

2025-2026 John M. DeGrove Webinar Series



From Swamp to Suburbia

The True Cost of Wetland Loss in Florida

Image: "Dedicated bus lane with far-side bus bulb (colored)" by NACTO/Flickr



May 13, 2026

1000FOF.ORG



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Building Better Communities, Saving Special Places

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Work with citizens, community and state leaders, conservation and business groups

Educate, advocate and negotiate to protect Florida's high quality of life



Dr. John M. DeGrove

May 4, 1924 – April 13, 2012



Icon of comprehensive planning both in Florida and across the nation

Co-founder of 1000 Friends of Florida

To find out more, please visit:

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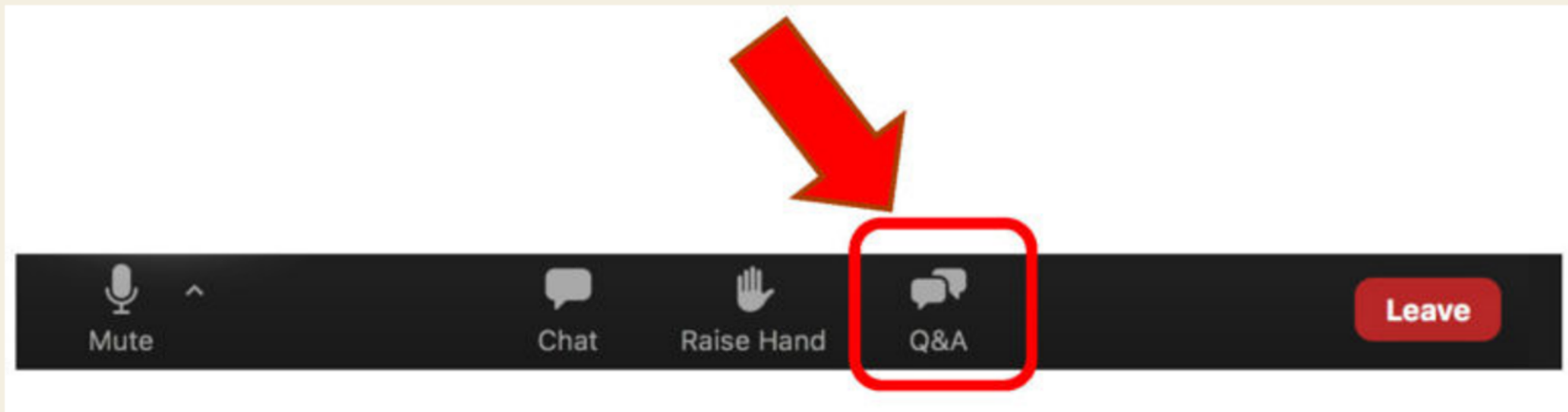
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Questions & Answers

Please submit questions for speakers using the Q&A button on your Zoom control panel.

Keep questions succinct and, if possible, indicate who your question should be directed to.





Julianne Thomas



Mariana Aziz Pico



Christina Reichert

Julianne Thomas - *The Conservancy of Southwest Florida*



Serves as Senior Environmental Planning Specialist for the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, where she supports the policy department with a focus on growth management. An advocate with the Conservancy since 2009, Julianne is also responsible for geographic information support (mapping) for the policy department. Holds a Master of Science in Urban Planning and Geographic Information Systems and a Master of Liberal Studies in Urban Planning and Public Administration, both from Eastern Michigan University. Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and Biology from Alma College.

Mariana Aziz Pico – *Miami Waterkeeper*



Environmental lawyer with 10+ years of experience strengthening environmental regulations, advancing water quality protections, and defending the right to a healthy environment. Currently the Legal Environmental Policy Specialist at Miami Waterkeeper, focused on climate adaptation, coastal resilience, and ocean conservation. Previously Transparency Campaigns Director at Oceana Mexico, with earlier roles at the Mexican Federal Government and the Mexican Supreme Court of Justice. Master's in Environmental Law and Public Policy from University College London (UCL). Law degree from the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM).

Christina I. Reichert – *Earthjustice*



Senior environmental attorney with experience across water, wetlands, species, energy, toxics, and land use law. Currently with Earthjustice's Florida and Puerto Rico Regional Office. Previously with the Southern Environmental Law Center, Duke University's Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions, and Oceana. Published in the University of Pennsylvania Journal of Constitutional Law, Harvard Environmental Law Review, and the Regulatory Review. Coauthor of a chapter on ocean energy in *Climate Change and Ocean Governance* (Cambridge University Press).



Wetlands Loss

Julianne Thomas

Senior Environmental Planning Specialist

Who is the Conservancy?



The work of saving our environment started in 1964 when plans were revealed to build a road through Rookery Bay, crossing Gordon Pass and into the Ten Thousand Islands.

A small group of citizens became concerned, involved, and politically active mobilizing grassroots efforts to prevent the project.

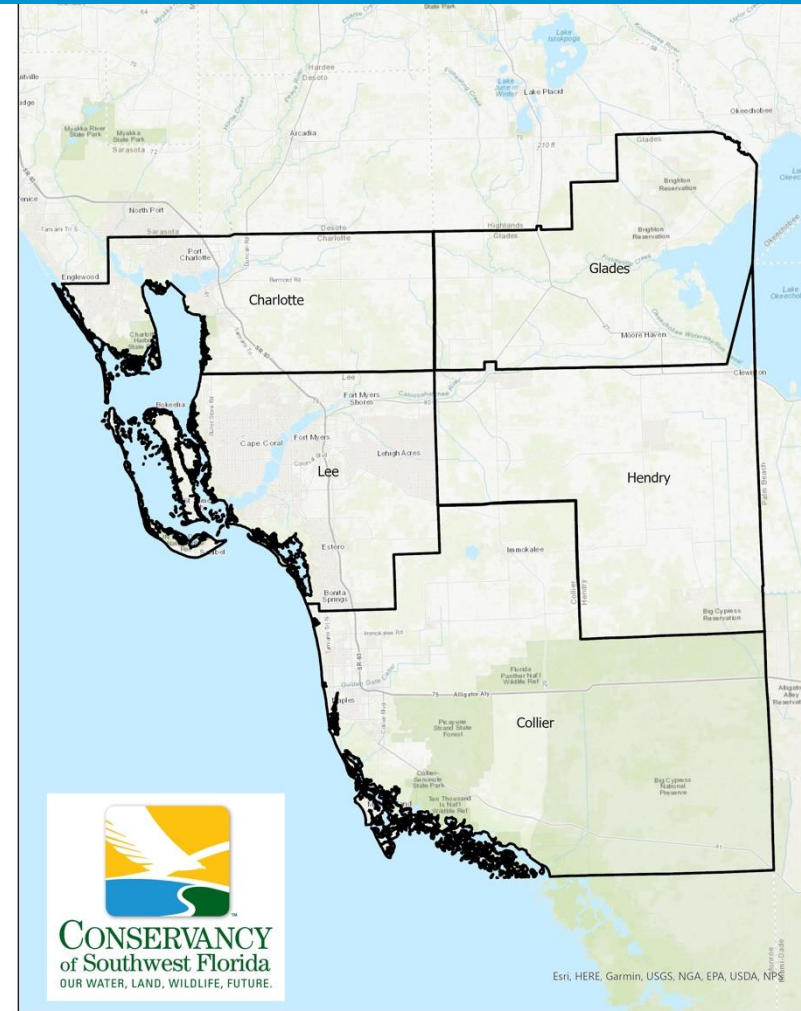
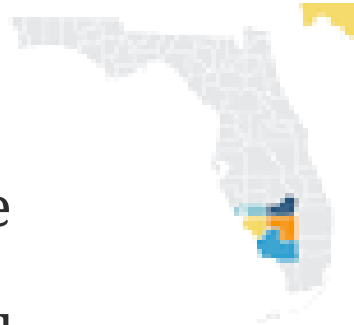
As a result, the road was never built, Rookery Bay and its inhabitants were saved, and the Conservancy of Southwest Florida was founded.

Who is the Conservancy?



Since 1964, the Conservancy has expanded our scope across the five counties in Southwest Florida: Collier, Charlotte, Lee, Hendry, and Glades.

We maximize the combined forces of environmental policy, advocacy, research, science, education, and wildlife rehabilitation to protect Southwest Florida's natural treasures - our water, our land and our wildlife.



Who is the Conservancy?



The Conservancy of Southwest Florida Policy and Advocacy Department helps protect our wild lands, wildlife, and our waters. We steward smart growth in our area — advising on transportation planning and land-use decisions and helping to preserve habitat and waterways.

It's about balancing conservation with economic health and making sure decisions and actions are supported by science-based information and policies.

What are Wetlands?

WHAT IS A WETLAND?

It is a piece of ground that's wet much or all of the time, long enough and regularly enough that it contains plant, insect, microorganism, and animal species which evolved for wet conditions, forever changing the chemistry of the soil.

ALL WETLANDS HAVE 3 CHARACTERISTICS:

- 1 HYDROLOGY**

Water presence in wetlands can be permanent, frequent, or seasonal.

The water may be above, below, near, or at the soil surface, with the water coming from groundwater flow, surface flow, or precipitation.
- 2 HYDROPHYTIC PLANTS**

These "water loving" plants have evolved to survive in water and the low-oxygen environments typical of waterlogged soils.

