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Progress Report



August 2003

Report No. 03-43

Forestry Program Could Achieve Savings by Implementing OPPAGA Recommendations

at a glance

The Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services has not implemented the recommendations made in our August 2001 review of the Forest and Resource Protection Program. We again recommend that

- the program could generate an estimated \$750,000 annually in recreation activity fees by providing local state forest managers greater autonomy;
- the program could save Florida's taxpayers over \$1 million annually by directing private forestland owners to use the federally funded Forest Stewardship Program to create land management plans; and
- the Legislature could help improve privately owned forestland management practices and reduce program costs by modifying the county fire protection assessment, which has remained unchanged since 1935.

Scope

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of the actions taken in response to the findings and recommendations included in our 2001 justification review of the Forest and Resource Protection Program administered by the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.^{1,2}

Background

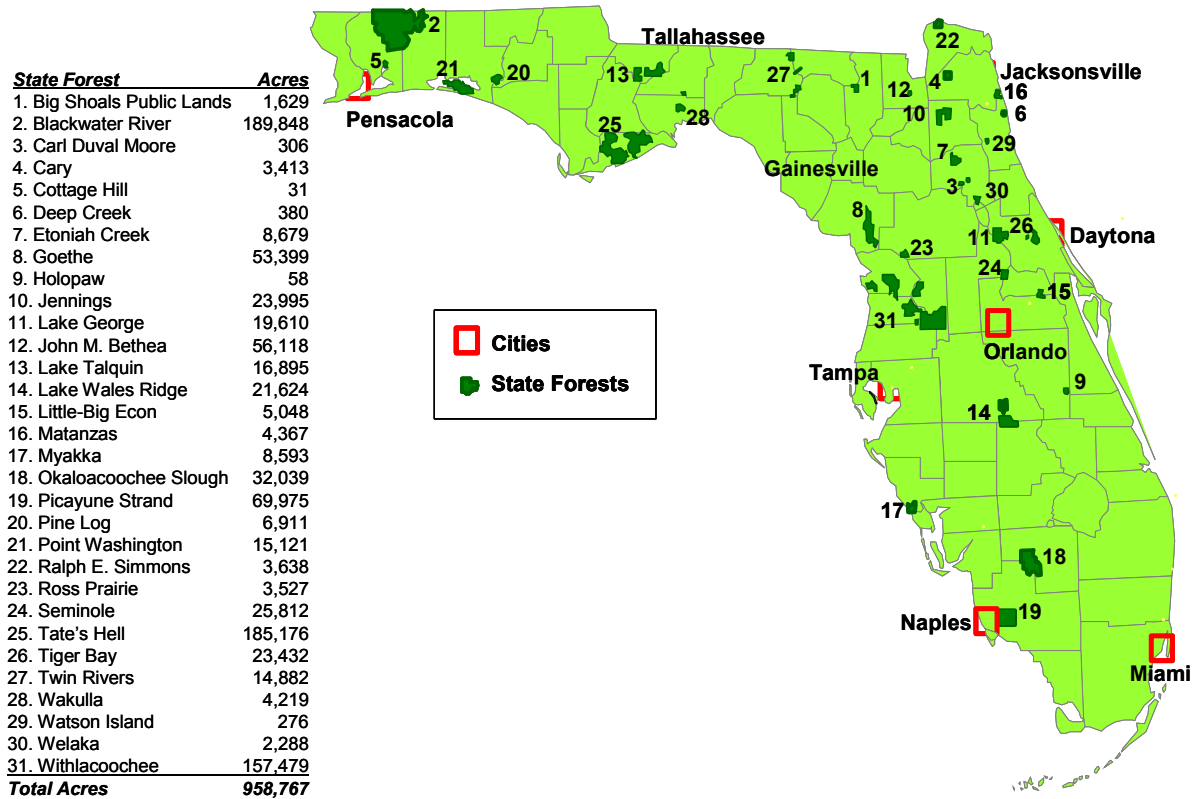
The mission of the Forest and Resource Protection Program is to protect and manage Florida's forest resources to assure these resources will be available for future generations. The two major services provided by the program are forestland management and protection from wildfires. As shown in Exhibit 1, the program manages 31 state forests that are located throughout Florida. In addition to the over 958,000 acres of state forestland, the program has the lead role in managing 518,385 acres of forestland owned by other state entities. It also provides forestland management services to private landowners.

The program's forest protection services include activities to protect over 34 million acres of state wildlands from fire. The program maintains crews in 15 districts located throughout the state to fight wildfires and perform fire prevention activities such as plowing firelines and conducting prescribed burns.

¹ Section 11.51(6), *F.S.*

² *Justification Review: Forest Protection Program Meets Most Standards: Could Achieve Further Savings*, OPPAGA [Report No. 01-36](#), August 2001.

Exhibit 1
Florida Has 31 State Forests



Source: Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, July 22, 2003.

The Legislature appropriated the program \$89.5 million and 1,232.5 staff positions for Fiscal Year 2003-04. Approximately \$45.8 million or 51% of the program funding is from Florida's general revenue fund. Various trust funds, including Conservation and Recreation Lands, Florida Forever, Incidental, and the Contracts and Grants Trust Fund provide the remaining \$43.7 million.

The program is organized into four bureaus.

- The Bureau of Forest Management provides technical direction and management regarding the state-owned forestlands and administers various programs to assist private landowners, such as the federal Forest Stewardship Program.³

- The Bureau of Forest Protection administers programs relating to protecting Florida's 34 million acres of wildlands from fire and provides statewide emergency response assistance.
- The Bureau of Field Operations implements the policies and procedures prescribed by the Forest Management and Forest Protection bureaus. This bureau is directly responsible for statewide operational activities and public lands management. Field operations are divided among 15 forestry centers and districts.
- The Bureau of Forest Resource Planning and Support Services provides planning, construction, information technology, telecommunications and equipment for the program.

