermore, participants are eligible to receive Forest Steward Certification, determined by the local county forester and a Forest Stewardship Certification Team (Source: www.fl-dof.com/forest).

To find more information on programs discussed in the manual as well as others available in Florida, consult USDA and FDACS websites and local service centers. More information on the Federal Farm Bill programs is at www.usda.gov. More information of Florida programs can be found through the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, www.fl-dof.com/services.html and USDA local centers at: www.fl-nrcs.usda.gov/.

AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION EASEMENTS AND LAND DONATIONS

Agricultural Conservation Easements – Florida agricultural interests have much to gain by considering options of conservation easement geared specifically toward farmers. Farm area conservation easements can ensure the continuation of farming as a permanent land use, and assist with better conservation of wildlife habitat and other vital natural resources. Easements are attractive to those looking to protect their traditional livelihood and heritage, and may also result in property and federal income tax deductions and estate tax benefits (Main et al., 2006).

Agricultural conservation easements can be written to protect such resources as fertile agricultural land, wildlife habitat, surface and ground water, historic sites and scenic viewsheds, and other possible features. They are customized to each individual land-



owner and generally focus on ensuring the continuation of available farming or forest land in conjunction with protecting or improving wildlife habitat resources.

Landowners may enter into agricultural easement agreements with several types of stewarding organizations. Federal or state agencies can include the USDA, NRCS and/or FSA, operating through such initiatives as the Wetlands Reserve Program and Conservation Reserve Program. Non-profit land conservancy organizations include Tall Timbers, The Nature Conservancy and the American Farmland Trust (see Chapter 6, Case Study, Tall Timbers Land Conservancy).

The landowner retains ownership and use of the property, and maintains eligibility to participate in state and federal funding and cost-share programs. The property remains on local tax rolls. In general, agricultural easements are created on a permanent basis, although some short-term easements have been made. Furthermore, landowners retain rights to restrict public access and farm in accordance with terms of the agreement, utilize the land as collateral, or sell the property (Source: www.farmlandinfo.org, 2004).

For more information on conservation easements, see Chapter 6.

The Florida Forest Legacy Program – The Forest Legacy Program (FLP) is a land acquisition grant program sponsored by the US Forest Service (USFS). It employs voluntary conservation easements to protect environmentally important forest areas that are threatened by conversion to non-forest uses. The Florida Division of Forestry (DOF) administers the program, identifies potential projects, and monitors conservation easements.

Performed periodically by the USFS, Florida's Assessment of Need (AON) contains an assessment of forested lands within the state and their uses. The AON identifies forests that are at greatest risk for converting to non-forest uses and the forces advancing such actions. The AON includes state-developed criteria for important forest areas eligible for designation as Forest Legacy Areas (FLAs), and guide implementation of the FLP. For example, based on its AON in 2005, Florida received \$493,000 to help fund its first Forest Legacy purchase, including a key tract of forestland near Newnan's Lake in Alachua County, acquired jointly by the water management district and the County. If continued funding for Forest Legacy is authorized by Congress, Florida will receive additional Forest Legacy funds to assist in the purchase of the crucial timberland projects (Source: www.fl-dof.com, 2008).

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Photo Courtesy of (images left to right): Steve Ball and the Florida Wildlife Federation; Matthew Paulson and the Florida Wildlife Federation; David Moynahan; Gwen McCarthy

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Landowners can protect their land by donating it to a qualified public agency, land trust, or nonprofit organization as an outright charitable gift. This can eliminate or reduce taxes associated with some or all of a landowner's holdings. Land donations may be an attractive option for farmers and rural landowners who: do not intend to pass land to heirs; possess land they no longer wish to manage; own highly appreciated property that poses a tax burden; and/or possess real estate holdings of a substantial nature and wish to reduce estate tax burdens.

THE RURAL AND FAMILY LANDS PROTECTION ACT: FUNDING FOR PROTECTION OF AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES IN FLORIDA

The Rural and Family Lands Protection Act is a state program that provides monetary benefit for placing land under agricultural or conservation easement to: (1) protect valuable agricultural lands in Florida; (2) design easement agreements that work in conjunction with agricultural production goals to ensure reasonable protection of environmental resources without severely limiting agricultural operations and maintaining economic viability of production interests; and (3) protect natural resources such as species habitat, groundwater recharge and natural floodplain, while ensuring agricultural economic viability.

