



FLORIDA NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY

Po Box 278
Melbourne, FL 32902-0278

March 18, 2022

Governor Ron DeSantis
Executive Office of the Governor
400 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399

SUBJECT: Please Preserve the Integrity of Land Conservation in Florida - Veto SB 2508

Dear Governor DeSantis:

Florida's land conservation programs have long been a model for the entire nation. Senate Bill 2508 threatens to upend our successful approach to land conservation by replacing the science-based, transparent, and accountable Florida Forever program with one that is designed to keep agricultural lands in production rather than to protect sensitive natural resources. The Florida Native Plant Society (FNPS) respectfully requests that you veto SB 2508.

FNPS has been a champion of the Rural and Family Lands Program (RFL) since its inception because productive agricultural lands are a valuable resource, and because many of the ranches and forest lands it has protected have supplemental habitat value for native plants and wildlife, help maintain connectivity within wildlife corridors, and buffer more environmentally sensitive areas. But Florida Forever has been, and should remain, Florida's principal land conservation program.

Proposed Florida Forever projects are evaluated using a rigorous, science-based process and are then vetted by the Acquisition and Restoration Council - a panel of experienced environmental professionals – before being considered for approval by the Governor and Cabinet. Proposed RFL projects do not undergo such review and vetting, and pursue the purchase of a conservation easement rather than fee-title ownership because the entire purpose of the program is to perpetuate the agricultural usage of those lands.

SB 2508 would expand RFL to allow fee-title purchases, without establishing a rationale for why the state should purchase a fee-title interest in agricultural land. It would also allow the owner of lands protected under an RFL easement to establish a mitigation bank on their property. In other words, a landowner could be paid for an RFL conservation easement that protects their land from development, and then establish a for-profit mitigation bank that would pay them for protecting their land from development – AGAIN! Why should Florida pay to keep land in agriculture and then acquiesce when the landowner takes the land out of production to go into the mitigation banking business? That is a recipe for failure at best, and corruption at worst. RFL has been starved of funding for the last several years, and FNPS is pleased the legislature allocated significant funding for RFL during the 2022 session. RFL is a wonderful complement

Preserving, conserving and restoring the native plants and native plant communities of Florida

to the Florida Forever Program; but it is not a replacement. The only thing Florida Forever needs to remain successful is proper funding.

SB 2508 would also give utilities expedited review of wetland permits if the project serves a “public purpose” without defining what qualifies as a public purpose. This creates a “fox guarding the henhouse” protection standard for impacts to wetlands. It would also give priority to the water needs of Big Sugar over those of south Florida residents. SB 2508 would ensure that when water is in short supply, and someone needs to make do with less, it will not be Big Sugar or other agricultural interests. Why shouldn’t water conservation require a shared sacrifice?

In summary, SB 2508 is an assault on the principles that have made land conservation in Florida such a success. It also threatens important elements of Everglades restoration and provides the utility industry with a “special exception” to wetland permitting rules. FNPS urges you to veto SB 2508. Thank you for considering our concerns.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'BB', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Bonnie Basham, President
Florida Native Plant Society