



The Southwest-Central Florida Connector: Polk to Collier County

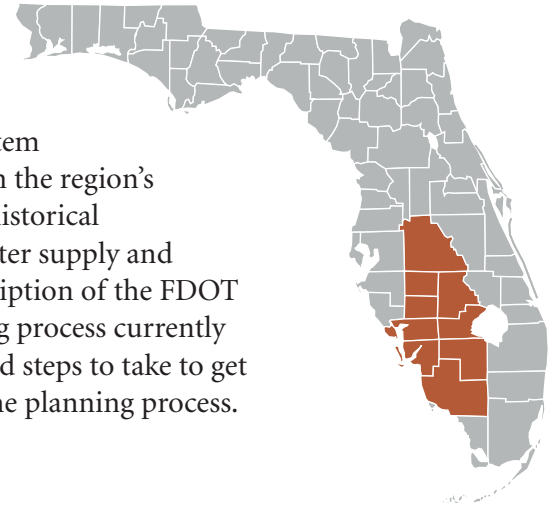
June 19, 2020

During the 2019 Florida Legislative Session, Senate Bill 7068 was passed into law. This sweeping legislation authorizes the design, funding and construction of “M-CORES,” or multi-use corridors of regional impact. These three tolled road systems extend 340 miles from Jefferson County on the Georgia boarder south to the western Everglades in Collier County.

The southern-most highway corridor – the Southwest-Central Florida Connector – is proposed to extend 140 miles with possible impacts to nine predominantly rural counties: Polk, Hardee, DeSoto, Highlands, Charlotte, Glades, Lee, Hendry and Collier counties.

Data from the Florida Bureau of Business and Economic Research (BEER), reveals that in 2019 the nine counties in the Southwest-Central Florida Corridor had a combined population of 2,204,355, or about 10.4% of the state’s total population. BEER medium population projections for 2045 show the corridor with a population of 2,976,700 or about 10.9% of the state’s total.

Following is an analysis of the impacts this new road system could have on the region’s natural and historical resources, water supply and more, a description of the FDOT road planning process currently underway, and steps to take to get involved in the planning process.



To find out more about the Southwest-Central Florida Connector visit:

- FDOT – floridamcores.com/suncoast-connector-task-force/
- 1000 Friends of Florida – 1000fof.org/mcores/southwest

Natural Resources

Most of the project area’s existing development is located in the counties of Charlotte, Lee and Collier, which include coastal urbanized areas from Port Charlotte south to Naples. But much of the rest of the corridor’s lands are predominantly rural and home to a vast array of significant natural areas, including critical wetlands, vast ranchlands, forested areas and pristine rivers essential to Florida’s water supply and quality. These lands, rich in biodiversity, also provide significant wildlife habitat, including that of the iconic Florida Panther.

In the northern part of the corridor is Green Swamp, partly located in Polk County. Described by the Southwest Florida Water Management District as “the beat of central Florida’s hydrologic heart,” Green Swamp is so significant that about 323,000 acres were designated in 1979 by the State of Florida as an Area of Critical State

Concern. These wetlands replenish the Floridan Aquifer and supply the Hillsborough, Withlacoochee, Ocklawaha and Peace rivers – the source of much of central Florida’s water supply. The state’s land planning agency notes the swamp’s designation “recognizes its valuable hydrologic function and the need to specifically regulate encroaching development that imperils these functions.”

Heading south, this stretch of the proposed M-CORES corridor traverses through Hardee, Highlands, DeSoto, Charlotte and Glades counties. This segment is predominated by open ranchlands, citrus groves, and crop farms. Among the unique habitats in this segment are the Lake Wales Ridge, a 150-mile long relic sand dune that runs through parts of Polk and Highlands counties and provides a home for rare and endangered plants and animals, many of which are found nowhere else on Earth. The Peace River traverses through DeSoto to

Charlotte County, providing drinking water and recreation. Its fresh waters flowing into Charlotte Harbor help maintain salinity levels needed to support commercial and recreational uses there.