The Rural and Family Lands Protection Act has a great deal of potential to serve agricultural interests in Florida. Funding for the program has been severely limited until 2008, when the Florida Legislature voted to support program funding. Local governments would do well to keep an eye on this program to assist rural and family landowners as well as offer support for its reauthorization and funding in the future. Check with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

Potential Benefits and Drawbacks to Agricultural Easements

Benefits

- Permanent protection of valuable farmland, wildlife habitat and other resources, while simultaneously maintaining private ownership and continuance of the property on local tax rolls.
- Tax benefits in the form of advantages in federal income tax and estate taxes and local property tax reductions.

- Custom design of easements to meet the needs and goals of each specific agricultural landowner.
- Continuation of a viable and time-honored agricultural profession, with reduced pressures from the outside real estate market.

Drawbacks

- Cannot ensure that the land will continue to be farmed or that farming will remain economically viable.
- Not always the most lucrative option for farmers and landowners.
- Subsequent landowners may not have similar interests in upholding easement terms.

(Source: www.farmlandinfo.org, 2004)

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- Immediate donation, donating in the form of a remainder interest (reserving use of the property until he or she dies).
- Donation with a charitable remainder trust (employed most commonly on high appreciated land which would incur a large capital gains tax, requiring that the property first be placed in a conservation easement and then be placed in a trust).
- Donating land by will (request), or donations under a charitable gift annuity in which a charity agrees to make regular annuity

payments to the donor for life, continuing to protect the property after the landowner's death. (Source: Main et al., 2006)

RURAL LAND STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

Another tool may be found in the Rural Land Stewardship Areas Program. A recent development, the RLSA program is an incentive-based tool for development processes affecting large parcels in Florida's rural areas. RLSAs encourage voluntary preservation and private stewardship of wildlife habitat and other on-site resources, retaining some current agricultural and rural land uses while seeking to accommodate a limited and prescribed diversification of land uses and development entitlements. The voluntary program extends its availability to all private agricultural and rural landowners within overlay zones delineated by comprehensive plan amendment. Overlay zones may be multi-jurisdictional, and must consist of at least 10,000 acres.

For more information on this approach see Chapter 5.

CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION TECHNIQUES

Developing a Management Plan – A wildlife conservation management plan can assist with the improvement of wildlife habitat resources on agricultural property. In fact, such a plan (or a Conservation Plan of Operation) is required in order to participate in a number of the cost-share programs described above.

In meeting production needs, agricultural practices often cause alterations in the natural landscape and ecosystem. A management plan can help to improve the coexistence of working and natural landscape features benefiting native species, helping to correct loss of habitat for certain species, and limiting the proliferation of some invasive species. A management plan can be developed by following steps:

- Identify short- and long-term goals both for agricultural

production, habitat, and wildlife protection.

- Inventory functioning or potential habitats on the land subject to management as well as neighboring lands.
- Recognize existing or potential wildlife species that the identified habitats should be able to support.
- Determine what management practices will be required to further the plan's overall production and habitat and wildlife protection goals.
- Possibly obtain some form of technical assistance through the USDA, NRCS, FDACS or FFWCC.

(Source: Marion et al., 2004).

Agroforestry – Agroforestry describes the practice of planting and growing trees and other wildlife-beneficial vegetation in conjunction with crops or livestock on agricultural land in order to develop or improve habitat. Agroforestry practices seek to maintain vital wildlife corridors and make rural and farmlands more hospitable to native wildlife. This is accomplished through optimization of biological interactions in agricultural land use, effectively cultivating the most beneficial relationship possible among trees, shrubs, crops, aquatic vegetation and the like. By fostering ecological diversity within agricultural lands, farmers, planners and communities maintain the ability to sustain traditional agricultural production in an economically viable fashion while simultaneously conserving wildlife habitat.

A variety of products generated as a result of agroforestry enable the availability of benefits associated with those products at varying time intervals. Such practices can also buffer economic risks associated with agriculture in the event of crop failure or market variability. Complimentary land uses can also effectively employ a number of beneficial layout strategies and encourage a more advantageous nutrient cycle. Plans may be established to best suit the needs of row crops, timber plantations, fruit crops,

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Wildlife Conservation and Restoration in Agricultural and Rural Areas

Tourism shares with agriculture the distinction of being one of the top industries in Florida. "Agritourism" is the term developed to describe the strategic utilization of natural resources, forestry procedures, farming practices, lifestyle and heritage to invite visitors to experience farms for purposes of education, enjoyment, active participation in farm activities and special events. The inclusion of "agritourism" and "ecotourism" may be workable options for farmers and rural landowners.

livestock and other agricultural land uses. By providing pockets or continuous stretches of vegetative diversity, it may be possible not only to favor wildlife habitat, but also to prevent detrimental soil erosion and/or effects on riparian areas.