Wetland plants are adapted to specific water conditions like saturation levels, flow, depth, and flooding frequency, making each wetland type its own unique ecosystem.

When these wet conditions are present, wetland plant communities can establish over the course of multiple years.
- 3 HYDRIC SOILS**

Soils that are repeatedly or consistently waterlogged, inundated, or flooded at least 2 weeks during growing seasons.

The presence of water and low soil oxygen levels lead to gradual changes in soil properties.

These changes form unique soil characteristics that can help identify a historic wetland for some years after the vegetation and hydrology were altered.

WHAT IS NOT A WETLAND

- A ditch excavated through dry land.
- Dry areas that are only wet for a few days after it rains or snows.
- Rivers, streams, or larger lakes.

EXAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS OF HYDRIC SOILS

- undecayed plant material
- greenish or bluish gray soil under dark layers
- orange or rust colored patches or streaks
- rotten egg smell

THE WETLANDS INITIATIVE

Wetlands are foundational to human health, water quality, drinking water resources, floodwater protection, fish and wildlife habitats, and resilience against the effects of climate change.

Wetlands are the kidneys that can absorb nutrients and pollution and prevent them from reaching downstream waters. Up to 90% of the sediments from runoff can be removed if it passes through wetlands.

What are Wetlands?

Wetlands serve as natural infrastructure for disaster risk reduction from hazards such as floods, droughts, and storm surges, which account for over 90% of natural disasters.

How many Wetlands?

Wetlands are perhaps one of the most valuable ecosystems on the planet.

Only about 5–10% of the world's land surface is currently wetland, but more than 70% is already destroyed or impaired.

Florida has more wetlands than any other state in the continental United States. Yet these precious resources are at risk.



What did we do?



We compared SFWMD Landcover data from 1999 and 2023. Simply, we made a map of wetlands in Collier and Lee Counties in 1999 and another map of wetlands in Collier and Lee Counties in 2023 and then erased the 2023 wetlands from the 1999 wetlands.

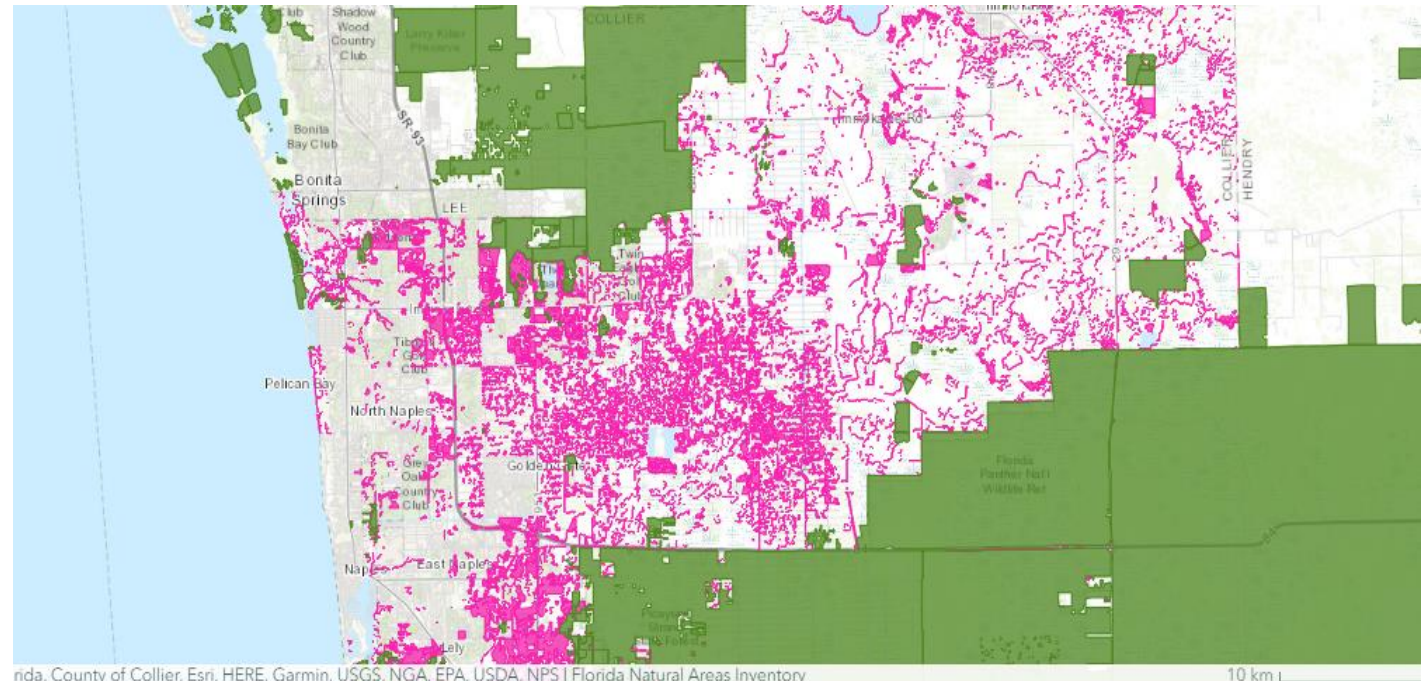
This allowed us to see what was considered by SFWMD to be a wetland in 1999 that was no longer a wetland in 2023.

Collier Wetland Loss

This map shows wetland loss in Collier County between 1999 and 2023.

The pink layer shows the 22,796 acres of wetlands that existed in 1999 that were no longer considered wetlands by the South Florida Water Management District in 2023.

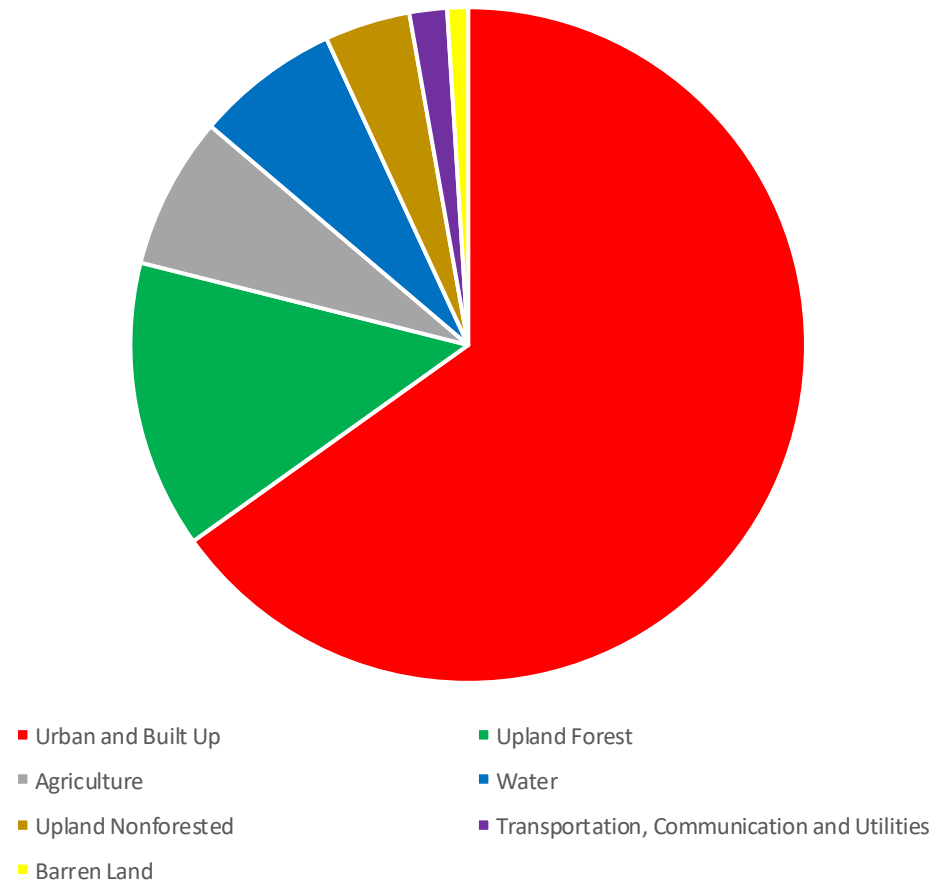
This is a loss of 17% of wetlands in 24 years. Please note that wetlands in managed lands (represented in green) were not considered in our analysis.