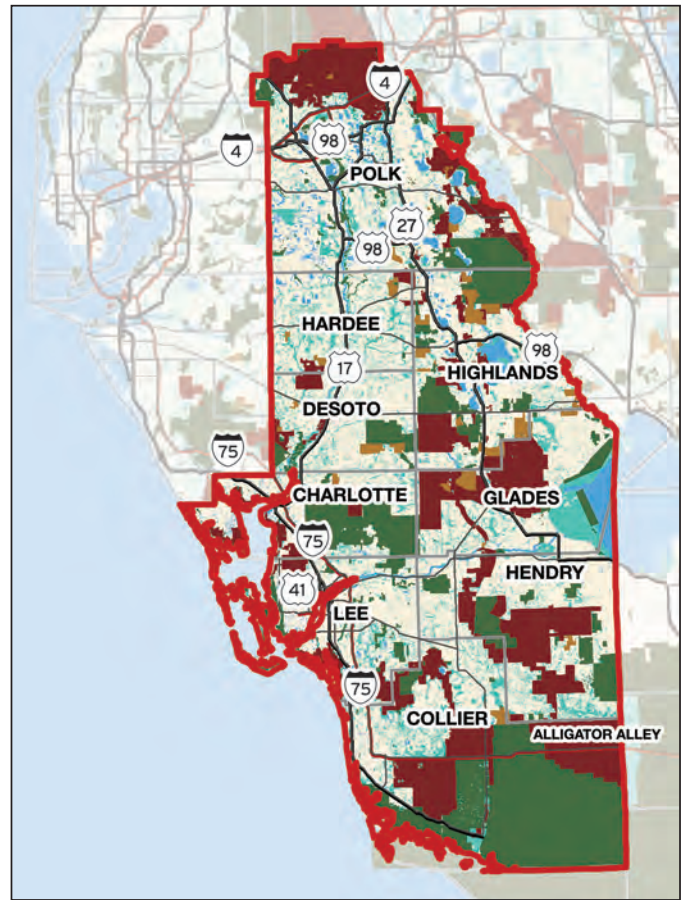
Further south, the lands and waters of Collier and Hendry counties are ground zero habitat for the endangered panther. Its seasonally wet grasslands and longleaf pine savannas provide important wetland and upland habitats for a wide variety of species. Reflecting its ecological abundance, Collier County alone has vast tracts of land under conservation, including the Big Cypress Preserve National Preserve, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park, Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, Picayune Strand State Forest, and Audubon Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. Part of the county falls within the Big Cypress Area of Critical State Concern.

1000 Friends of Florida commissioned the Center for Landscape Conservation Planning at the University of Florida to prepare a series of maps and related data identifying the significant natural resources in the three corridors.

This analysis is based on the Critical Lands and Waters Identification Project (CLIP), a cooperative project by UF's Center for Landscape Conservation Planning, the Florida Natural Areas Inventory, and the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission, as well as the Cooperative Land Cover data version 3.3, a collaborative effort between the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission and Florida Natural Areas Inventory. This GIS database identifies and ranks core statewide natural resource priorities which are ranked from P1 to P5 or P6, with P1 to P3 representing the most critical lands and waters for protection. CLIP is used by many different governmental and non-governmental organizations to assist in conservation, land use, and transportation planning

This data reveal that the Southwest-Central Florida lands encompass close to 19% of Florida's total lands, with about three quarters either open water, natural, semi-natural or in pasture. About 14% of the lands are in intensive agriculture and close to 10% are developed.

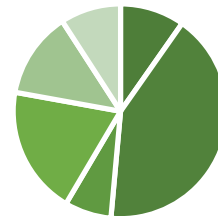
CLIP maps reveal that close to a third of the Southwest-Central Florida lands are wetlands. About 27% of the lands are in the top 3 CLIP 4.0 floodplain priorities, about 18% in the top three CLIP aquifer priorities, and close to 42% are in the top three CLIP surface water priorities.



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Reflecting the ecological abundance of the Southwest-Central Florida Corridor and its importance to the state's water supply and the Everglades, about 60% of the lands are in conservation.

Southwest-Central Florida Land Use Classes



- Open Water
- Natural
- Semi-Natural
- Pasture
- Intensive Agriculture
- Developed (Residential, Commercial, Industrial)

About three quarters of the Southwest-Central Florida Corridor is open water, natural, semi-natural, or in pasture, 14% in intensive agriculture and close to 10% developed.

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These lands are also very valuable from a biodiversity perspective. As shown at right, almost 57% are in the top three CLIP biodiversity priority areas, and about half of the lands are in the top two priority tiers of the Florida Ecological Greenways Network, which are known as the Florida Wildlife Corridor.

