

# State-Owned Lands Public Access Annual Report

Division of State Lands  
Florida Department of Environmental Protection  
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## **Executive Summary**

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Division of State Lands (DSL) prepares an annual report describing the percentage of conservation lands in Florida that are publicly accessible and efforts of the managing agencies to increase public access to these lands.

DSL analyzed land ownership information in the Florida State-Owned Lands and Records Information System (FL-SOLARIS) database that pertains to full-fee lands acquired by the State of Florida for conservation under Chapter 259, Florida Statutes, as of June 30, 2017. For such lands, DSL contacted the designated land manager to determine which tracts or parcels are closed to public access and why they are closed. In addition, DSL queried the land managing agencies to determine specific actions they are taking to increase public access to conservation lands in their stewardship, including efforts to increase public awareness and participation in existing recreational opportunities.

This year's report determined that almost all full-fee lands (99.03%) acquired by the State of Florida for conservation under Chapter 259, F.S., as of June 30, 2017, are open to public access. All managing agencies are making a concerted effort to increase public access to the 0.97% of state-owned land that is not open to the public and increase public use on those acres that are open to the public through both traditional means and implementation of new technologies.

## Percentage of State-Owned Conservation Lands Open to the Public

The table below represents state-owned conservation lands data provided by land managers and verified by FL-SOLARIS and Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) databases. Parcel acreages closed to public access were verified by the managing agencies. A total of 4,946,808.05 acres (99.03%) of state-owned conservation land are open to the public, with 48,653.65 acres (0.97%) closed to the public.

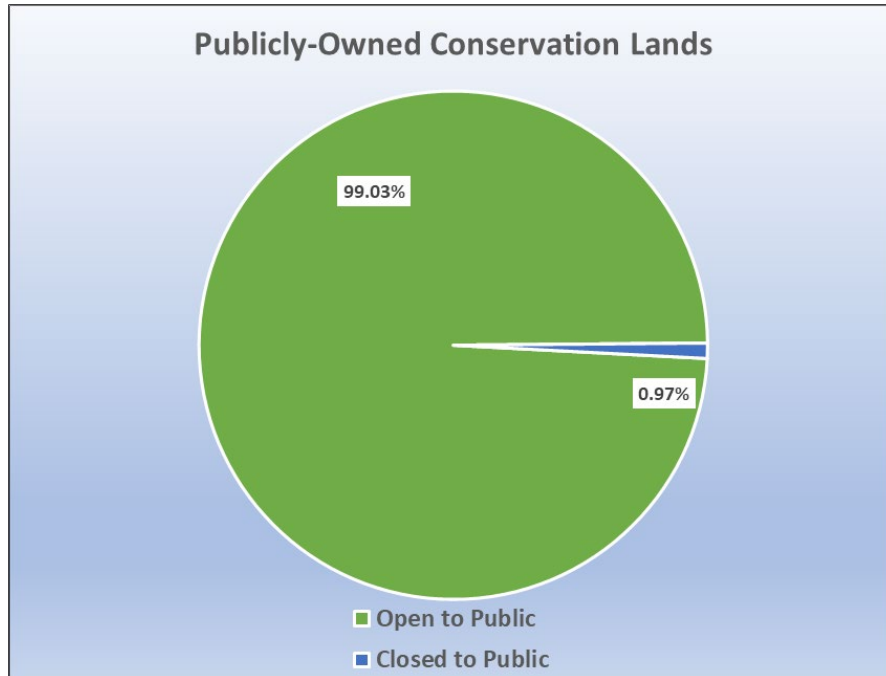


Figure 1

## Efforts to Increase Public Use of State-owned Conservation Lands

DSL contacted each of the managing agencies to determine what state agencies and water management districts are doing to increase public access to the lands they manage, including efforts to increase public awareness and participation in recreational opportunities. Each agency submits detailed information about recreational opportunities and enhancements on its conservation lands to the Florida Outdoor Recreation Inventory (FORI) database managed by DEP's Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP). In 2010, DRP released a comprehensive FORI report that is available on DEP's website, and the state managing agencies continue to submit data to FORI regularly. Up-to-date recreational activities available on specific conservation lands can be accessed on the respective managing agency website or the FORI database on DRP's website at [www.outdoorflorida.org](http://www.outdoorflorida.org).