Collier Wetlands Loss 1999-2023

Collier Wetland Conversion

Wetland Conversion



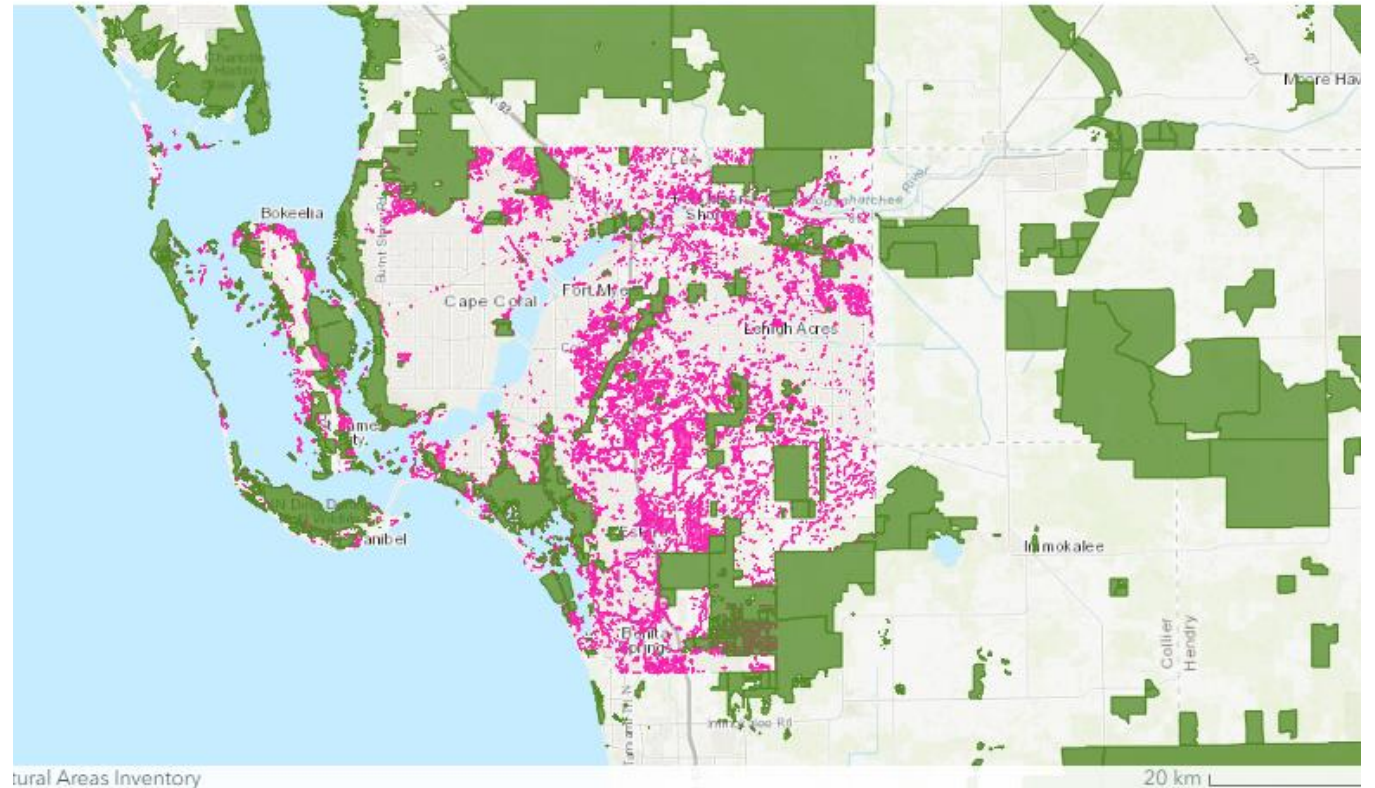
Urban and Built Up	65.2
Upland Forest	13.8
Agriculture	7.3
Water	6.9
Upland Nonforested	4.1
Transportation, Communication and Utilities	1.8
Barren Land	1

Lee Wetland Loss

This map shows wetland loss in Lee County between 1999 and 2023.

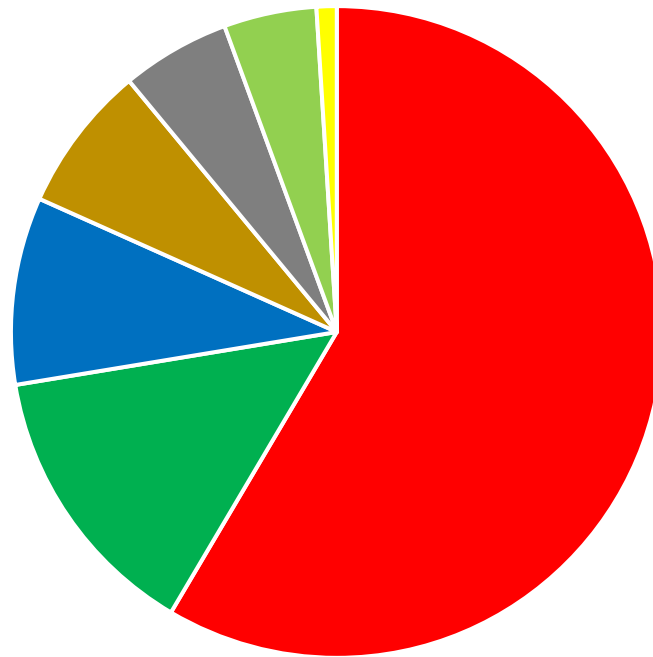
The pink layer shows the 20,800 acres of wetlands that existed in 1999 that were no longer considered wetlands by the South Florida Water Management District in 2023.

This is a loss of 31% of wetlands in 24 years. Please note that wetlands in managed lands (represented in green) were not considered in our analysis.



Lee Wetland Conversion

Wetland Conversion



- Urban and Built Up
- Water
- Transportation, Communication and Utilities
- Barren Land
- Upland Forest
- Upland Nonforested
- Agriculture

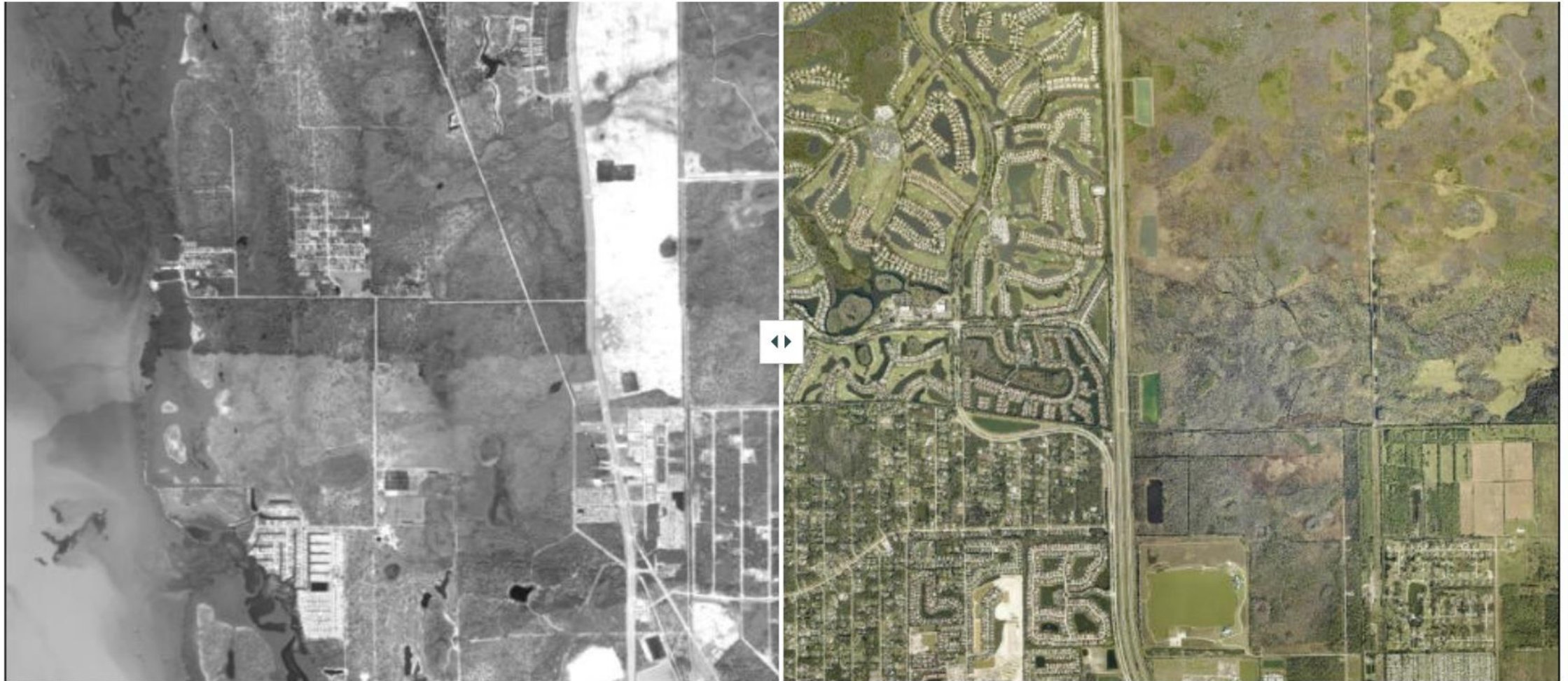
Urban and Built Up	58.5
Upland Forest	13.9
Water	9.3
Upland Nonforested	7.3
Transportation, Communication and Utilities	5.4
Agriculture	4.6
Barren Land	1

SLIDERS



CONSERVANCY
of Southwest Florida
OUR WATER, LAND, WILDLIFE, FUTURE.

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/e924cca8693042b88597bbb80256a7eb>



Conservancy Work



CONSERVANCY
of Southwest Florida
OUR WATER, LAND, WILDLIFE, FUTURE.

The Conservancy of Southwest Florida is fighting to protect our precious wetlands.

We are a watchdog to the growth and development that often targets wetlands, flowways, and aquatic habitats.

We are not against growth - we believe that growth should occur at an appropriate scale in appropriate locations.

