



The Florida Legislature

OFFICE OF PROGRAM POLICY ANALYSIS AND GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY



SUNSET MEMORANDUM

Report No. 07-S15

Department of Environmental Protection, Recreational Programs, Options for Legislative Consideration

November 16, 2007

As provided by The Florida Government Accountability Act, the Legislature directed OPPAGA to examine the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP).¹ This memo is part of a series that reviews the department's operations, and focuses on the agency's recreational programs and their purpose, organization, responsibilities, resources, and performance. The memo also offers options for legislative consideration.

OPPAGA developed seven policy options for the Legislature to consider regarding DEP's recreational activities. These options include continuing to purchase new recreational properties using annual Florida Forever Program funds (Option 1); discontinuing acquisition of new recreational properties for one year (Option 2); permanently discontinuing acquisition of new recreational properties (Option 3); limiting initial development at new recreational properties to basic "starter kits" (Option 4); aggressively seeking to maximize revenue at recreational properties by increasing admission and activity fees and expanding revenue producing services (Option 5); closing some recreational properties that have low visitation, are costly to maintain, and/or have low recreation, cultural, or environmental value (Option 6); and establishing a foundation board to raise private philanthropic funds for state parks and other recreational properties (Option 7). For each option, we describe the advantages and disadvantages.

¹ Sections [11.901](#)-11.920, *F.S.*

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Purpose, Organization, and Responsibilities

The purpose of the Department of Environmental Protection's recreational programs is to anticipate and meet the outdoor recreation needs of the state's residents and visitors, to ensure that an adequate natural resource base is maintained to accommodate future demands and preserve a quality environment, and to preserve, enhance, and restore the natural functions of marine and estuarine environments.

The agency's three major recreational programs are State Park Operations, the Office of Greenways and Trails, and the Office of Coastal and Aquatic Managed Areas.

- **State Park Operations** manages 161 state parks encompassing 698,648 acres (see Appendix A for a statewide map of the park system). Staff performs various activities, including managing areas and facilities for outdoor recreation activities such as camping, swimming, picnicking, and hiking. Staff also provides historical interpretation by restoring historic features, offering living history programs and tours, and displaying printed materials at state parks.
- **Office of Greenways and Trails** works with local governments, developers, private landowners and state and federal agencies to help establish the statewide system of greenways and trails. Currently, 769,603 acres are designated as part of the state's greenways and trails system. The office also administers the Florida Greenways and Trails Designation Program, which formally defines the statewide system by designating trails on public and private lands. In addition, the office manages several state trails throughout Florida and the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway, a 110-mile long conservation and recreation corridor spanning Putnam, Marion, Citrus and Levy counties in north central Florida.
- **Office of Coastal and Aquatic Managed Areas** provides resource management for state owned submerged lands and coastal uplands. This activity includes restoring degraded resources through prescribed fires, invasive plant control, habitat restoration, restoring watershed function, and providing technical assistance for the planning and permitting process. The office manages the Florida Aquatic Preserves, the State Buffer Preserves, the national Estuarine Research Reserves, and the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. The office manages 57 sites totaling over five million acres of state submerged lands and coastal uplands that serve as native habitat for wildlife. Buffer preserves also provide opportunities for outdoor recreation activities such as hiking, horseback riding, bicycling, and wildlife observation.

Moreover, through the Florida Forever Program, the state's land acquisition initiative, the state park system receives \$4.5 million per year to purchase in-holdings and additions and the Office of Greenways and Trails receives \$4.5 million annually for trail development. In addition to these land acquisitions, DEP's recreational programs may also receive additional land for parks, trails, and coastal areas through Florida Forever acquisitions facilitated by the Acquisition and Restoration Council.² Staff also coordinates with the Division of State Lands to represent the agency's interests in negotiations and to ensure the timely matching of available money with negotiated projects. Once properties are under program management jurisdiction, planning staff assumes land administration responsibility.

