



Case Study 10

Land Conservation along the Suwannee River

Different agencies have different tools to address problems in the wildland-urban interface. For example, some agencies are in the position to acquire or facilitate the acquisition of conservation easements (or land-preservation agreements). Conservation easements (voluntary donations or purchases of property rights for the purpose of restricting development) can be a powerful tool for conserving natural resources, improving management opportunities, and protecting connectivity in interface areas. The Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD) is one agency that is using this tool with great success. The district is one of five regional water management districts in Florida. It was created by the Florida legislature through the Water Resources Act of 1972. The objectives of this agency are to manage water and related natural resources in north central Florida by providing water quality and quantity monitoring, research, regulation, land acquisition and management, and flood protection. The SRWMD aims to balance public access, recreational use, and restoration and protection of natural lands when making management decisions.



Photo courtesy of Florida DEP

Conservation easements allow resource agencies to create buffers around management areas and conserve resources without the high cost of purchasing land outright.

In 1999 the Florida Forever land acquisition program was founded. This program aims to conserve and protect natural resources by acquiring and protecting land on behalf of the citizens of Florida. Under the sponsorship of the Florida Forever program, SRWMD promotes conservation easements as a cost-effective means to protect natural resources and provide buffers for their management areas. A conservation easement enables a landowner to retain the title to his or her property but transfers subdivision and development rights to the district, and restricts certain land uses. In most cases, landowners can still manage their lands for products and services, such as timber production and wildlife habitat enhancement, but they must agree to develop annual management plans in cooperation with the district. According to the projects coordinator at for the SRWMD, Acquisition and Management Program, conservation easements are an attractive mechanism for both landowners and the agency. Landowners are able to preserve their property by selling the development rights and continuing to own it and the agency is not saddled with a purchase of the entire property.

Conservation easements have many advantages. One advantage is that the landowner is still responsible for managing the land, as opposed to the fee simple purchase of land in which the district then becomes responsible for land management. Another advantage is that conservation easements serve as buffers for the lands the district has conserved by outright purchase. Purchasing development rights is also significantly less expensive than purchasing land outright, enabling the district to conserve more land with its funds.



Suwannee River Water Management District website. http://flwaterpermits.com/home/srwmd_inside.jsp (accessed September 2004).

The Suwannee River Water Management District's Acquisition and Management Program has successfully protected over 150,000 acres of land from development.

The SRWMD conservation easement program has contributed to many ecological improvements in a short time, including the hydrological restoration of Mallory Swamp, the conservation of the floodplain of the Suwannee River in the Suwannee Swamp and Oak Hammock, and the creation of a greenway linking Manatee Springs State Park and the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge that serves as a wildlife corridor. The district relies primarily on word-of-mouth to promote this program but also distributes brochures and speaks to civic organizations. As of early 2005, the district had successfully purchased the development rights of over 154,000 acres of conservation easements.

Sources

Demott, T., Projects Coordinator for Acquisition and Management Program, Suwannee River Water Management District. Personal interview, April 5, 2005.

Florida Forever. 2004. Work Plan online. <http://www.srwmd.state.fl.us/resources/2004+florida+forever+work+plan-for+pdf.pdf> (accessed April 5, 2005).

Florida Forever website. <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/lands/acquisition/FloridaForever/default.htm> (accessed April 5, 2005).