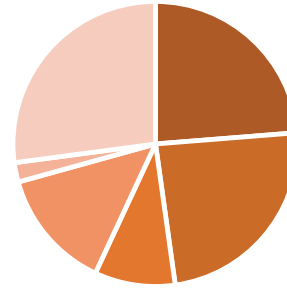
About 46% of the lands in this corridor are in the top three priorities for panther habitat, and another 30% in categories 3-6 as shown in the pie chart below right. Panther Habitat Conservation Priorities 1-3 represent areas of potential panther habitat with very high to moderately high significance for panther conservation. Priorities 4-5 represent supporting areas protecting additional large, rural landscapes that can provide buffers, corridors, and potential areas of range expansion.

Currently, about 60% of the Southwest-Central Florida lands are under conservation, including such vast iconic tracts as the Big Cypress National Preserve, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park, Kissimmee Prairie State Park, Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest, and much more.

Hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars have been spent conserving land in these nine counties. Given the ecological significance of the region, about another 20% of the lands are slated for future conservation through the Florida Forever and Rural and Family Lands programs.

Fragmentation of the lands of the Southwest-Central Florida Corridor with more roads and development would further threaten the region's rich biodiversity, wildlife habitat, and ecosystems that naturally protect and cleanse its waters and undermine the significant taxpayer investment in the region.

Southwest-Central CLIP 4.0 Biodiversity Priorities

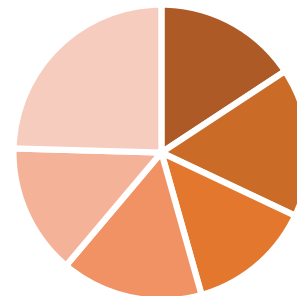


■ P1 ■ P2 ■ P3 ■ P4 ■ P5 ■ Not CLIP Priority

Attesting to the ecological abundance of the region, about 57% of the Southwest-Central Florida Corridor lands are in the top three CLIP Biodiversity areas.

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Southwest-Central Corridor Panther Conservation Priority Land



■ P1 ■ P2 ■ P3 ■ P4 ■ P5 ■ Not Panther Priority

Close to half of the Southwest-Central Corridor is in one of the top 3 CLIP priorities for panther habitat conservation

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Historic and Cultural Resources

As with the other two M-CORES corridors, Southwest-Central Florida is a remnant of rural Florida. It is home to abundant historic and cultural resources. In addition to the earlier mentioned coastal cities, rural Main Street communities abound, serving as the social and economic hearts of their communities. Among these are Bartow, Winter Haven, Lake Wales, Arcadia, Wauchula, Moore Haven, LaBelle and Sebring to name but a few. As M-CORES is planned, major effort should focus on protecting the economies of these small towns, and the financial viability of small locally owned businesses that add to the region's quality of life.

The region is also home to vast tracts of ranchlands – some in the same families for generations, so protecting the region's agricultural lifestyles and economies is essential. Another key part of the segment is outdoor

recreational opportunities provided by the many state and federal parks, preserves, private lands and more. Protecting the region's lands and waters so these opportunities continue to flourish is paramount. Better promoting heritage tourism and ecotourism is another essential economic development tool that builds upon — and does not detract — from the region's rural character and charm.

As with many rural areas across the state, the region faces economic challenges that must be addressed, including lower incomes and higher unemployment. Promoting improved broadband service and other modern amenities — not contingent upon the building of new roads — should be an integral economic development strategy for the region.