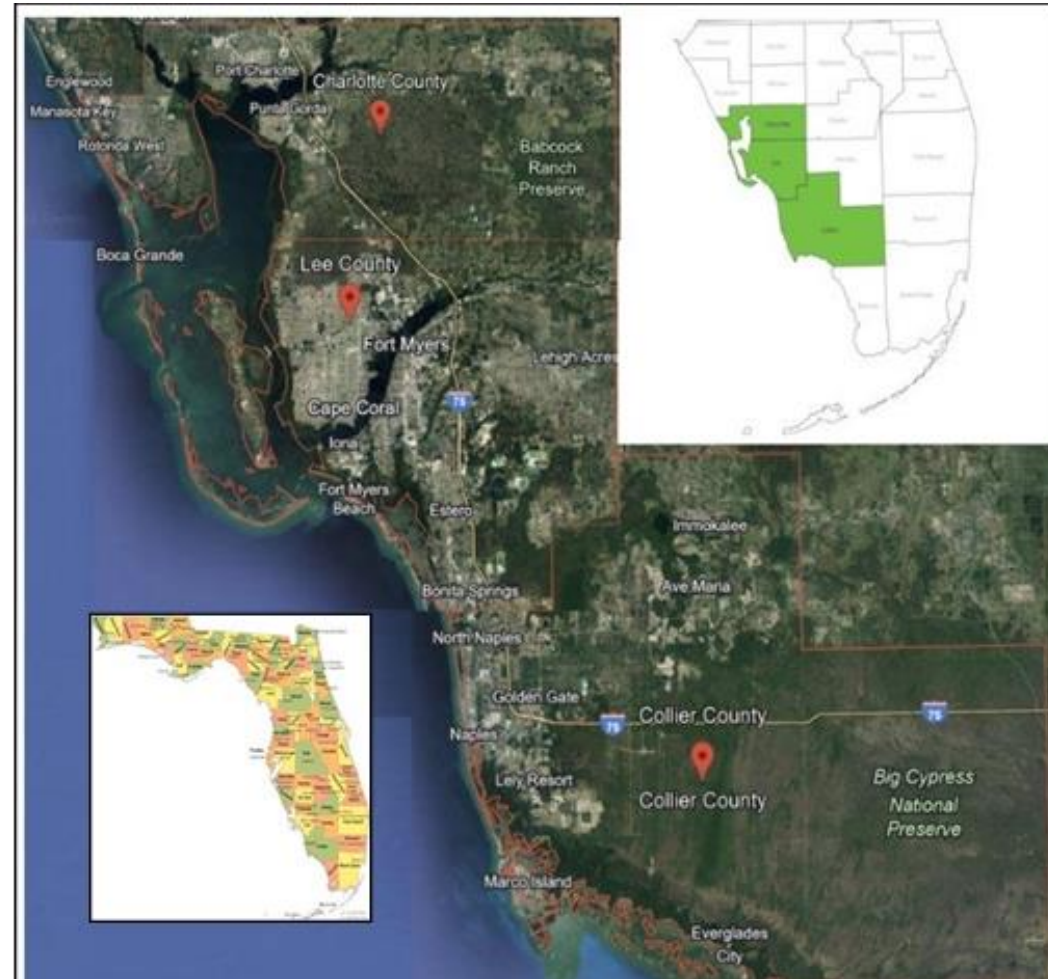
We've taken environmentally incompatible development to court.



Clean Water and the Economy

To address growing concerns around the health and vitality of our waterways, Captains for Clean Water, Conservancy of Southwest Florida, and Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation enlisted Greene Economics to conduct a thorough analysis of the economic repercussions of degraded water quality.

This analysis was completed at the end of 2023.



Clean Water and the Economy

The analysis found that Southwest Florida's allure and prosperity are deeply rooted in water.

Within the counties of Charlotte, Lee, and Collier, our region's economic and ecological well-being hinges on the health of these waters.

Clean and healthy water bodies not only support diverse wildlife but also fuel key economic activities, reinforcing the area's desirability as a tourist destination and a place to call home.



Harmful Algal Blooms

In recent times, the tranquility and health of these waters have been marred by harmful algal blooms.

Such events, particularly severe in 2018, disrupted local industries, marred the natural beauty, and raised alarming concerns about the ecological future of the region.

These blooms serve as a stark reminder of the fragile balance between nature and human activities.



Harmful Algal Blooms

Annual Economic Losses from HAB Event



\$5.2B

Coastal economic losses



\$17.8B

Property value losses



43K

Coastal economy jobs lost



\$460M

Commercial & recreational
fishing losses

LIQUID gold | THE WORTH OF WETLANDS

5-10% of the world's land surface are wetlands.

MORE THAN 70% HAVE BEEN DESTROYED OR IMPAIRED.

WETLANDS ARE FOUNDATIONAL



to human health, water quality, drinking water resources, floodwater protection, fish and wildlife habitats, and resilience against the effects of climate change.

UP TO **90%** OF THE SEDIMENTS FROM RUNOFF CAN BE REMOVED IF IT PASSES THROUGH WETLANDS.

Wetlands allow water to filter into groundwater aquifers that are critical to our water supply.

91% of Florida's population gets their drinking water from groundwater.



ONE ACRE OF WETLAND CAN STORE OVER ONE MILLION GALLONS OF FLOOD WATER. WETLANDS HOLD THESE WATERS AND RELEASE THEM GRADUALLY.

MORE THAN **1/3**

of the threatened and endangered species in the United States are found only in wetlands, and more than half rely on wetlands as part of their life cycle or routine habitat.



1/3 WETLANDS CONTAIN ABOUT OF THE WORLD'S CARBON.

When wetlands degrade, the emissions locked in their soils are released.



AMONG THE MOST VULNERABLE AND MOST THREATENED HABITATS



Wetlands in the United States decreased by 53% from the 1780s to the 1980s. These losses were largely due to water diversion and development.



The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reported to Congress in 1989 that 22 states had already lost more than 50% of their wetland acreage.

In 2017, EPA reported to Congress that 32% of our remaining wetlands were in poor biological condition.



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THANK YOU

For more information please visit:
www.conservancy.org



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Wetlands Loss

Julianne Thomas

Senior Environmental Planning Specialist



MIAMI
WATERKEEPER

From Swamp to Suburbia: The true cost of wetland loss

Photo: Joe Raedle/Getty Images

Florida has experienced significant wetland loss, with approximately 44% of its total wetland area disappearing.



Historic Flow





Gulf of Mexico

Kissimmee River

Lake Okeechobee

Florida Bay

Biscayne Bay

Current Flow







2012



2016



2018



2021





Local News

Miami-Dade County issues a water shortage warning to its residents, suggests tips on how to minimize use

SEVERE WEATHER

Heavy storms bring flash flooding, travel disruption in South Florida

The storms extended beyond the roads, causing ripple effects at major airports.

By Jamie Guirola • Published September 8, 2025 • Updated on September 8, 2025 at 11:18 pm

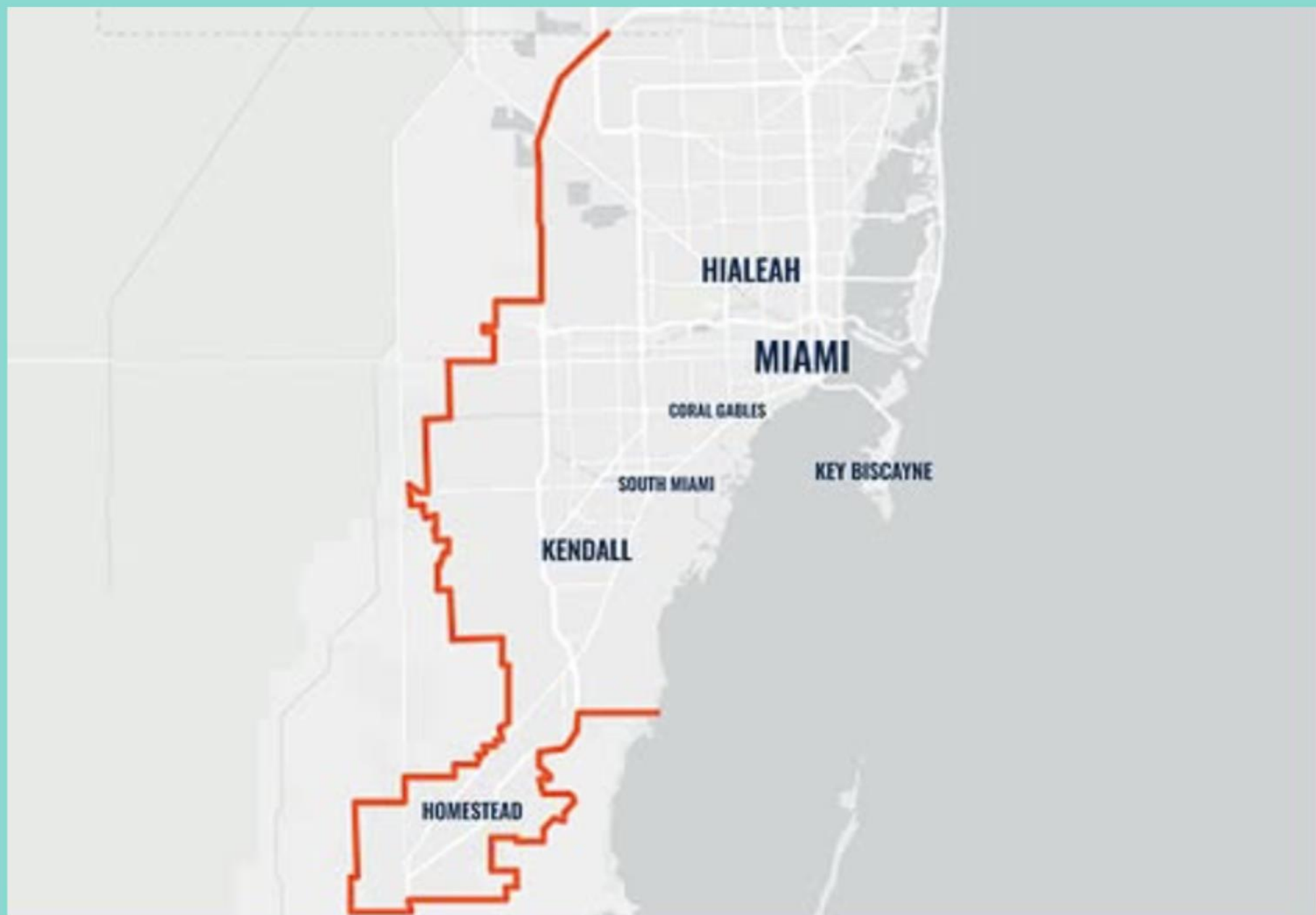
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MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

