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Florida Dignitaries Help Celebrate Everglades Headwaters Conservation Easements

Orlando, Fla. – Sen. Bill Nelson and Rep. Patrick Murphy were among the Florida dignitaries on hand at the Adams Ranch in Fort Pierce today to celebrate the completion of the first set of conservation easements to be added to the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area.

More than 5,700 acres of critical ranch, farming, wildlife habitat, flood protection area and water storage lands have been added to the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area south of Orlando, thanks to conservation partnerships formed by Florida ranchers, sportsmen, state and federal agencies and non-profits.

The Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area was formally established in 2012 in coordination with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, ranchers and sportsmen. Since then, a dynamic partnership of private landowners, public agencies, and nonprofit organizations has worked together to secure funding and negotiate conservation solutions that balance continued ranching with habitat protection.

Using \$12.5 million from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has secured 4,214.99 acres in conservation easements and acquired 1,502.26 acres of land, including 400 acres of donated land. These latest acquisitions also leverage additional investments being made by the Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the State of Florida.

“Conserving land in the Everglades Headwaters is critical to our long-term efforts to restore the River of Grass,” said U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, D-FL. “It allows us to hold more water North of Lake Okeechobee, which helps improve the quality of water flowing not only into the lake, but all the way down into Everglades National Park.”

Five properties were involved in the recent acquisitions: the Hatchineha Ranch owned by the Nature Conservancy, Adams Ranch, Camp Lonesome, Tiger Cattle Company and the Idols Aside property.



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“It is an honor to be part of today’s celebration of our continued advocacy to conserve Florida's unique environment and a major victory for the Everglades Headwaters,” said Rep. Patrick E. Murphy, D-FL. “I have been proud to support this important initiative that allows our local farmers and ranchers to preserve their way of life while achieving conservation goals that benefit our entire economy.”

"Every time I'm home and drive around my district I feel so blessed to represent the most beautiful part of the country: Florida's heartland. Conservation easements are a vital part of protecting both Florida's natural beauty and agriculture,” said Rep. Tom Rooney, R-FL. “That's why when I am up in Washington, I make it a priority to fight for increased funding for programs, like the Everglades Headwaters, that make a real difference in the lives of my constituents and the vitality of Florida's ecosystem"

The Everglades Headwaters Refuge and Conservation Area was envisioned to use a unique combination of conservation easements, which leave land in private ownership and on the tax rolls, and land acquisition from willing sellers.

The result is a landscape-scale conservation area from the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes to Avon Air Force Park that will protect habitat for more than 30 threatened and endangered species, conserve important wetlands, and help sustain Florida’s ranching economy. It is a win-win all around - for conservation and watershed protection, agriculture economy, hunting and fishing access, and military readiness.

Together, these conservation easements and fee acquisitions will protect habitat for iconic Florida wildlife such as the Florida panther, Florida black bear, gopher tortoise and the highly endangered Florida grasshopper sparrow.

“The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is deeply committed to partnering in a collaborative effort to conserve a connected network of working lands that also provide wildlife habitat and public use opportunities,” said Bill Miller, Project Leader for the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

“These conservation easement partnerships leverage resources and enhance efforts to protect Florida's natural habitat while helping farmers and ranchers keep their land in agriculture," noted Roney Gutierrez, assistant state conservationist for the Natural Resource Conservation Service’s Florida Easements Program.

“Florida ranchers are leading the way in how conservation gets accomplished,” said Desiree Sorenson-Groves, vice president for government relations with the National Wildlife Refuge Association. “These conservation easements exemplify the commitment to stewardship as well as innovation and passion that Florida’s ranching families are bringing to partnerships that wouldn’t have been possible just a few short years ago.”



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“It’s an honor for Adams Ranch to protect land as part of the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge,” said Mike Adams, President of Adams Ranch, Inc. “We take pride in our management of Florida’s natural resources as well as our cattle, and conservation easements will allow our succeeding generations to enjoy this heritage as well.”

In February, when the easements were first announced, several partners involved stepped up to applaud the success of these most recent acquisitions:

“As one of the nation’s fastest growing states, Florida’s rapid conversion and fragmentation of agricultural lands to other more intense land uses has resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of acres sustainable agriculture, wildlife habitat, and is threatening swaths of groundwater recharge areas, said John Browne, of the Florida Forest Service, a state partner overseeing the state’s Rural and Family Lands Protection Program. “Once complete, the Everglades Headwaters project will protect historic, environmentally intact, ranchlands and enable the Kissimmee valley to enjoy its agricultural successes and secure its landscapes and open space for future generations. We are extremely proud to see our Rural and Family Lands Protection Program participating in this partnership of public and private agencies.”

“The Department of Environmental Protection is committed to working to acquire land to protect our state’s water and natural resources,” said David Clark, acting director for DEP’s Division of State Lands. “We are proud to partner with the many stakeholders to protect the lands around the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area.”

“The Nature Conservancy is excited to see additional lands become part of the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area,” said Temperince Morgan, executive director of the Florida Chapter of The Nature Conservancy. “Since donating the initial acreage to establish the refuge 4 years ago, TNC has continued to work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and partners to protect critical lands and preserve Florida’s ranching and timber operations.”

“One of Audubon’s highest priorities is working with these ranchers to conserve the Northern Everglades landscape,” said Charles Lee, Director of Advocacy at Audubon Florida. “These large easement purchases will hopefully bring attention to the need for more funding so the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge can be completed.”

“The Conservation Trust for Florida congratulates the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in its efforts to build a network of conservation lands in the Kissimmee River basin that will protect scenic landscapes, water resources and the ranching heritage for future generations” said Susan Carr, president of the Conservation Trust. “Families like the Adams are leaders in the ranching industry, which is important to our economy. Their



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dedication to keeping these large ranches intact will preserve Florida's unique ranching lifestyle and provide essential habitat for wildlife."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is authorized to acquire up to 50,000 acres as national wildlife refuge lands, as well as up to another 100,000 acres in conservation easements, all within the refuge and conservation area boundary.

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The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge Association is to conserve America's wildlife heritage for future generations through strategic programs that protect, enhance, and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System and the landscapes beyond its boundaries.