Water management districts and state agencies are making a concerted effort to increase public use of the conservation lands they manage, both through traditional means (e.g., developing new trails and facilities) and by implementing new technologies (e.g., providing interactive maps on agency websites

and GPS enabled mobile applications). The information below summarizes each main land management agency's recent actions and efforts to increase public access and awareness.

### ***Department of Environmental Protection – Division of Recreation and Parks***

DRP is responsible for the development of Florida's recreation and parks system. DRP promotes the state park system for the use, enjoyment and benefit of the people of Florida and visitors. DRP provides public access to the best of Florida's diverse natural and cultural sites by providing appropriate resource-based recreational opportunities and interpretation. The agency promotes a statewide outdoor recreation program by offering a diverse, connected and balanced system of outdoor recreational resources, facilities and programs. DRP maintains over 2,200 miles of trails and 100 miles of sandy beaches. There are 59 campgrounds located at 56 parks within a system of 175 separate management units located across the state which includes the four campgrounds on the Cross Florida Greenway (Rodman, Ross Prairie, Santos, and Shangri-La). Recreational activities include bicycling, camping, canoeing, kayaking, boating, fishing, swimming, hiking, horseback riding, nature study, picnicking, beach activities, and visits to archeological and historic sites. The Florida State Park system is recognized as one of the best state park systems in the country and is the nation's only four-time Gold Medal Winner as awarded by the National Association of Recreation and Parks. Florida State Parks hosted over 29 million visitors last fiscal year (Fiscal Year 2020-21) representing an overall increase of approximately 99% in state park attendance since 1999.

The Florida State Parks website ([www.floridastateparks.org](http://www.floridastateparks.org)) has various links for the public to learn more about the parks open for recreational use. The Florida State Parks Map Direct is a public online web map that can be launched on a desktop computer or smart phone and displays information most useful to park visitors, such as entrances, points of interest, structures, and trails. This is one of the most comprehensive and accessible web-based state park maps of its kind and has received 427,970 page views at a rate of 48.86 views per hour. The DRP also maintains the Florida Outdoor Recreation Inventory (FORI), a comprehensive inventory of existing outdoor resources and facilities in Florida. It provides details of parks, recreation areas, open spaces and other outdoor sites in the state including federal, state, regional, county and municipal governments, commercial enterprises, non-profit organizations and clubs.

### ***Department of Environmental Protection – Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection***

The DEP's Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection (RCP) mission statement is "conserving and restoring Florida's coastal, aquatic, and ocean resources for the benefit of people and the environment." The "benefit of people" is through providing healthy ecosystems and fun, safe ways to experience those systems whether through on-site opportunities or off-site programs.

RCP amplified public awareness of, and access to, RCP-managed lands through a multitude of means, as evidenced in the increase in the number of visitors and volunteer hours over the years. According to Land Management Uniform Accounting Council annual reports from the period of 2010 to present, the

number of visitors on RCP-managed lands increased 27.5%, from 627,000 in FY 2009-10 to 799,524 in FY 2020-21. Over the same timeframe, the public's awareness and interest in RCP-managed lands improved as evidenced in the 63.3% increase in the number of volunteer hours donated, from 19,713 hours in FY 2009-10 to 32,208 hours in FY 2020-21. Visitation surged after declines resulting from Hurricane Michael closures, but volunteering continued to decrease in the last fiscal year.

Visitation increased through expanded education and outreach programs including new and revamped on-site programs, additional off-site programs, refreshing in-house and traveling exhibits, distribution of informational items, participation in local events, hosting visiting researchers and university groups (Spring Break Alternative, internships, etc.), and published articles and announcements. Visitation also increased through enhancing existing on-site facilities and adding new opportunities such as: opening a new state-of-the-art visitor center in the Panhandle, new primitive camping sites, installing additional amenities (picnic tables, fire rings, etc.), constructing new ADA-compliant trails, boardwalks, and an observation tower with a camera for remote viewing, making existing roads/trails more accessible (paving, adding low water crossings, etc.), constructing a new paddle craft launch site, establishing self-guided tours, enhancing media presence (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, website, etc.), and expanding volunteer opportunities. The latest improvements and upgrades include completing repairs from Hurricane Michael, and assuming management of a 0.6-mile boardwalk to facilitate repairs.