² The Acquisition and Restoration Council has sole responsibility for evaluating, selecting, and ranking state land acquisition projects for the Florida Forever program. The council annually reviews all Florida Forever acquisition proposals, decides which proposals should receive further evaluation, determines the final project boundaries, and groups Florida Forever projects.

Resources

The Legislature appropriated \$188.3 million in trust funds and general revenue and 1,202.5 positions to the agency's recreational programs for Fiscal Year 2007-08 (see Exhibit 1).³ Nearly 80% of this funding (\$149.8 million) was for State Park Operations, including fixed capital outlay costs.

Most funding is from trust funds, including the Land Acquisition Trust Fund, Conservation and Recreation Lands (CARL) Trust Fund, the Grants and Donations Trust Fund and State Park Trust Fund. Funds from documentary stamps affixed to deeds in transfers of real property support the Land Acquisition Trust Fund; in this way, Floridians and part-time residents who buy land or houses pay for the acquisition and development of state park land, as well as subsidize park operating costs. Funds deposited in the State Park Trust Fund are generated from state park user fees, such as entrance fees, rental fees, and concession sales.

Exhibit 1

The Legislature Appropriated \$188.3 Million to DEP Recreational Programs for Fiscal Year 2007-08

Program	General Revenue	Trust Funds	Total	FTE
State Park Operations	\$0	\$149,790,323	\$149,790,323	1,054.5
Office of Greenways and Trails	0	19,197,752	19,197,752	46.0
Office of Coastal and Aquatic Managed Areas	3,280,040	15,999,010	19,279,050	102.0
Total Funds	\$3,280,040	\$184,987,085	\$188,267,125	1,202.5

Source: 2007 General Appropriations Acts.

Performance

Legislative outcome measures demonstrate that the Department of Environmental Protection's recreational programs did not meet performance standards for most measures. Additionally, ongoing issues related to state park funding sufficiency and identification of new ways to produce revenue have affected the park system.

DEP's recreational programs collectively achieved established standards for two of eight legislatively mandated outcome measures in Fiscal Year 2006-07 (measures achieving established standards are highlighted in Exhibit 2). Specifically, state parks under the department's management experienced a significant increase in visitors, with 19.5 million people in Fiscal Year 2006-07. This represented a 7.3% increase in visitors from the prior year, exceeding the approved standard of a 1.3% increase in visitation. The Office of Coastal and Aquatic Managed Areas greatly exceeded its standard for enhancing or restoring degraded areas in the National Estuarine Research Reserves. The percentage change in the number of areas improved was 250%, compared to the standard of a 1% increase.

However, the recreational programs did not meet standards for six of eight outcome measures. For example, state park acreage declined by 3.8% in Fiscal Year 2006-07 compared to the performance goal of a 1% increase; the department attributed this decline to the transfer of the 32,327-acre Tosahatchee State Park to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Moreover, while the number of visitors to state parks increased

³ The park system is also supported by 6,000 volunteers that assist with park management activities. In addition, there are currently more than 80 Citizen Support Organizations supporting state parks throughout the state by volunteering, educating visitors, hosting events and raising funds for specific park projects.

significantly, visitors at coastal and aquatic areas declined by nearly 1%. According to the department, the decrease was due to the Apalachicola visitor center being closed for hurricane-related repairs.

In addition, the program areas experienced difficulty in restoring and maintaining state parks and in controlling invasive species on greenways and trails and in coastal and aquatic areas. The number of state park acres restored or maintained in their native state fell by 17% during the fiscal year, in contrast to the performance standard of a 2% increase. The percentage of managed acres with controlled invasive or undesirable species was 25%, significantly below the approved standard of 35%. Similarly, the amount of managed lands infested by invasive plants grew by 17%, compared to the standard of only a 1% increase.