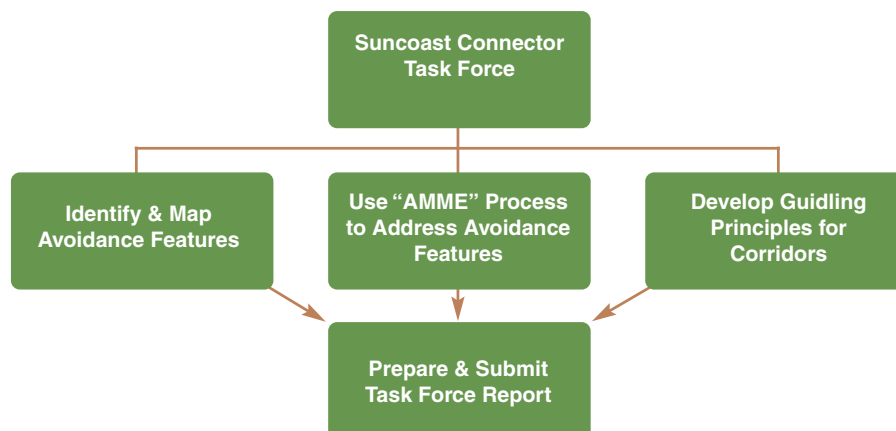
Corridor Task Force

As part of the M-CORES process, a separate task force has been established for each of the three corridors. In addition to representatives of state agencies, the 47-member Southwest-Central Florida task force includes representatives of the impacted counties; Southwest Florida and Central Florida Regional Planning Councils (RPCs); the South Florida and Southwest Florida Water Management Districts (WMDs); the Collier County, Lee County, Charlotte-Punta Gorda, Heartland and Polk Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs); community and nonprofit groups; and six conservation organizations including 1000 Friends of Florida,

Audubon Florida, Defenders of Wildlife, The Everglades Foundation, Florida Wildlife Corridor, and The Nature Conservancy.

At its meetings this group has been identifying “**Avoidance Features**” defined as “places with environmental, community, or economic resources where direct impacts from enhanced or new corridors should be avoided.”

They also are undertaking the “**AMME**” process to identify which resources need to be **Avoided**, those resources on which impacts need to be **Minimized** or **Mitigated**, and those to be **Enhanced**.



In an assignment added in May, the task forces are also now identifying “**Attraction Areas**” within their corridors. These are defined as “places where a connection to or service by an enhanced or new corridor is desired to accomplish economic, community, environmental, or other goals such as areas targeted in local plans for economic development.”

The Task Force “**Guiding Principles**,” to be used to shape corridor planning and development, will be incorporated into its final report, due to the Governor and Legislature.

The legislation establishing M-CORES specifies that, in

addition to evaluating the need for and impacts of the road system on the economy, environment, hurricane evacuation and land use, the Southwest-Central Connector Task Force shall also:

Address the impacts of the construction of a project within the corridor on panther and other critical wildlife habitat and evaluate in its final report: the need for acquisition of lands for state conservation or as mitigation for project conservation, and

Evaluate wildlife crossing design features to protect panther and other critical wildlife habitat corridor connections.

Avoidance and Enhancement Areas

As noted, the task force has been involved in identifying “avoidance features” which have been mapped at right.

The deep pink shows “will not impact” layers, while light pink highlights “no new corridor through” features. However, the “no new corridor through” features could be impacted by the expansion or realignment of existing transportation corridors as part of the M-CORES process, such as SR 29 that would affect Big Cypress National Preserve and the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge.

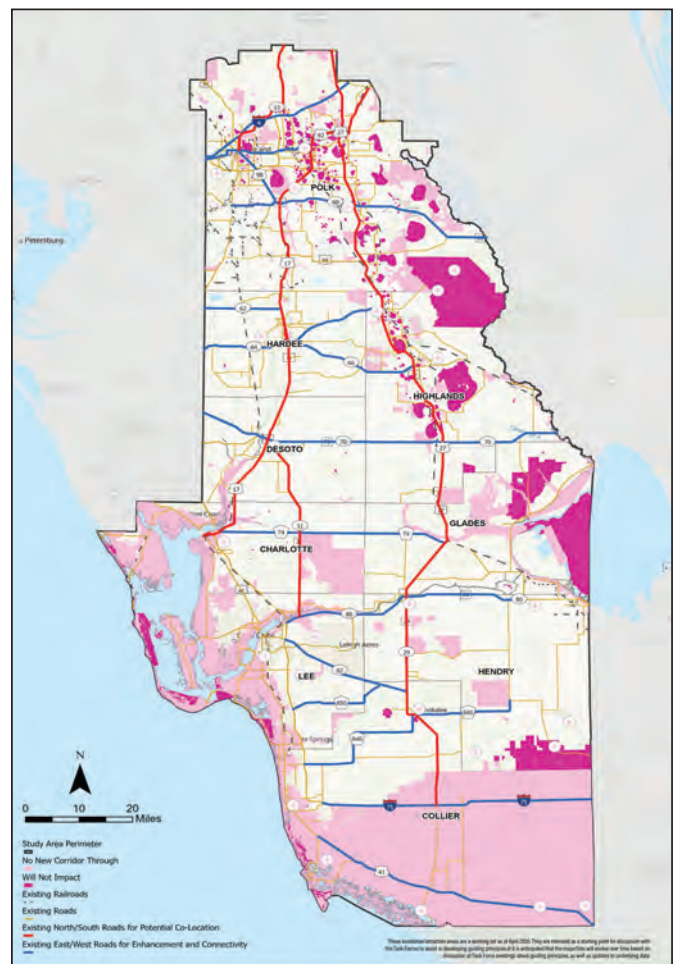
While the avoidance map identifies specific sites to circumvent, for the most part it does not take a look at the bigger picture. Many significant features shown on the maps commissioned by 1000 Friends of Florida are not included as avoidance features on the M-CORES maps.

