

October 24, 2011

Everglades Headwaters Proposal
US Fish and Wildlife Service
PO Box 2683
Titusville, FL 32781-2683



Comments on the proposed establishment of Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area

American Forests is the oldest national non-profit conservation organization in the country, and it has been protecting and restoring urban and rural forests since being founded in 1875. American Forests has served as a catalyst for many of the most important milestones in the conservation movement, including the founding of the U.S. Forest Service, the national forest and national park systems, and thousands of forest ecosystem restoration projects and public education efforts. Since 1990, American Forests has planted nearly 40 million trees in forests throughout the U.S. and beyond, resulting in cleaner air and drinking water, restored habitat for wildlife and fish, and the removal of millions of tons of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

We support the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's plan to establish the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and Conservation Area. This area is well known for its rich abundance of wildlife, and in order to provide adequate protection, we need to care for the trees that are at the foundation of this unique ecosystem. Approximately 390,000 acres of the Everglades are forested, consisting of freshwater forested wetlands, high pine, mesic and hypric pine flatwoods, and mesic temperate hammock. As part of America's Great Outdoors (AGO) Initiative, we support the Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area's goal to support local communities and landowners in protecting working lands and fostering a spirit of outdoor recreation in this country. The 2011 AGO progress report outlines conservation successes that have already been reached by 15 federal agencies.

American Forests is interested in the restoration and protection of the Everglades for several reasons. Through our Global ReLeaf tree-planting restoration projects and continued advocacy for sound forest policy, we hope to protect areas like the Everglades that provide us with water, natural resources, wildlife habitat, and outdoor recreation opportunities. Global ReLeaf has several tree restoration projects in the Southeast and hopes to expand into the Everglades region. Our organization's members come from all across the country, and with this plan from the U.S.

Fish and Wildlife Service, we hope to encourage our members in the Southeast to join us in protecting the Everglades through policy and restoration efforts.

The four goals of the Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area are in line with American Forests' organizational mission and vision. Our mission is to protect and restore forests, helping to preserve the health of our planet for the benefit of its inhabitants. Our vision is a world in which forests are thriving and valued for their significant environmental, societal, and economic benefits. Through our public policy work, American Forests aims to protect all aspects of forest ecosystems. Fish, wildlife, water quality, and outdoor recreation are all dependent on the health of trees. In order to protect these values, it is important that the Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area address the protection of trees.

We care about maintaining the Everglades many natural functions. The proposed Land Protection Plan (LPP) and draft Environmental Assessment (EA) offer protection for one of the last remaining grassland and savanna longleaf pine landscapes in North America. This area also supports a host of plant and animal species, including several that are threatened or endangered: 59 state listed species and 39 federally listed (or candidate species). The Everglades ecosystem also offers protection to drinking water for residents in the Lake Okeechobee and greater Everglades watershed. Healthy freshwater marshes and forested wetlands provide natural hydrologic functions that store and clean water. Protecting the Everglades would help improve water quality, increase water supply, and enhance water storage capacity.

We agree with the plan's assessment of threats facing the Everglades. The impacts of climate change, urbanization, habitat fragmentation, and altered ecological processes are all affecting the health and functionality of the Everglades and other forest ecosystems across the United States. The draft LPP and the draft EA aim to protect wildlife corridors from these threats and reduce habitat fragmentation by working with rural landowners and Native American tribes to promote good stewardship.

American Forests supports ecosystem restoration projects like the Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area that creates "green corridors" by connecting already protected land and is based on coordinated and collaborative efforts among governments, non-governmental organizations, landowners, ranchers, and tribes. This use of collaboration can be used as an example for other AGO projects that create "green corridors" across the country. We hope that the Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area will be used as a model in areas where habitat fragmentation and urban development is interfering with wildlife habitat.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area proposal. Please feel free to contact American Forests should you have any questions regarding our comments.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rebecca R. Turner", is displayed on a light yellow rectangular background.

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