Wildfires in Broward and Miami-Dade counties cut road visibility and access

By David Goodhue



**ADOPTED 2030 AND 2040
LAND USE PLAN *
FOR MIAMI-DADE COUNTY, FLORIDA**

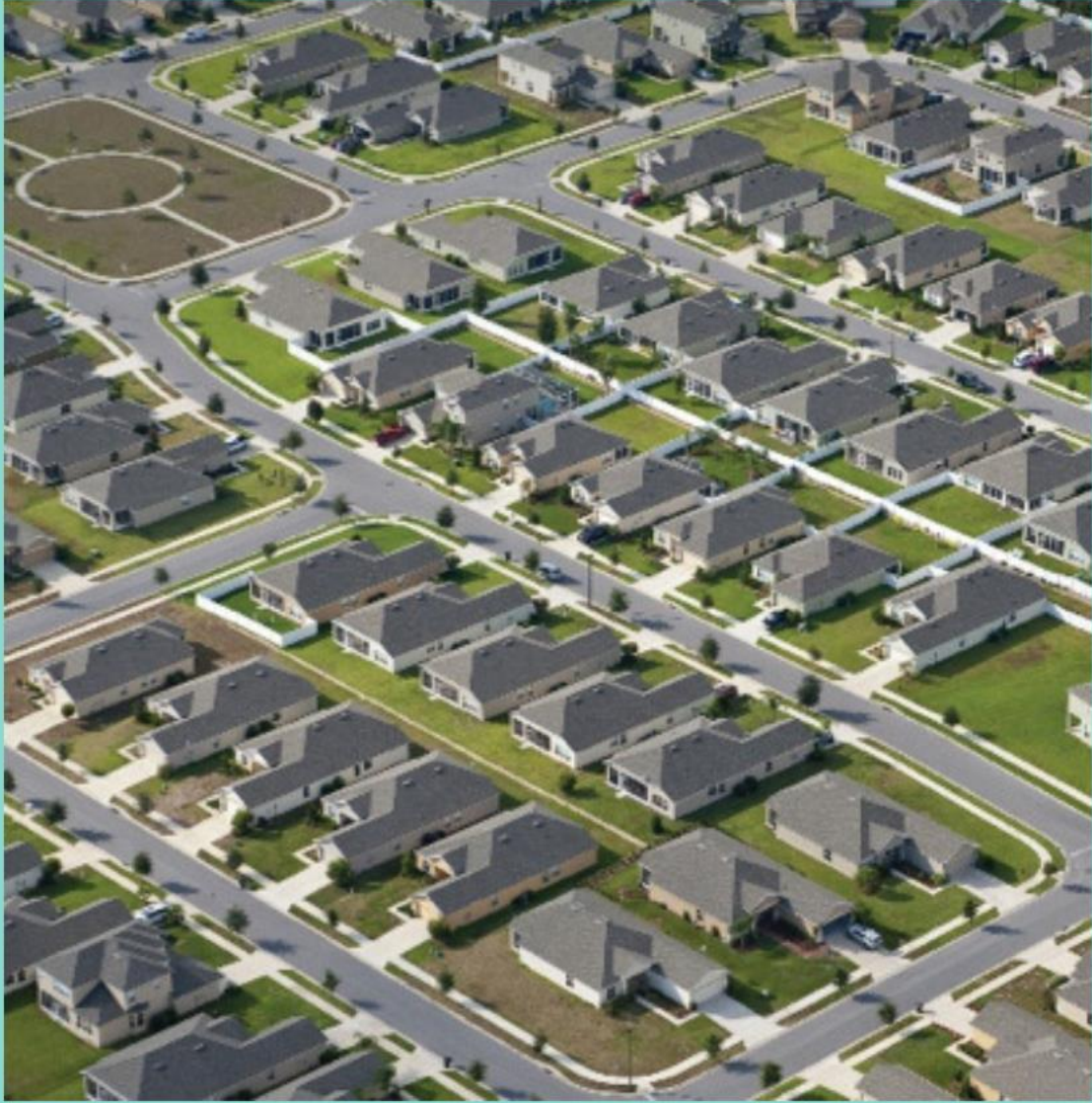
RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITIES



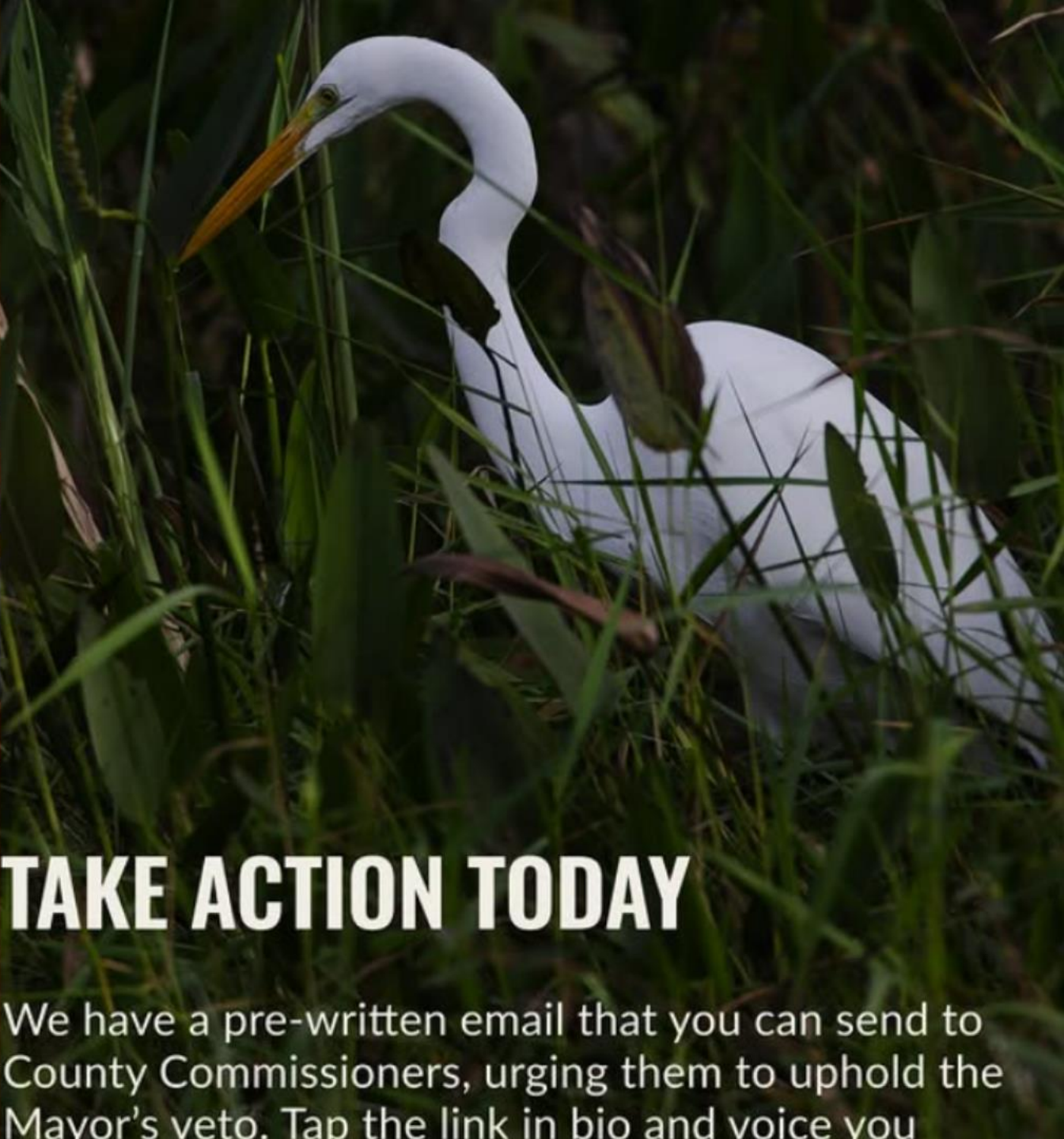
THE PLAN IS NOT A GUARANTEE of any future development or of any specific location of any future development. The Board of County Commissioners and the Board of Planning and Economic Development are not responsible for any future development or for any specific location of any future development. The Board of County Commissioners and the Board of Planning and Economic Development are not responsible for any future development or for any specific location of any future development.