Also not taken into account is the millions spent by taxpayers on land conservation, with the intent that they be protected from development and encroachment. This extensive investment in conserving these lands is a compelling argument for assigning them to the “will not impact” category in the avoidance map.

An analysis of all the local comprehensive plans within the region is also in order to determine other locally designated land and water resource areas meriting protection.

You can check out 1000 Friends of Florida’s maps and data at 1000fof.org/mcores/maps and use the Defenders of Wildlife web map application to view an interactive map or create your own at <https://arcg.is/ezfLz>

Southwest-Central Florida Corridor



FDOT’s Suncoast M-CORES Avoidance and Attractions Areas Map shows areas deemed inappropriate and appropriate for road construction as of May 29, 2020

Florida Department of Transportation

Draft Guiding Principles

The task force is drafting general guiding principles, included on pages 7 to 8. As can be seen these fall into four general categories: natural resources pertaining to conservation, wildlife and agriculture; cultural resources related to historic architecture and archaeology; social resources focusing on community assets; and physical resources including existing transportation and utility

networks. At present these are very general and could likely be applied to vast swaths of the state. It will be important to bore down and develop region-specific and more quantifiable principles. There are also potential implementation strategies for the principles.

Next Steps

Time is of the essence in sharing your input. To do this you may:

- Work with others in your community to identify local Avoidance Features, Attraction Areas, appropriate Guiding Principles and Implementation Strategies to protect significant resources.
- Share this information in writing to FDOT and the Task Force Chair, at the public participation segment of upcoming task force meetings, at the open houses when scheduled, and via email at FDOT.Listens@dot.state.fl.us
- Advocate for changes to your county and (where appropriate) municipal comprehensive plan to better protect significant resources.
- Prepare a “My View” column for the local newspaper and share the information widely on social media.

- Contact state, regional and local elected leaders and government officials to share your information and express your concerns.

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FDOT Southwest-Central Florida Connector Draft Guiding Principles

May 29, 2020

The task force is creating these principles to be included in the report submitted to Governor DeSantis and the Legislature and guide the Florida Department of Transportation as it continues planning the corridors.

Draft Guiding Principles Summary

Natural Guiding Principles

1. Prioritize avoidance and enhancements to existing lands currently managed for conservation purposes; where avoidance is not feasible, minimize and mitigate impacts on these lands. Provide enhancements for mitigation lands if avoidance is not feasible.
2. Prioritize avoidance and enhancements to lands proposed for management for conservation purposes; where avoidance is not feasible, minimize and mitigate impacts to these lands.
3. Minimize and mitigate impacts to endangered, threatened, rare, or endemic species and their habitats, as well as to rare or endemic plant communities. Enhance these areas to extent practical.
4. Avoid, to the extent possible, and enhance, to extent practical, degradation of fresh water sources and aquifer recharge areas; where avoidance is not possible, minimize and mitigate impacts on these resources.
5. Maintain, and where possible, restore and enhance water quality and watershed integrity.
6. Minimize direct impacts to wetlands; where mitigation is needed, pursue regional or landscape scale approaches.
7. Avoid or minimize fragmentation of, or other negative impacts to, regionally significant or large contiguous productive agricultural lands and other rural lands with environmental significance, working with landowners to understand their future plans.
8. Maintain and, where possible, restore and enhance the integrity and connectivity of regionally significant

environmental lands (such as Florida Ecological Greenway Network Priorities 1 and 2), with emphasis on enhancing connectivity for wildlife, water, and other resources.

9. Enhance, to extent practical, existing roads to improve natural resource conditions.

Cultural Guiding Principles

10. Avoid lands owned by Native American tribal nations.
11. Avoid cemeteries and historic markers.

Social Guiding Principles

12. Avoid military sites and lands important to maintain the site's military mission.
13. Maintain and enhance transportation connectivity to, from, and between working farms, forests, and mines; recreational areas, trails, and other eco-tourism attractions; rural employment centers; and other economically valuable rural lands.
14. Enhance transportation corridors to reflect the context of the communities and environment through which the corridors pass, to the fullest extent possible.
15. Maintain and enhance the context and quality of life consistent with local and regional visions and plans.
16. Enhance economic development, job creation and community development, with emphasis on rural areas, by maintaining consistency with local and regional comprehensive plans, economic development plans and

initiatives to maximize opportunities that meet the needs of communities and the region.