³ The Forest Stewardship Program is a nationwide program sponsored by the U.S. Forest Service to encourage forest landowners to practice multiple use management.

Prior Findings

Our 2001 review determined that the program was effectively accomplishing its mission to protect and manage Florida's forest resources to assure these resources will be available for future generations. However, we identified several areas to improve accountability, increase revenues, and reduce costs.

Improvements to performance measures would enhance accountability

Our prior review determined that the program's legislative performance measures should be modified to strengthen accountability. We recommended four changes to the measures.⁴

The program could increase revenues by providing local state forest managers greater autonomy in charging fees

Our prior review determined that providing state forest managers more discretion over local fees charged for recreation activities would generate an estimated \$750,000 in revenue. This estimated increase was based on a U.S. General Accounting Office study that examined the impact of a similar initiative in federal lands, which authorized managers to modify recreation fees and retain a portion of these new fees to meet local site needs; the study found the initiative resulted in an almost doubling of revenues, with no adverse impact on visitation. We recommended that the department implement a similar program at the state level.

The program could save over \$1 million per year by promoting use of the federally funded Forest Stewardship Program

Our prior review found that land management services could be provided to private landowners through the federally funded Forest Stewardship Program instead of from state funding sources.

⁴ Specifically, we recommended that: (1) the measure "Number of acres burned through prescribed burning" be replaced with a measure that captures the percentage of acres treated for wildfire prevention and management; (2) a new measure be adopted to show the number of acres treated for wildfire prevention and management in urban interface areas; (3) a new measure be adopted to show the percentage of land management costs funded from state forest activities; and (4) a new measure be adopted to show the percentage of forest land with certified management plans.

In addition to saving Florida taxpayers over \$1 million per year, promoting participation in the federal Forest Stewardship Program could help the program achieve its mission. The federal program promotes sound forest management practices by identifying strategies to sustain forest health and vigor and encourages activities such as prescribed burns that reduce the number and severity of wildfires and the associated firefighting costs. The federal program develops land management plans to any non-industrial private forest landowner at no cost. We recommended that private landowners be directed to use land management services provided through the federally funded program.

Stronger incentives to implement forest land management practices may reduce wildfires

Our prior review found that only 10% of the forest landowners with an approved land management plan had implemented their plan. Better implementation could reduce wildfire risks and costs by encouraging landowners to conduct prescribed burns. Currently, the state fire protection assessment does not provide an incentive to implement the plans. The current assessment, which has remained unchanged since 1935, assesses counties a fee of 3 cents per acre for forested lands. While the fee initially largely covered the program's costs, it now pays a small fraction of these expenses.

The state could provide an incentive to develop and implement land management plans by increasing the fee to 10 cents per acre for forestland that is not managed under a certified Forest Stewardship plan; the fee could be retained at the current rate for land that is managed under these guidelines. This change to s. 125.27, *Florida Statutes*, would initially increase fee revenues by \$1.2 million annually.

Structural firefighting course requirement was unneeded

In our prior review we reported that the state could save \$175,000 annually by eliminating the requirement to include the basic volunteer structural fire training course in its wildfire training course. The department indicated that this training was not relevant to its firefighters because they were not equipped or authorized to

enter burning structures. We recommended that the Legislature revise s. 590.02(e), *Florida Statutes*, to eliminate the requirement that program staff complete a structural firefighting course.

Current Status _____

The program has not implemented the recommendations from our prior report.

Changes to legislative performance measures have not been made

The program has not implemented our recommendation to change the program's legislative performance measures. As an alternative, the program could adopt these measures internally for use by management and to report to the Legislature when requested.

Local recreation fees have not been modified

The program has not implemented this recommendation, asserting recreation program facilities and resources can be more efficiently and effectively managed through centralized policies that consider statewide priorities. However, we continue to believe that allowing local land managers more discretion over local recreation fees would help better meet the needs of the public while increasing state revenues.

State funding for land management plans continues

The program has not implemented our recommendation to discontinue state funding for land management plan development and to instead direct landowners to the federal program. The department asserts that it would be a disservice to Florida forest landowners and that

some state funding still would be needed to certify that federal plans had been implemented. However, we continue to believe that our recommendation would allow the program to continue to provide the same services to Florida's forest landowners. Federal Forest Stewardship plans provide planning services and technical advice concerning timber production and/or hunting, while also providing recommendations regarding sound forest management.

County fire suppression fee unchanged

The Legislature has not revised s. 125.27, *Florida Statutes*, to modify the county fire suppression fee. The department reported that as a result of an aggressive campaign to promote sound forest management, it attained a 93% increase in the number of management plans written for forest landowners in Fiscal Year 2001-02. While we commend the increased number of land management plans written for forest landowners, we continue to recommend that the county fire suppression fee be increased for forestlands that are not certified under the federal Forest Stewardship Program. The Legislature could use the resulting additional revenues to promote implementation of the plans, which could help reduce wildfire risks and costs.

Structural firefighting course continues

At the time of our prior review, the program identified this as an area where cost savings could be realized without sacrificing program effectiveness. However, the program has since determined that the structural firefighting requirement is important for its firefighters who work in partnership in handling wildfire with local fire departments in wildland urban interfaces.

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Project supervised by Debbie Gilreath (850/487-9278)

Project conducted by Chuck Hefren (850/487-9249)

Gary R. VanLandingham, OPPAGA Interim Director