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TAKE ACTION TODAY

We have a pre-written email that you can send to County Commissioners, urging them to uphold the Mayor's veto. Tap the link in bio and voice you



Miami Herald

KEEP MIAMI-DADE'S URBAN DEVELOPMENT BOUNDARY INTACT | OPINION

BY SENATOR ALEXIS CALATAYUD AND DR. RACHEL SILVERSTEIN



WATER WIN

MIAMI-DADE'S URBAN DEVELOPMENT BOUNDARY SAVED

Broad coalition comes together to protect
Miami's future, water, and open land.



MIAMI
WATERKEEPER®



Federal Wetlands Protection

Christina I. Reichert (she/her)
Senior Attorney, Earthjustice

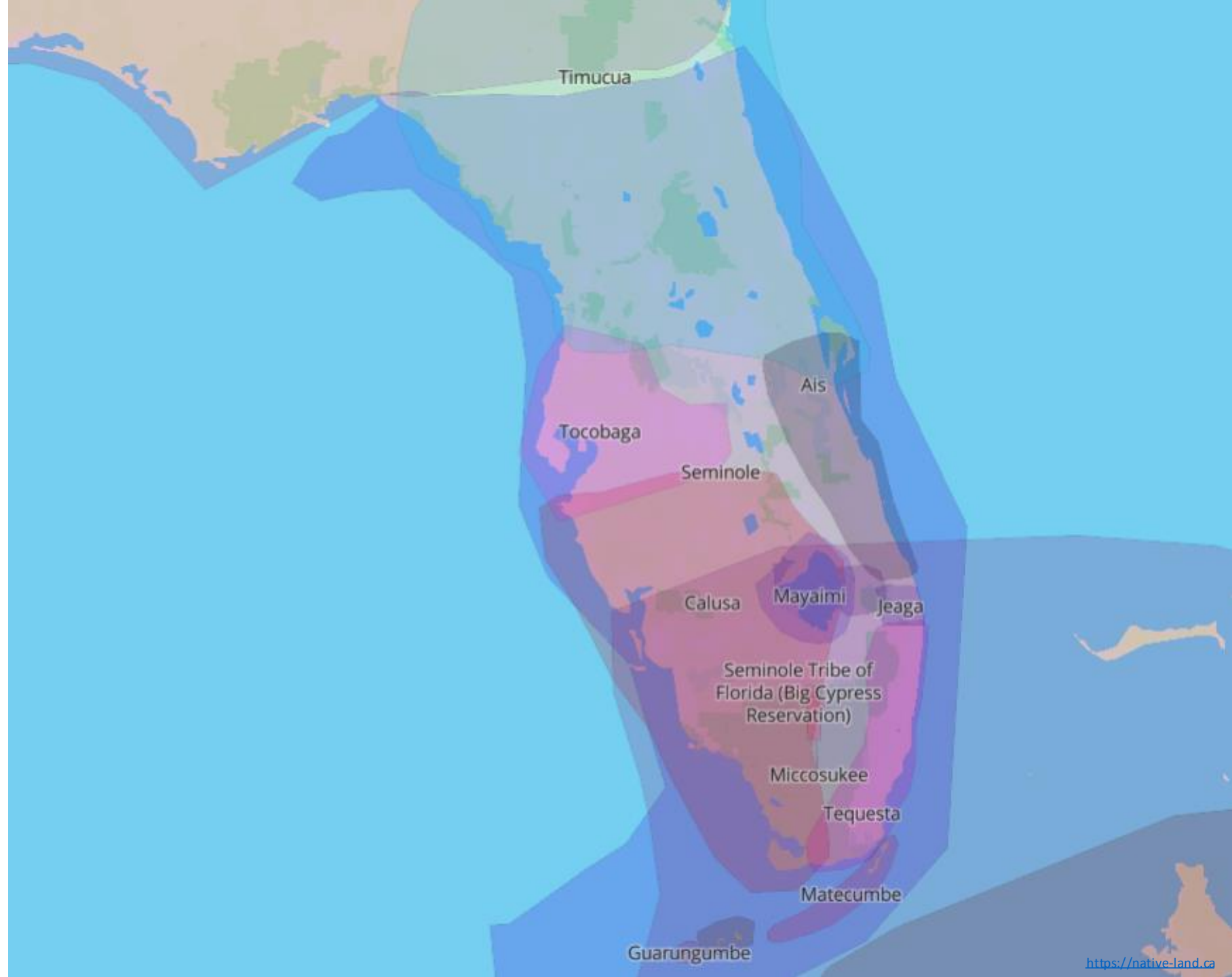
Land

Acknowledgment:

I acknowledge my location in Fort Lauderdale occupies the unceded ancestral lands of the [Miccosukee](#) and [Seminole](#) Tribes and the traditional territory of the Tequesta peoples.

[Learn about our Tribal partnerships work.](#)

[Support LANDBACK.](#)



Plan for Today

- About Earthjustice
- Clean Water Act basics
- Waters of the United States
- Section 404 and State Assumption
- Florida's 404 Assumption Saga



About Earthjustice

Behind nearly every major environmental win,
you'll find Earthjustice



Where We Work



Florida Office



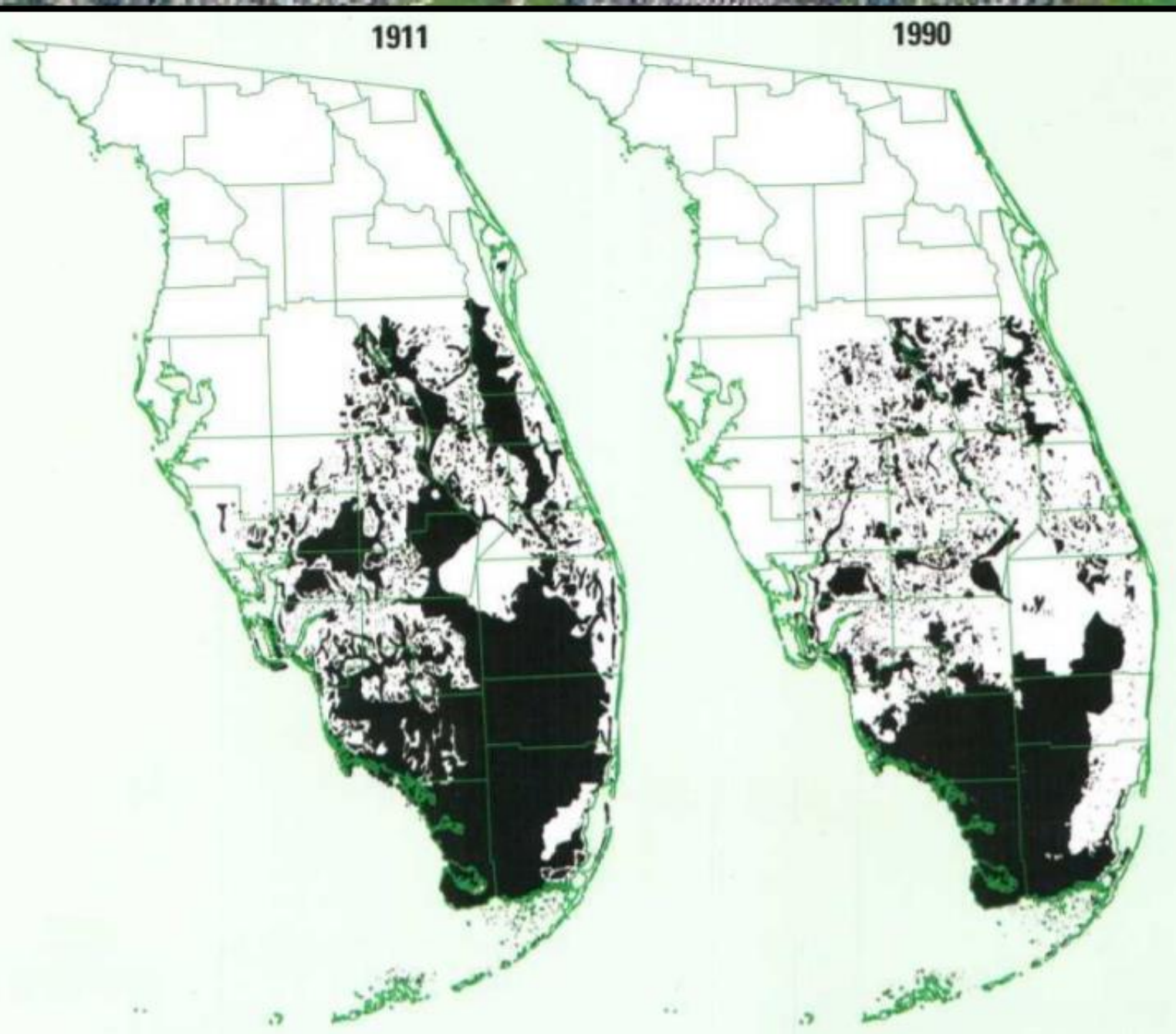
Clean Water Act Basics



Rivers and Harbors Act
(1989)

Federal Water Pollution
Control Act (1948)

Cuyahoga River fires
(1960s)



The extent of the greater Everglades system in South Florida, 1911 and 1990.