17. Avoid schools and locally significant identified public serving institutions and mitigate negative impacts of a transportation corridor on these institutions.

Physical Guiding Principles

18. Prioritize minimization implementation of new transportation facilities by following existing transportation rights of way, utility corridors or easements, and other existing human-disturbed corridors through conservation, agricultural, and other natural lands.

19. Enhance transportation connectivity by emphasizing linkages to existing to communities and the existing regional roadway network.

20. Enhance the development and operation of transportation corridors by using state-of-the-art and energy-efficient infrastructure, vehicles, materials, technologies, and methodologies.

21. Enhance emergency evacuation and response.

22. Enhance areas where utilities and broadband can be combined with transportation through nondiscriminatory, competitively neutral access to FDOT rights of way for utility and service providers or joint deployment of infrastructure.

23. To extent feasible, minimize impacts of transportation lighting on nearby agricultural, environmental and conservation lands.

Potential Implementation Strategies

A. Consult with tribal nations to identify opportunities for enhanced connectivity that would provide mutual benefit.

B. Enhance infrastructure and transportation planning processes to support co-benefits of implementation.

C. Avoid or minimize impacts to funding for programmed FDOT projects.

D. Conservation lands include fee and less than fee conservation easements, rural land stewardship

management areas, Water Management District monitoring sites, and areas needed for associated, appropriate land management (such as smoke sheds, optimal boundaries).

E. In transportation corridor planning and project development, localize public input/feedback.

F. In transportation corridor planning and project development, evaluate improvements and access to existing and planned trail networks.

M-CORES Southwest-Central Florida Corridor Resource Overview

Resource Category	Acres in Southwest-Central Corridor	Percent of Southwest-Central Corridor	Acres of Resource in Florida	Percent of Resource in Southwest-Central Corridor	Percent of Florida Acres Southwest-Central Corridor
Total Acres	6,782,983	100%	36,337,297	N/A	18.67%
Existing conservation lands	4,065,899	59.90%	10,614,140	38.30%	11.19%
Florida Forever Projects	1,305,369	19.20%	2,242,042	58.20%	3.59%
Rural and Family Land Program Projects (RFLPP) Tier 1	78,796	0.10%	237,758	33.10%	0.22%
Rural and Family Land Program Projects (RFLPP) ALL	108,160	0.20%	373,311	29.00%	0.30%
All Wetlands (including in existing and proposed conservation lands)	2,185,096	32.20%	11,410,303	19.20%	6.01%
Wetlands not in existing or proposed conservation areas	696,243	10.30%	4,190,614	16.60%	1.92%
100 Year Floodplain not in existing or proposed conservation lands or wetland	828,433	12.20%	3,279,482	25.30%	2.28%
CLC v3.3 Land Use Categories	6,461,688	100%	45,687,425	17.60%	17.78%
Natural (excluding open water)	2,828,847	43.80%	16,072,819	7.00%	7.78%
Semi-natural	478,529	7.40%	6,833,717	28.30%	1.32%
Pasture	1,312,480	20.30%	4,632,501	31.70%	3.61%
Intensive Agriculture	883,009	13.70%	2,785,746	14.60%	2.43%
Residential, Commercial, Industrial Development	619,878	9.60%	4,237,303	3.00%	1.71%
CLIP 4.0 Aggregated Priorities	6,232,682	91.90%	37,449,416*	16.70%	17.15%
P1	3,398,485	50.10%	19,571,080	17.40%	9.35%
P2	875,971	12.90%	5,461,015	16.00%	2.41%
P3	751,952	11.10%	5,258,741	14.30%	2.07%
P4	1,041,485	15.40%	6,106,599	17.10%	2.87%
P5	164,789	2.40%	1,051,981	15.70%	0.45%

CLIP: Critical Lands and Waters Identification Project. GIS database and analyses that identify and rank core statewide natural resource priorities (P). Ranked from P1 to P6, with P1 representing the most critical lands and waters for protection.

