

The Nature Conservancy Florida Chapter Results Report 2023 Florida Legislative Session

The 2023 Florida Legislative Session has adjourned, and many important bills have passed that will further conservation of Florida’s precious natural habitats, and advance work to protect Florida from the impacts of a changing climate. The Nature Conservancy in Florida is proud to have collaborated with our House and Senate members, lobbied for legislation, and served as subject matter experts to shape strong policies that support conservation and climate action.

Statement from the Executive Director Regarding the 2023 Florida Legislative Session

The Florida Legislature made conservation and support for the environment a priority, through the allocation of significant funding to programs that are critical to a sustainable future for our state, our health and well-being.

Collaboration with private landowners and the State of Florida for the purchase of property and conservation easements is a cornerstone of The Nature Conservancy’s (TNC) strategy to protect critical habitats for Florida Panthers. With the Florida Agriculture and Natural Resources budget, we are thrilled to see the leadership of the Florida Senate and House of Representatives prioritize of land conservation in Hendry and Collier counties.

Additionally, designating appropriations of over \$1 billion—the largest in Florida’s history—means conservation efforts will greatly expand the successful Florida Forever program and the Florida Wildlife Corridor, and support the Caloosahatchee Big Cypress Corridor in Collier and Hendry to protect the habitat of the Florida Panther, as well as enhance protections in North Central Florida in the Ocala to Osceola Wildlife Corridor.

Protection of Florida’s vital land and water resources will be accelerated by the allocation of \$100 million in recurring funds for the Florida Forever Program and an additional \$100 million for the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program to purchase conservation easements.

CS/SB 106 extends the Florida Shared-Use Nonmotorized Trail Network to the Florida Wildlife Corridor linking existing trail systems and provides \$200 million in funding that prioritize the development of regionally significant trails and

enhances the planning, coordination, and marketing of the state's bicycle and pedestrian trail system and the Wildlife Corridor.

CS/CS/HB 137 changes land acquisition procedures to increase the threshold of acquisitions that do not require Cabinet approval from \$1 million to \$5 million, modifies appraisal procedures, and provides recurring funding of \$100 million a year for the Florida Forever Program. Lands within the Florida Wildlife Corridor are added as a priority for acquisition within the Florida Forever Program.

A priority of TNC is to take action on the root causes and impacts of climate change critical to protecting the quality of life of all Floridians and the health of our lands and waters. CS/CS/SB 284 encourages the state acquisition of electric vehicles (EVs) by requiring consideration of the lifecycle costs of vehicles and requiring a study on the acquisition of EVs for state fleets. Tools to address sea-level rise are expanded by CS/HB 111 that authorizes the use of Resilient Florida funding for designing and permitting nature-based solutions and expanding the scope of Sea Level Impact Projection Studies (SLIP) required for publicly financed infrastructure projects to include all areas subject to sea level rise.

We thank the President of the Senate, Kathleen Passidomo and Speaker of the House, Paul Renner, for their commitment to protecting the resources so critical to our collective success.

Greg Knecht, Executive Director, The Nature Conservancy in Florida

How do these legislative initiatives align with the Florida Chapter's Strategic Plan?

Core Strategy: Conserving Resilient Lands, Oceans and Waters

Florida will now have more than \$1 billion for land acquisition in the 2024 budget to preserve and protect critical habitats – an unprecedented sum of money with unprecedented opportunity.

Caloosahatchee Big Cypress Corridor includes approximately 75,816 acres in Collier and Hendry counties and the state budget includes \$474 million to complete the transaction.

The Ocala to Osceola Wildlife Corridor includes \$376 million for land acquisitions to help complete this corridor.

HB 1379 is the "department" bill that contains many of the environmental issues TNC monitors during the session. HB 1379 contains a long-standing priority of TNC, recurring funding for Florida Forever. The Florida Department of

Environmental Protection (FDEP) has needed the long-term budget planning capacity that assured recurring funding delivers and 1379 does this. The recurring funding is set at \$100 million annually. Also included in this bill is the long-needed change to requirements of which land acquisitions must go to the Florida Cabinet. With this bill, land acquisitions of \$5 million and less will be approved by the Secretary and will not have to wait to be heard and approved by the Cabinet. As a result, it is reported that upon this bill becoming law, twenty land transactions may be immediately approved.

It is important to note that each one of these actions will provide significant support for the Florida Wildlife Corridor.

Core Strategy: Inspiring Climate Action

Important legislation passed with CS/HB 111 advancing flooding and sea-level rise studies. The bill expands the requirement for public entities to conduct a SLIP study before commencing construction of certain state-financed coastal structures to apply the requirement to certain structures that are within any area that is at risk due to sea level rise, not just areas within the coastal building zone.