### ***Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services – Florida Forest Service***

The Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Florida Forest Service (FFS) manages state forests using a multiple-use management concept, which includes providing the public with outdoor recreational opportunities. FFS makes every effort to utilize historic ground and vegetation disturbances which allows public access and recreation without additional impacts to the public land. The most common recreational activities include camping, hiking, biking, horseback riding, hunting, fishing and paddling.

FFS has implemented programs to increase public use of the state forests including an online reservation system, State Forest Photo Contest, Trailwalker program for hikers and Trailtrotter program for equestrian users. Many of the state forests contain segments of the 1,400-mile Florida National Scenic Trail, and many others are part of the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail. Geocaching is another recreational opportunity in the forests allowing visitors an outdoor treasure hunting adventure that uses GPS devices. FFS also offers off-highway vehicle riding opportunities to the public on three state forests.

The FFS website ([www.fdacs.gov/Divisions-Offices/Florida-Forest-Service](http://www.fdacs.gov/Divisions-Offices/Florida-Forest-Service)) contains vast information to assist the public with locating outdoor recreational opportunities and increasing public awareness of cooperative initiatives including the Friends of Florida State Forests Inc., Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the Florida Scenic Highways. The website also contains the regularly updated "10 Things to Do on Florida State Forests," which provides unique recreational, historical and

ecological opportunities that are available on the state forests. Florida's state forests also serve as outdoor classrooms for all ages through educational programs.

FFS also provides Operation Outdoor Freedom events for wounded veterans with the outdoor activities for their enjoyment at no cost.

### ***Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission***

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) works to provide a variety of wildlife-centric recreational opportunities both statewide and on the Wildlife Management Area (WMA) system. FWC maintains more than 2,100 miles of roads and more than 1,000 miles of trails for the public to access and explore the FWC lead managed areas in the WMA system. In addition, FWC has developed public access infrastructure on most lead managed areas that includes access amenities (reported in the FORI database) such as boat launches, visitor entrances, check stations and wildlife viewing structures. Area specific recreational opportunities are listed and detailed on [www.MyFWC.com](http://www.MyFWC.com) and include hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, hiking, paddling, and horseback riding. Statewide programs such as the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail encourage conservation of Florida's native habitats and species and increase awareness of the premier wildlife viewing opportunities on Florida's public lands.

FWC engages in several activities to increase public awareness of and participation in recreational opportunities. The public is involved in planning public access and recreational opportunities for each management area through the agency's management plan development process. A variety of programs to educate the public about fish and wildlife conservation, hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, boating, and shooting sports are provided and new recreational opportunities or access improvements are often promoted through special events. FWC continues to improve ADA access and expand volunteer opportunities statewide with volunteers participating in a variety of species monitoring and habitat restoration efforts, interpretive programs, and infrastructure development and maintenance.

FWC features WMA opportunities regularly through a variety of print and electronic media, and often partners with VISIT Florida and local and regional tourism organizations to promote awareness of the WMA system.

### ***Department of Military Affairs***

The goal of the Department of Military Affairs is to open the entire Upchurch Milling and Storage Company tract to public use once current natural community restoration work is completed. The agency is working on acquiring or establishing easements on adjacent private lands to facilitate public access to this conservation property which is managed by Camp Blanding Military Reservation.

### ***Northwest Florida Water Management District***

Northwest Florida Water Management District (NFWWMD) has many facilities available to support public recreation on the lands it owns and manages. These include boat ramps, tent and RV campsites, canoe launches, fishing piers, hiking trails, horseback trails and parking areas, pavilions, picnic tables, restrooms, and wildlife viewing trails.