CLC: Cooperative Land Cover

*CLIP 4.0 Aggregated Priorities has more total acres than the state because the CLIP Aggregated Priorities includes state coastal waters that are NOT included in the total state acres in these statistics. The state acres includes only land and freshwater ecosystems and no coastal waters.

M-CORES Southwest-Central Florida Corridor Water Resources

Resource Category	Acres in Southwest-Central Corridor	Percent of Southwest-Central Corridor	Acres of Resource in Florida	Percent of Resource in Southwest-Central Corridor	Percent of Florida Acres Southwest-Central Corridor
Wetlands	2,185,096	32.20%	11,410,303	19.20%	6.01%
CLIP 4.0 Floodplain Priorities	3,190,588	47.00%	14,983,276	21.30%	8.78%
P1	1,030,703	15.20%	4,733,894	21.80%	2.84%
P2	397,460	5.90%	2,400,303	16.60%	1.09%
P3	404,768	6.00%	2,734,910	14.80%	1.11%
P4	436,458	6.40%	2,779,588	15.70%	1.20%
P5	385,455	5.70%	877,139	49.80%	1.06%
P6	535,745	7.90%	1,457,442	36.80%	1.47%
CLIP 4.0 Aquifer Recharge Priorities	6,196,463	91.40%	33,126,224	18.70%	17.05%
P1	12,550	0.20%	1,108,062	1.10%	0.03%
P2	180,090	2.70%	3,265,920	5.50%	0.50%
P3	991,951	14.60%	6,075,478	16.30%	2.73%
P4	1,885,561	27.80%	7,508,557	25.10%	5.19%
P5	1,364,543	20.10%	6,632,648	20.60%	3.76%
P6	1,761,768	26.00%	8,535,559	20.60%	4.85%
CLIP 4.0 Surface Water Priorities	6,043,600	89.10%	30,702,938	19.70%	16.63%
P1	1,668,396	24.60%	6,661,334	25.00%	4.59%
P2	781,288	11.50%	4,187,284	18.70%	2.15%
P3	373,380	5.50%	3,470,770	10.80%	1.03%
P4	2,739,761	40.40%	11,855,298	23.10%	7.54%
P5	480,775	7.10%	4,528,252	10.60%	1.32%

M-CORES Southwest-Central Florida Corridor Biodiversity/Wildlife Resources

Resource Category	Acres in Southwest-Central Corridor	Percent of Southwest-Central Corridor	Acres of Resource in Florida	Percent of Resource in Southwest-Central Corridor	Percent of Florida Acres Southwest-Central Corridor
CLIP 4.0 Biodiversity Priorities	4,944,807	72.90%	27,426,584	N/A	13.61%
P1	1,609,953	23.70%	5,485,918	29.30%	4.43%
P2	1,631,217	24.00%	9,389,110	17.40%	4.49%
P3	620,956	9.20%	5,389,000	11.50%	1.71%
P4	933,296	13.80%	5,983,991	15.60%	2.57%
P5	149,384	2.20%	1,178,565	12.70%	0.41%
Florida Ecological Greenways Network	4,462,538	65.80%	23,083,737	19.30%	12.28%
P1*	2,432,245	35.90%	11,629,918	20.90%	6.69%
P2*	958,430	14.10%	5,102,507	18.80%	2.64%
P3	486,831	7.20%	1,239,939	39.30%	1.34%
P4	26,087	0.40%	1,526,260	1.70%	0.07%
P5	558,945	8.20%	3,585,113	15.60%	1.54%
Panther Conservation Priorities	5,117,317	75.40%	29,648,204	17.30%	14.08%
P1	1,067,099	15.70%	1,789,122	59.60%	2.94%
P2	1,105,092	16.30%	8,253,396	13.40%	3.04%
P3	922,568	13.60%	7,850,833	11.80%	2.54%
P4	1,053,038	15.50%	6,548,652	16.10%	2.90%
P5	969,521	14.30%	5,206,201	18.60%	2.67%
Gopher Tortoise Habitat Priorities	1,444,660	21.30%	8,097,017	17.80%	3.98%
P1	590,437	8.70%	3,546,130	16.70%	1.62%
P2	183,271	2.70%	2,241,990	8.20%	0.50%
P3	670,953	9.90%	2,308,897	29.10%	1.85%

*** Florida Wildlife Corridor P1-P2 of Florida Ecological Greenways Network**

Acres: 3,390,674 acres
 Percent: 50.0%
 Acres in Florida: 16,732,425
 Percent Total in Study Region: 20.3%