Exhibit 2

In Fiscal Year 2006-07, DEP's Recreational Programs Did Not Meet Standards for Most Performance Measures

	Fiscal Year 2006-07	
	Actual Performance	Standard
State Park Operations		
Percentage change in state park acres from the prior fiscal year	-3.8%	1.0%
Percentage change in the number of state parks acres restored or maintained in native state from the prior fiscal year	-17.0%	2.0%
Percentage increase in the number of visitors from the prior fiscal year	7.3%	1.3%
Office of Greenways and Trails		
Percentage of managed acres with invasive or undesirable species controlled	25.0%	35.0%
Percentage change in the number of acres designated as part of the statewide system of greenways and trails from those so designated in the previous year	0.2%	1.5%
Office of Coastal and Aquatic Managed Areas		
Percentage change in the number of degraded areas in National Estuarine Research Reserves enhanced or restored from those enhanced or restored in the previous fiscal year	250.0%	1.0%
Percentage change of managed lands infested by invasive plants	17%	1%
Percentage increase in number of visitors	-0.74%	3%

Source: The Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

The program areas also reported that they did not achieve legislative standards for these measures for a variety of reasons, including natural disasters, unexpected invasive plant infestations, and lack of staff. For example, efforts to restore and maintain parks in their native state were hampered by statewide droughts and wildfires that precluded the normal level of prescribed burning. The department also reported a substantial increase in a particular exotic plant in one coastal/aquatic area that had not previously proved problematic and its ability to respond to this infestation was constrained by available funding.

An ongoing issue has been state park funding sufficiency and identifying ways to produce more self-generated income and expand revenue sources. Prior evaluations have recommended options for addressing this concern, including delaying new park development, establishing formal guidelines for determining priority projects, increasing state park fees, expanding overnight accommodations at state parks, and increasing the use of honor boxes to collect park entrance fees.⁴

⁴ See previous OPPAGA reports: *Justification Review: Recreation and Parks Program*, Department of Environmental Protection, Report No. 00-28, December 2000; and *Progress Report: Recreation and Parks Program Implements Few Cost Saving and Revenue Recommendations*, Report No. 02-41, July 2002.

Admission fees to state parks were raised in 2004 and provide about half of the state park operating budget, with various trust funds covering the remaining amount. The department also increased the number of cabins available for rental in parks, although this remains substantially lower than in other states such as Georgia. As state park attendance increases and its infrastructure ages, it has experienced a growing capital improvements backlog such as park refurbishments, facility repairs, and renovations to achieve ADA compliance. For Fiscal Year 2007-08, the department estimates that the state park system has \$283.3 million in capital improvement needs, while \$20 million in funds were available for fixed capital outlay projects.

To explore options for addressing these concerns, in 2006 DEP hired a consulting firm to assess the potential for creating a statewide foundation to conduct fundraising for state parks.⁵ The study identified several positive factors about the state park system, including that 85% of study participants had a positive image of Florida's parks. However, the review also identified numerous challenges, including the perceptions of participants that

- most state residents and visitors are largely unaware of parks other than those located in their home communities;
- only those who cannot afford other recreational opportunities utilize the state parks to any considerable extent; and
- receipt of significant private philanthropic dollars could result in reduced state funding.

The study recommended the creation of an independent volunteer foundation board to raise funds to supplement its annual legislative appropriation. The foundation board, in consultation with department staff, would make decisions about how these supplemental funds are managed, expended, and invested. The department has not yet decided to support the creation of a foundation, but continues to seek feedback from the public regarding this option.

Options for Legislative Consideration

Florida's park system is one of the largest in the country, with 161 parks encompassing nearly 700,000 acres. In Fiscal Year 2006-07, the state's parks received 19.5 million visitors, with the Department of Environmental Protection estimating the economic impact of these visits at nearly \$900 million. During the same period, an estimated additional 3 million visitors used the Florida Trail System, and 436,944 visited the state's coastal and aquatic managed areas. Funding for the state's park system and its operations makes up nearly 80% of the annual legislative appropriation for the state's recreational programs.