NFWWMD has expanded public recreational activities on land purchased with public funds, with the most popular activities being hunting, fishing, camping, paddling, hiking, and wildlife viewing. The recreational activities are compatible with natural resource protection and land use priorities. NFWWMD's website lists the conservation lands and the facilities available for public access and recreation in each area. The website also has the areas divided by region, making it very easy for the public to find and learn about a specific area of interest.

### ***Suwannee River Water Management District***

The Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD) owns almost 160,00 acres, 155,039 acres which are open to the public for recreation and 4,866 acres that are closed to the public. Public lands include a variety of facilities and features to enhance the public user experience. The District engages with community and user groups to encourage youth and mobility-impaired hunts, further increasing access where possible. In FY 2022, the District will launch an interactive, mobile-responsive web map which displays District lands, facilities, and recreational features.

### ***St. Johns River Water Management District***

The St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) provides a wide range of recreational opportunities available to the public on its managed lands including hiking, canoeing, kayaking, boating, fishing, bicycling, horseback riding, camping, geocaching, wildlife viewing, and hunting. SJRWMD emphasizes ecosystem viability while also offering compatible public recreation opportunities. SJRWMD holds regular recreational public meetings to discuss land management activities and recreation with stakeholders. SJRWMD works closely with agency and local government partners to identify opportunities to enhance SJRWMD-managed lands that not only provide valuable ecological benefits but also increase opportunities for outdoor recreation. SJRWMD partners with other agencies on special hunts for youth and disabled veterans on its lands, and actively promotes the array of recreational opportunities available through traditional outreach and social media. SJRWMD also constructs and maintains a variety of infrastructure and capital improvements that enhance public use including boat ramps, restrooms, picnic pavilions, storm shelters, observation towers and boardwalks. Informational kiosks on SJRWMD properties provide on-site guidance to visitors, while the SJRWMD website features an interactive recreation guide with regularly updated detailed information about public access and recreational activities. The recreation webpages had over 410,000 pageviews in FY 2020-21. This is a 20% increase in annual pageviews, compared to the previous fiscal year.



Nearly 40% of those pageviews were to the Lake Apopka Wildlife Drive (LAWD) and Lake Apopka North Shore pages. LAWD is a popular outdoor recreation destination featuring 11 miles of driving trails along levees within a network of wetlands that attracts an estimated 180,000 visitors annually. Another popular destination for the public is the marshes of the Upper St. Johns River Basin. Since 2019, the SJRWMD has managed agreements with concessionaire groups that provide organized airboat tours of the Upper Basin marshes at two separate conservation areas; Blue Cypress and Three Forks. These agreements help increase recreational opportunities, support the local economy through ecotourism, and allow SJRWMD to control impacts to the natural systems. Also, in the Upper St. Johns River Basin, the Headwaters Boat Ramp at Fellsmere Water Management Area opened to the public in August 2021 and has proven to be wildly popular in the freshwater angling community. This area provides two paved boat ramps, a small pier, paved parking, restrooms, and access to 10,000 acres of aquatic and wetland habitat. From opening day of the new boat ramp to the beginning of June 2021, over 14,000 vessels used the boat ramp and an estimated 27,407 anglers enjoyed the world class fishing at Fellsmere Water Management Area.

### ***South Florida Water Management District***

The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) provides a wide variety of nature-based recreational opportunities on public lands managed by the agency. These activities are managed to maximize the diversity and extent of public recreational activities provided on SFWMD managed lands while still providing resource protection measures necessary to assure the lands are properly managed for their conservation values and long-term public benefits. Recreational activities provided on SFWMD managed lands include hunting, fishing, air boating, canoeing, camping, horseback riding, hiking, biking, wildlife viewing, star gazing, and geocaching.

The SFWMD constructs and maintains a variety of infrastructure and capital improvement facilities designed to enhance public access and support recreational opportunities on SFWMD managed lands. These facilities and improvements include barns and paddocks to support equestrian use, restrooms and pavilions at campgrounds and day-use sites, canoe and kayak portages, board walks and hiking trails, boat ramps, trail heads with informational kiosks, and parking areas to accommodate public access and equestrian use. In addition to the construction and maintenance of recreational facilities, the SFWMD hosts quarterly Recreation Forum meetings to solicit input and receive suggestions from the public on ways to expand and enhance recreational opportunities on public lands.