The structures subject to this requirement are any “potentially at-risk structures or infrastructure,” which include certain critical, historical, or cultural assets that are within an area at risk due to sea level rise. The bill expands the Resilient Florida Grant Program to provide funding to municipalities and counties for feasibility studies and permitting costs for nature-based solutions that reduce the impact of flooding and sea level rise; and water management districts to support local government adaptation planning.

We have equal footing for the state’s vehicle pool to access electric vehicles with the passage of CS/CS/SB 284. CS/CS/SB 284 revises the vehicle procurement requirements for the state purchasing plan. Specifically, the bill requires vehicles of a given use class to be selected for procurement based on the lowest lifetime ownership costs, including costs for operations, maintenance, and fuel when fuel economy data is available, rather than on the greatest fuel efficiency available, when fuel economy data is available

Core Strategy: Transforming Marine Management

With the passage of HB 407, there is a new focus on the Apalachicola Bay. Beginning in the 2023-2024 fiscal year and continuing through the 2027-2028 fiscal year, the bill authorizes the FDEP to expend up to \$5 million each fiscal year for the purpose of entering into financial assistance agreements with the City of Apalachicola to implement projects that improve surface water and groundwater quality within the Apalachicola Bay including the construction of stormwater management facilities and central sewage collection facilities, installation of onsite sewage treatment and disposal systems, direct and indirect potable reuse, and other water quality and water supply projects.

Core Strategy: Building a Sustainable Florida

While tremendous successes have occurred in this session, one bill has negative impacts on our mission to help build a sustainable Florida.

CS/CS/SB 540 allows the prevailing party to recover attorney’s fees and court costs in challenges to local governments’ comprehensive plan amendments that could chill efforts to oppose comprehensive plans and their amendments. TNC will be requesting the Governor consider vetoing this legislation.

The State Budget

The overall budget of the State of Florida is \$116 billion for the 2024 fiscal year beginning on July 1, 2023. This is a \$6 billion increase over 2023. In the 2024 budget, we have \$300 million for efforts to combat rising sea levels and \$382.5 million slated for Everglades Restoration.

Below is the table with the numbers.

2023-2024 Florida Environmental/Conservation Budget

BUDGET ISSUE	FINAL SB 2500
LAND ACQUISITION	
Florida Forever	\$100,000,000
FF Debt Service	\$82,178,448
Florida Communities Trust	\$15,000,000
Rural & Family Lands	\$100,000,000
FRDAP	\$11,233,087
Wildlife Corridor-- Caloosahatchee-Big Cypress and Ocala to Osceola	\$850,000,000
Kirkland Ranch—Pasco County	\$30,800,000
Total Land Acquisition	\$1.107 Billion
EVERGLADES RESTORATION Total	\$478,520,477
CERP	\$356,520,477
EAA	\$64,000,000
Restoration Strategies	\$58,000,000
C-43	-----
Northern Everglades	\$86,084,653
C-51 PBC	\$70,000,000
Preventing Discharges to Caloosahatchee/St. Lucie	\$50,000,000

WATER QUALITY	
Innovative Technologies/Blue Green Algae	\$10,000,000
Blue Green Algae TF & Analytics	\$12,000,000
Red Tide	\$5,000,000
Dispersed Water Storage	\$5,000,000
Springs Restoration	\$50,000,000
Wastewater Construction	\$304,671,849
Wastewater Grant Program	\$200,000,000
TMDLs	\$40,000,000
Local Water Projects ()	\$432,993,047
Pensacola/Perdido Estuary Program Restoration Initiative	\$750,000
Biscayne Bay Septic to Sewer	\$20,000,000
Florida Keys	\$20,000,000
Indian River Lagoon	\$104,900,000
WATER QUANTITY	
Alt. Water Supply	\$60,000,000
MFLs for NFWFMD & SRWMD	\$3,446,000
LAND MANAGEMENT	
Land Management by WMDS	\$10,237,210
Div. of Forestry LM (\$8,902,162
DSL LM	\$3,660,358
Parks LM	\$2,847,747
FWC Habitat	\$1,000,000
Invasive Plant Management	\$36,733,031
COASTAL RESILIENCE	
Regional Resilience Coalitions	\$2,000,000
Flood Hub	\$5,500,000
Resilient Florida Planning Grants (from Resilient FL TF) (1	\$20,000,000
Resilient Florida Flooding & SLR Resilience Plan	\$300,000,000
Coral Reefs (1806)	\$8,000,000
St. Andrew Bay Sea Grass Restoration	\$999,496
Beach and Inlet management	\$50,000,000
Volkswagen Settlement	\$15,000,000
DACS IJA Energy Grants	\$24,118,070
DACS IRA Energy Grants	\$5,000,000
DEO Home Energy Assistance	\$123,988,863

DEO Weatherization	\$25,363,096
DEO LIHEAP	\$16,000,000