



DeSantis, Cabinet Eye Conservation Deals?

📅 MARCH 23, 2022 /



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(NSF/TALLAHASSEE/March 23, 2022) — Gov. Ron DeSantis and the Florida Cabinet next week are expected to consider nearly \$40 million in land deals that would help keep more than 17,000 acres from future development.

Targeted sites range from 2.85 acres of hardwood hammocks in the Florida Keys to 932 acres of ranchland in Hardee County to a 3,610-acre parcel in the Wolfe Creek Forest in the Panhandle.

State staff members have recommended that all 10 conservation deals be approved during a Cabinet meeting Tuesday. DeSantis, Attorney General Ashley Moody, Agriculture Commissioner Nikki Fried and state Chief Financial Officer Jimmy Patronis will meet for the first time since September.

The proposals include using \$16.75 million from the Florida Forever land-conservation program and \$3.66 million from the state's Rural and Family Lands Protection Program to keep five of the tracts, totaling 12,783 acres, from future development. Another five pieces of environmentally sensitive land would total just over 4,353 acres.

The land in the Keys is 2.85 acres of islands in an "area of critical state concern" with at least 11 development rights. It would cost \$540,000, 90 percent of the land's appraised value.

"The acquisition of this subject property will prevent future development and help continue efforts to sustain hurricane evacuations to under 24 hours," a staff report said.

The proposal with the biggest price tag, \$10.6 million, involves purchasing a conservation easement on 6,864 acres in the Fisheating Creek ecosystem in Glades County. Conservation easements generally limit development but allow continued use for such things as agriculture.

A staff report said the area includes the only undammed tributary, flowing through vast prairies and flatwoods, to Lake Okeechobee. The state would pay an estimated 77 percent of the appraised value of the land, with owner Lykes Bros., Inc., able to continue using it for agriculture and recreational hunting.

Four of the projects that will go before DeSantis and the Cabinet could have outside funding to reduce state costs.

The federal Forest Legacy Program could provide \$1.622 million for a proposed \$2.163 million purchase of 313.4 acres in the Wakulla Springs area south of Tallahassee.

Meanwhile, a \$9.47 million purchase of 3,610 acres in the Wolfe Creek Forest in Santa Rosa County could be offset by \$2.9 million from the Forest Legacy Program and another \$1.8 million from the private Knobloch Family Foundation.

Also, a \$700,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service would cut in half a conservation easement deal for 501 acres of ranch land in Hardee County.

And a \$2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Defense's Readiness and Environmental Protection Initiative Program could help pay for a \$2.26 million acquisition of 932 acres near the Avon Park Air Force Range in Okeechobee County.

DeSantis and the Cabinet also will consider:

- Spending \$1.469 million for a conservation easement on 354 acres in the Lake Wales Ridge area of Highlands County.

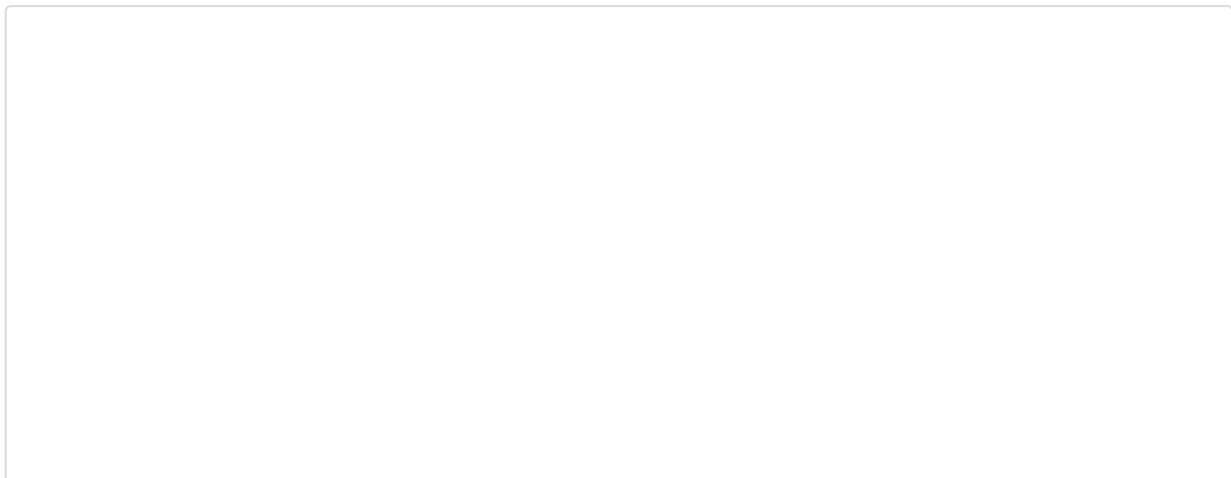
- Spending \$4.675 million for a conservation easement on 4,132 acres in the Red Hills region in Jefferson and Leon counties.

- Spending \$1.19 million for 160 acres in the Santa Fe River basin in southern Columbia County.

- Spending \$5.8 million for 241 acres in the Pumpkin Hill Creek area in Duval County.

By Jim Turner, [News Service of Florida](#)

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