The SFWMD website contains a recreation webpage to promote public recreation on SFWMD managed lands. The webpage provides area specific recreation information, updates on new recreational opportunities or emergency actions that have the potential to affect public recreation, the SFWMD Recreational Guide, and a link to the Special Use License system where the public can reserve no-cost permits for camping, equestrian use, expanded vehicle use to access remote areas, and other recreation orientated activities. Special Use Licenses are utilized to provide public recreational opportunities on properties where spatial limitations require the number of participants be regulated to maintain a high-quality recreational experience and for resource management purposes.

From October 1, 2020, to September 30, 2021, the SFWMD recreation website was visited by the public 70,010 times to obtain information and updates on public use and recreation opportunities on SFWMD managed lands. The website was also utilized by the public to obtain 6,365 no-cost Special Use Licenses to expand recreational use on conservation lands in an environmentally acceptable manner. The website and utilization of Special Use Licenses continue to serve as valuable tools to promote recreational use and inform the public on the large number of recreational opportunities available on lands managed by the SFWMD.

The SFWMD also actively partners with other governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations to expand and facilitate the administration of recreational programs and activities on lands managed by SFWMD. These partnerships include partnering with local governments to develop and maintain recreational infrastructure and public access sites, coordinating with state agencies such as the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to assist in the management and administration of hunting activities on SFWMD managed lands, and partnering with non-governmental organizations that actively participate in the SFWMD's volunteer program that helps support and enhance recreational opportunities on District lands. The volunteer program provides campground hosts and other services such as trail posting, trail maintenance, and the construction of public use pavilions that help support the SFWMD's recreation program.

### ***Southwest Florida Water Management District***

The Southwest Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) provides numerous recreational opportunities to the public, while strongly encouraging nature-based activities through a recreation website that receives more than 600,000 pageviews a year and a printed Recreation Guide. The SFWMD partnered with state and local governments to acquire lands that protect water resources and provide additional recreational opportunities. Approximately 99% of these lands are available for public use and recreation. The SFWMD provides bird watching opportunities that are part of the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail, paved and off-road biking, hiking including access to the National Scenic Trail, boating, canoeing, backcountry, primitive and equestrian camping, fishing, horseback riding, hunting, inline skating, kayaking, picnic facilities and a multitude of wildlife viewing opportunities.

The SFWMD continues to update signage, sign-in boxes and kiosks throughout recreation areas to guide visitors to specific sites while maintaining trails and campground amenities such as pavilions, picnic tables and fire rings. The SFWMD has transitioned to an automated online camping reservation system and staff continue to enhance the site.