Clean Water Act (1972)

“[R]estore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the Nation’s waters,” 33 U.S.C. § 1251

National goal: Discharge of pollutants eliminated by 1985

Interim goal: Water quality that provides for the protection and propagation of fish, shellfish, and wildlife and for recreation by July 1, 1983

Clean Water Act (1972)



<https://www.nrdc.org/stories/clean-water-act-101>

Unless authorized by specific provisions of the CWA, the discharge of any pollutant into our waters is unlawful, 33 U.S.C. § 1311

Pollutant means dredged spoil, solid waste, incinerator residue, sewage, garbage, sewage sludge, munitions, chemical wastes, biological materials, radioactive materials, heat, wrecked or discarded equipment, rock, sand, cellar dirt and industrial, municipal, and agricultural waste discharged into water, 33 U.S.C. § 1362

Point sources are any discernible, confined, and discrete conveyance, ... from which pollutants are or may be discharged, 33 U.S.C. § 1362



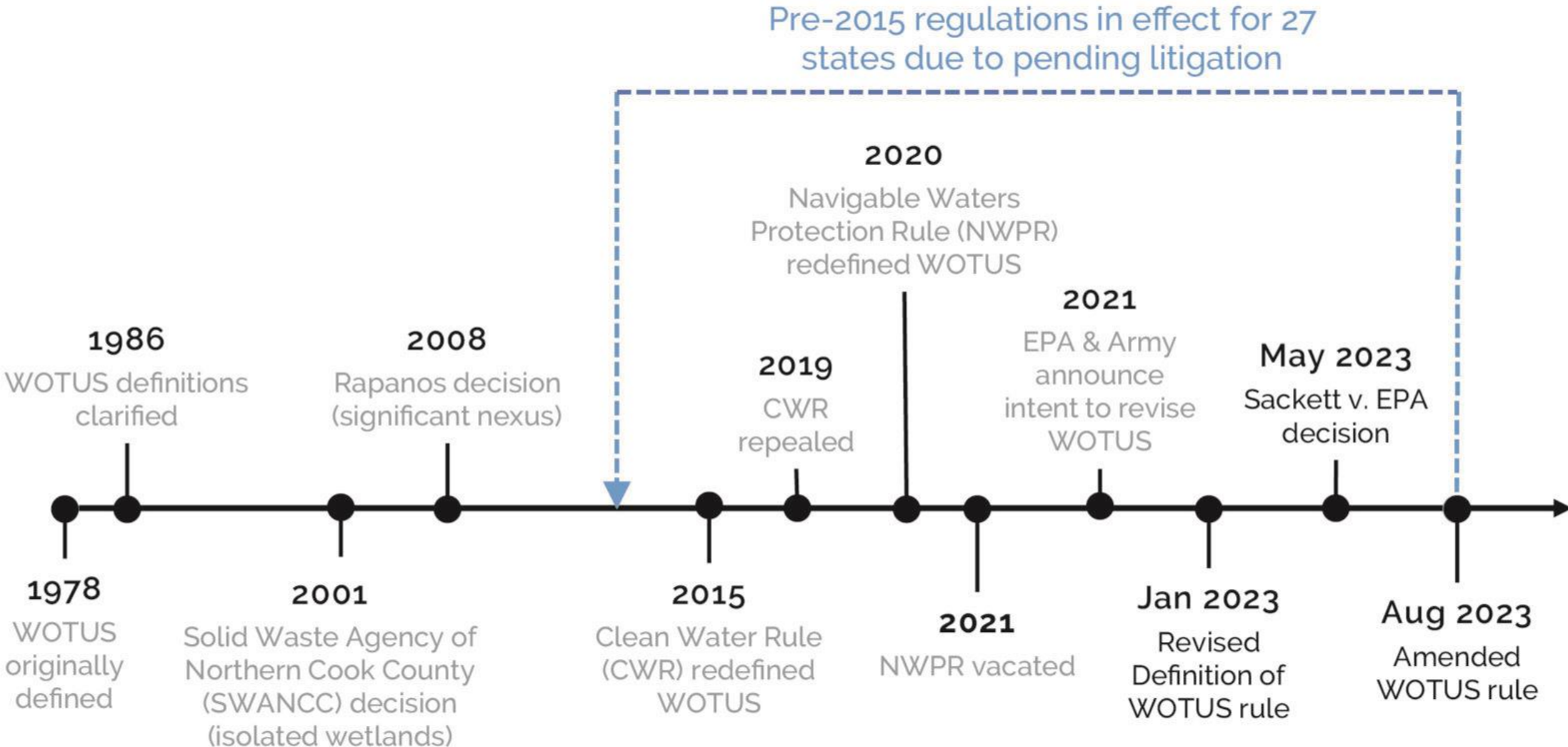
Waters of the United States

Statutory Definition

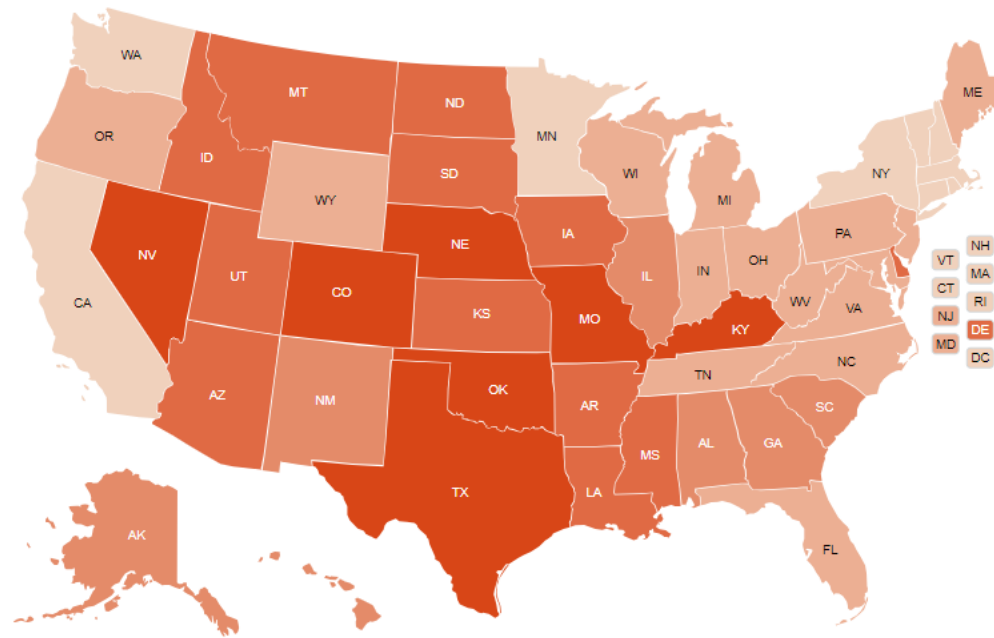
- The term “navigable waters” means the waters of the United States, including the territorial seas, 33 U.S.C. § 1362(7)
- “Waters of the United States” was undefined



The Evolution of Waters of the U.S. (WOTUS) Regulations



Wetlands Most in Danger After the U.S. Supreme Court's *Sackett v. EPA* Ruling



Scale based on state wetland protections and state legislative limits to clean water safeguards

← No or Little Protections for Wetlands

Wetlands At Risk, Some Protections →





Trump's EPA Rulemaking

- Only wetlands that
 - a) hold surface water for the duration of a “wet season” and
 - b) connect to a water body that has water continuously flowing during the wet season

- **More than 80% of wetlands would lose Clean Water Act protections**, according to the government's own analysis.





Section 404 and State Assumption

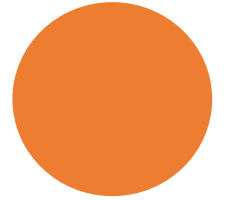
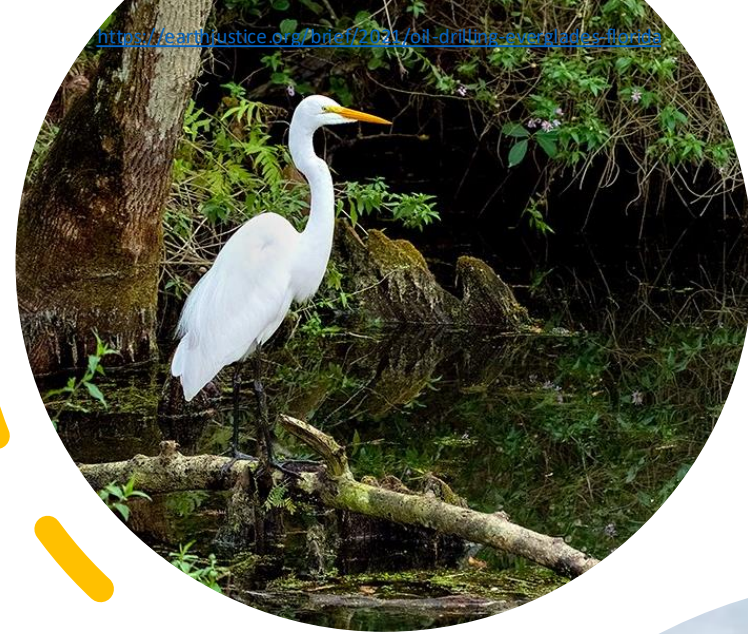
CWA Section 404

- Authorizes the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) to issue permits regulating the discharge of dredged or fill materials into waters of the United States, including wetlands, 33 U.S.C. § 1344(a)
- The Clean Water Act and its implementing regulations, including the 404(b)(1) Guidelines, govern the Corps when it issues permits, 40 C.F.R. pt. 230; 33 C.F.R. pt. 323–24



Intersection with Other Federal Laws

- 404 Permitting is a vector for other protections:
 - National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 U.S.C. § 4321 et seq.
 - Endangered Species Act (ESA), 16 U.S.C. § 1531 et seq.
 - National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), 16 U.S.C. §§ 470a et seq.