Agroforestry may take the form of such practices as: alley cropping (in which an agricultural crop is grown simultaneously with a long-term tree crop to provide annual income while the tree crop matures); forest farming; riparian buffer zones; silvopasture, (the integration of trees with livestock or other grassland ranch operations); windbreaks and others (Source: Workman et al., 2002). It is important to consult technical assistance in evaluating different management strategies for each individual agricultural property, as all have unique needs and goals in production and conservation.

AGRITOURISM POTENTIAL IN FLORIDA'S RURAL AND AGRICULTURAL LANDS

Tourism shares with agriculture the distinction of being one of the top industries in Florida. "Agritourism" is the term developed to describe the strategic utilization of natural resources, forestry procedures, farming practices, lifestyle and heritage to invite visitors to experience farms for purposes of education, enjoyment, active participation in farm activities and special events. The inclusion of "agritourism" and "ecotourism" may be workable options for farmers and rural landowners. An initiative to engage in agritourism or rural lands ecotourism opportunities begins with farmers and landowners, but is often assisted by agricultural extension offices.

Agritourism may take the form of heritage tourism, focusing on characteristics of farming culture and rural community lifestyle in appreciation of past life in Florida, highlighting historic sites and other types of cultural attractions or sources of interest. This may include allowance and arrangements for special events such as family reunions, festivals and other group events; participation



Photo Courtesy of Joanne Davis, 1000 Friends of Florida

in farm activities, such as demonstrating how typical farm work is carried out and providing opportunities for guests to take part; exhibition of farm heritage, through demonstrating antique tools, practices, maps, photos etc.; guided scenic and informational tours of the farm or agricultural property landscape; "u-pick 'em" operations; hay rides; seasonal events such as a pumpkin patch or crop mazes; classes on gardening, cooking or craft-making; tasting or product sampling opportunities; gift shops and sale of other farm memorabilia; and many others.

Another branch of rural tourism takes shape as "ecotourism" on private lands. Ecotourism focuses on ecological enjoyment opportunities such as bird watching, nature trails, hiking, kayaking and canoeing, photography, camping and other sporting activities such as hunting and fishing, etc. If properly implemented under informed habitat management practices, management plans for providing the public with opportunities for ecotourism on agricultural properties, forest lands, etc. can be beneficial for landowners, nature enthusiasts and native wildlife species alike (Source: University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, 2007).

CASE STUDY**Babcock Ranch: Ecotourism Opportunities in Conjunction with Agriculture and Smart Development**

The State of Florida secured what had long been considered the “missing link” in an environmental corridor stretching from Lake Okeechobee to Charlotte harbor with creation of the Babcock Ranch Preserve in 2005. Decades of outstanding land management made the ranch a prime opportunity to preserve not just the land, but part of Florida’s ranching heritage. Kitson & Partners, a private company that facilitated the state’s purchase of 80 percent of the 91,000 acre ranch, is now working with the state to make Babcock Ranch a model for sustainable preservation from perspectives of land acquisition, sustainable development, natural resource protection, habitat management strategies and public access. Revenue-producing activities such as cattle ranching and timber harvesting will continue on the 72,000 acres purchased by the state, generating the funds needed to support stewardship activities including controlled burns and control of exotic plant species. Next door, Kitson & Partners is creating an ecologically-friendly new community that intended to showcase best practices in green building, alternative transportation and natural landscaping.

Among the benefits Babcock Ranch delivers to both



Photo Courtesy of Joanne Davis, 1000 Friends of Florida

wildlife and human residents of Florida is providing approximately 30,000 visitors per year with the opportunity to experience a unique “ecotour.” The tour showcases the property’s pristine natural resources, wildlife species in native habitat, and its working ranch including cattle, pastureland, tomatoes, watermelon, and turf-grass and pine operations. For more information, go to www.babcockranchflorida.com.

For over fifteen years Babcock Wilderness Adventure

has conducted “ecotours.” The ecotour consists of a ninety-minute swamp buggy ride, which serves to visually and intellectually engage visitors regarding the dynamic nature of Babcock Ranch and its vital importance to the protection of Florida’s freshwater ecosystems. The tour emphasizes the land’s rich historical and socioeconomic importance as an agricultural center that continues, as it has for many years, to function also as a key element in efforts toward permanent protection of large contiguous tracts of crucial wildlife habitat in Florida.

While Babcock Ranch may serve as an exemplary model for a number of wildlife habitat planning principles and strategies, its ecotour is particularly effective in illustrating the potential for agricultural and/or sustainable development interests to provide a unique environmental recreation experience. Opportunities such as the Babcock Ranch ecotour could also serve to generate additional revenue, which could potentially augment beneficial land management practices for wildlife habitat and other natural resources.

For more information see Chapter 5, Special Large Property Opportunities.