## State-Owned Conservation Land Open to Public Access

Managing Agency	Total State-Owned Managed Conservation Acres	Acres Closed to Public Access	Acres Opened to Public Access	Percent of Land Open to Public Access	Percent of Land Closed to Public Access	Reasons Why Land is Closed to the Public
<b>Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services – Florida Forest Service</b>	1,155,206.90	0.00	1,155,206.90	100.00%	0.00%	All acres are open to the public.
<b>DEP – Division of Recreation and Parks</b>	798,140.31	0.00	798,140.31	100.00%	0.00%	All acres are open to the public.
<b>DEP – Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection</b>	59,127.00	0.00	59,127.00	100.00%	0.00%	All acres are open to the public.
<b>DEP – Mining and Mitigation Program</b>	5,506.00	5,501.00	5.00	0.09%	99.91%	Tracts contain environmentally sensitive lands, predominantly floodplain wetlands. Two opportunities for public access are available: (1) sublease with Polk County for a canoe launch for public access onto the Peace River and is approximately 2.5 acres, and (2) easement with the City of Fort Meade for a 2.5-mile public trail and primitive kayak launch onto the Bowlegs Creek. A third opportunity for public access is under discussion with Polk County for a proposed trail that could be from 10 – 30 acres depending on the route.
<b>Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission</b>	1,486,979.00	37.00	1,486,942.00	100.00%	0.00%	A restriction in the deed prohibits public access to Judges Cave site because the cave is a maternity roost site for the federally endangered gray bat. The area was acquired by The Nature Conservancy and transferred to FWC in January 1983. Janet Butterfield Brooks Preserve deed restriction requires the site to be open for guided tours only.
<b>Florida Department of Military Affairs</b>	1,577.07	1,577.07	0.00	0.00%	100.00%	Camp Blanding- Upchurch Milling and Storage Company Tract currently has no access without crossing military training lands or private property and is undergoing restoration of longleaf pine-wiregrass natural community. The Dept. of Military Affairs is working on acquiring or establishing access easements.
<b>Florida Department of Corrections (PRIDE)</b>	18,237.00	9,097.00	9,140.00	50.12%	49.88%	The 9,140 acres of conservation lands open to the public represents the Raiford Wildlife Management Area, which is split between Union Correctional Institution and Florida State Prison. The Raiford WMA is open to the public for hunting and other recreational use in accordance with FWC rules and regulations applicable to the WMA. Areas not open to the public are utilized by PRIDE and are not compatible with public use.
<b>University of Florida</b>	2,574.73	65.60	2,509.13	97.45%	2.55%	Life estate was approved by the Board of Trustees in May 2002. Public access will be allowed when the original owner is deceased or no longer lives adjacent to the property.
<b>Northwest Florida Water Management District</b>	211,335.96	23.38	211,312.58	99.99%	0.01%	Life estate retained by Seller, his wife and children as recorded in O.R. Book 1594, page 0537, public records of Leon County, Florida.

Managing Agency	Total State-Owned Managed Conservation Acres	Acres Closed to Public Access	Acres Opened to Public Access	Percent of Land Open to Public Access	Percent of Land Closed to Public Access	Reasons Why Land is Closed to the Public
<b>South Florida Water Management District</b>	324,939.37	1,907.25	323,032.12	99.41%	0.59%	The Loxahatchee Mitigation Bank and CREW Mitigation bank are currently managed through a public/private partnership agreement and are closed to public access due to on-going wetland restoration activities. These mitigation banks encompass a total of 1,907.25 acres and will be open for public use once on-going restoration activities are complete.
<b>St. Johns River Water Management District</b>	428,358.08	20,998.49	407,359.59	95.10%	4.90%	At Twelve Mile Swamp Conservation Area, 19,534 acres are currently encumbered by a timber lease with private hunting rights reserved until 2025 – public access will open when the lease ends. At Emeraldal Marsh Conservation Area, 1,320 acres are encumbered until 2026 by a peat harvesting lease - public access will open when the lease ends. An additional 144.49 acres at Emeraldal Marsh Conservation Area are closed for public safety related to adjacent land use.
<b>Suwannee River Water Management District</b>	159,906.28	4,866.86	155,039.42	96.96%	3.04%	4,866 acres that are closed to the public. Those lands were purchased for water supply/water quality projects such as municipal wellfields or spray fields. Of these 4,866 acres, 2,673 acres are the Double Run Creek and West Ridge tracts which were purchased for future water resource development projects and once completed they may be opened to the public. The Double Run Creek Tract has a hunting lease associated with it and is managed by the Florida National Guard at Camp Blanding. The 60-acre Newberry Wellfield Tract is leased to the City of Newberry for water supply/recreation and is considered open to the public.
<b>Southwest Florida Water Management District</b>	343,574.00	4,580.00	338,994.00	98.67%	1.33%	There are 1,926.41 acres that are reservoirs, 1,031.02 acres that are mitigation areas, 80.23 acres are part of a life estate that restricts access until the original owner is deceased, 2.93 acres related to water control structures, 18.72 acres of data collection sites and 1,521.23 acres that are a regional water treatment system.
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,995,461.70</b>	<b>48,653.65</b>	<b>4,946,808.05</b>	<b>99.03%</b>	<b>0.97%</b>	