State Assumption

- States can apply to administer the dredge and fill permit program within a state's boundaries, excepting those navigable waters retained by the Corps, 33 U.S.C. § 1344(g)(1), (h)(3)–(4); 40 C.F.R. § 233.15(h)
- Any state 404 program be at least as stringent as the federal program, 33 U.S.C. § 1344(h)(1); 40 C.F.R. pt. 233
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approval requires the Corps to suspend issuance of 404 permits for activities covered by the state program, 33 U.S.C. § 1344(h)(2)(A), (4)–(5)
- No more NEPA, ESA consultation, or NHPA consultation
- Three states have assumed, and we are [currently defending our victory vacating](#) EPA's approval of Florida's program



Florida's Assumption Saga

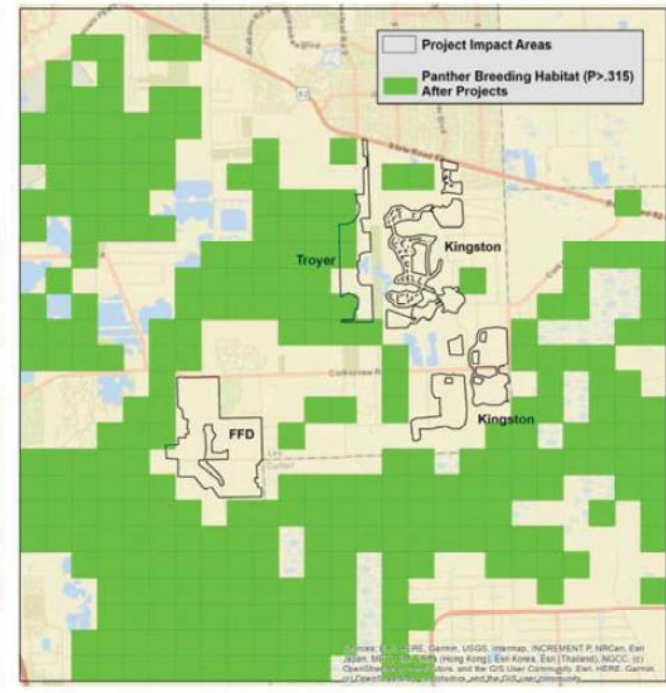
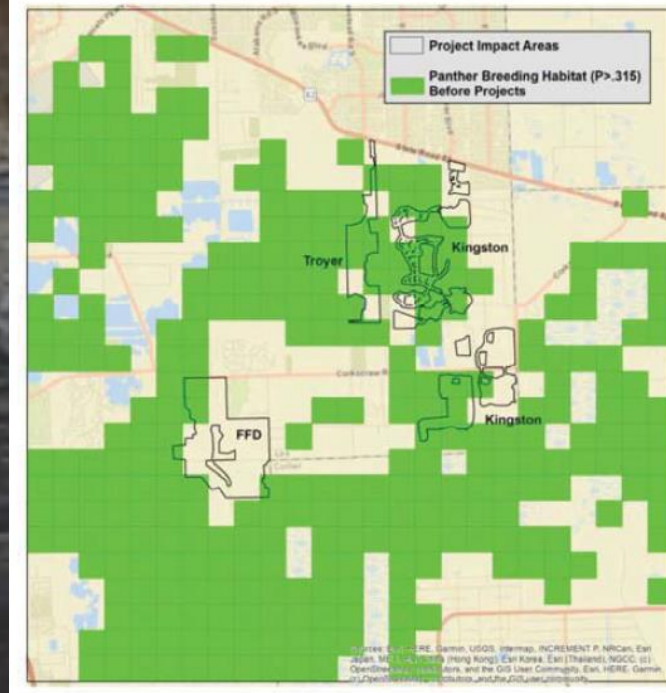
Florida's Assumption of the Section 404 Program

- EPA approved Florida's request in December 2020
- Florida program fell below the federal floor set by the Section 404(b)(1) Guidelines
- Illegal workaround to the federal Endangered Species Act
- We filed suit in January 2021 on behalf of a group of local, state, and national nonprofit organizations




Bellmar

Kingston



Victory!

 **EARTHJUSTICE**
BECAUSE THE EARTH NEEDS A GOOD LAWYER

ABOUT US ▾ OUR WORK ▾ TAKE ACTION ▾ **DONATE**

← **PRESS ROOM**

February 16, 2024

Federal Court Strikes Down EPA Approval of Florida Wetlands Program

Victory — Judge finds EPA and USFWS failed to comply with Endangered Species Act

NATION Endangered Species [Add Topic +](#)

EPA puts Florida panthers at risk, judge finds. Wetlands ruling could have national implications.

[Dinah Voyles Pulver](#), [Chad Gillis](#) and [Steve Patterson](#) USA TODAY NETWORK
Published 12:47 p.m. ET Feb. 20, 2024 | Updated 12:56 p.m. ET Feb. 20, 2024

[f](#) [X](#) [✉](#) [➦](#)



A Florida panther is seen in Sunshine Acres, Florida on May 3, 2021. (Photo: James H./Flickr/cc)

US Court Strikes Down Florida's 'End Run Around the Endangered Species Act'

"Requiring agencies to follow the law is a win for wildlife, protecting habitat and the public alike," said one advocate.

By [JULIA CONLEY](#) Feb 16, 2024

[p](#) [f](#) [t](#) [r](#) [e](#) [s](#) [p](#) [\\$](#)

COMMENTARY

Court ruling stops Florida's sloppy wetlands permitting, saves panthers

Trump-era EPA let Florida do an end run around the Endangered Species Act to aid developers

 **CRAIG PITTMAN**

FEBRUARY 22, 2024 7:00 AM

[X](#) [in](#) [f](#) [✉](#) [🔗](#) [🖨](#)



Where we are now?

- Florida and the Federal agencies appealed the district court's decision
- Fought back the State's attempts to keep the program during appeal
- In March 2026, the appellate court ruled that permits to build in wetlands should stay in the hands of federal regulators rather than the state of Florida.
- Next steps?

Thank You!

Christina I. Reichert
Earthjustice Florida Office
4500 Biscayne Blvd., Ste 201
Miami, FL 33137

(305) 440-5437


 @CIReichert

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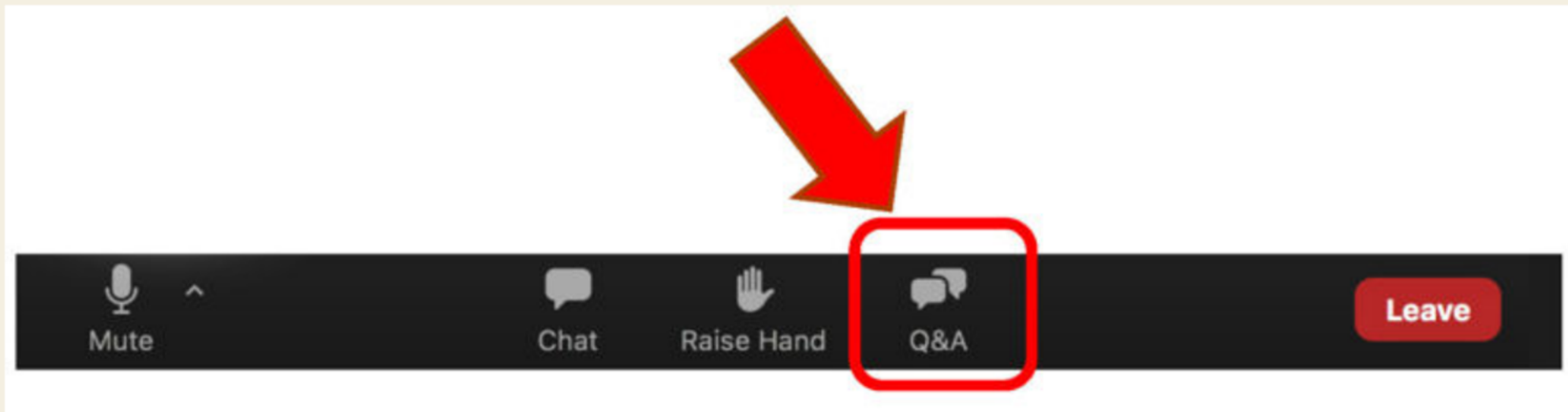
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