While the state's park system is well regarded nationally, it is facing a growing capital improvement backlog, and purchasing new recreational property, managing ongoing park operations, and keeping up with visitor increases is increasingly expensive. Relatively few parks are self-supporting, and some have low visitation and revenues. These funding concerns have been an ongoing issue and should be considered as the Legislature makes decisions about statewide land acquisition, management, and recreational use policies.

Exhibit 4 below identifies seven policy options for the Legislature to consider in managing these costs. These options include continuing to purchase new recreational properties using annual Florida Forever Program funds (Option 1); discontinuing acquisition of new recreational properties for one

⁵ *A Special Study and Concept Report for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection Division of Recreation and Parks*, Ketchum, December 2006.

year (Option 2); permanently discontinuing acquisition of new recreational properties (Option 3); limiting initial development at new recreational properties to basic “starter kits” (Option 4); aggressively seeking to maximize revenue at recreational properties by increasing admission and activity fees and expanding revenue producing services (Option 5); closing some recreational properties that have low visitation, are costly to maintain, and/or have low recreation, cultural, or environmental value (Option 6); and establishing a foundation board to raise private philanthropic funds for state parks and other recreational properties (Option 7). The exhibit outlines the policy options and describes the advantages and disadvantages associated with each option.

Exhibit 4

The Legislature Could Consider Seven Options to Modify the State Recreational System

Option	Advantages	Disadvantages
Option 1 - Continue to Acquire New Recreational Properties		
Continue to purchase new recreational properties using annual Florida Forever Program funds (\$9 million plus other land acquisitions from Acquisition and Restoration Council efforts).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitates the continued acquisition of new recreational properties, which helps to ensure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> growth in recreational opportunities for Florida's citizens and visitors and preservation, interpretation, and restoration of the state's natural and cultural resources. May result in long-term savings because purchasing land now may avoid paying a higher price for land in the future. Based on department estimates, may result in significant economic impact (e.g., the department estimated that Fiscal Year 2006-07 state park visitation resulted in a \$900 million economic impact). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires expenditure of state funds, including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> acquisition expenses and related debt obligation; park development expenses; and long-term management costs. May experience opposition from private recreational enterprises, which may perceive new recreational properties as competition.
Option 2 – Delay Acquisition of New Recreational Properties		
Discontinue acquisition of new recreational properties for one year.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eliminates state debt obligation, acquisition-related expenses, and management costs for one year. Allows time to make improvements, including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> establishing formal guidelines for determining priority recreational property development projects; using funds to address capital project backlog in lieu of land acquisition; and developing a strategic marketing plan to help improve underperforming recreational properties. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New recreational properties would not be acquired for one-year. Some currently available land may not be subsequently available for purchase or price may increase after hiatus. May negatively affect the state's preservation, interpretation, and restoration of natural and cultural resources. Based on department estimates, may result in reduction in overall economic impact of the state recreational system.
Option 3 - Discontinue Acquisition of New Recreational Properties		
Discontinue acquisition of new recreational properties.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduces long-term state debt obligation, acquisition-related expenses, and management costs. Would enable agency staff to concentrate on the operation and management of existing recreational properties and to address capital project backlog. Department staff that performs land acquisition tasks could be reduced or redirected. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New recreational properties would not be acquired, which would limit future recreational areas available to citizens and visitors. May negatively affect the state's preservation, interpretation, and restoration of natural and cultural resources. Based on department estimates, may result in reduction in overall economic impact of the state recreational system.
Option 4 - Limit Development of New Recreational Properties		
Limit initial development at new recreational properties to basic "starter kits," which include a paved road, a large picnic shelter, and a temporary restroom.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helps controls development costs, as starter kits are relatively inexpensive (\$50,000). Would allow new recreational properties to remain in its natural state while being accessible to the public. Allows time to determine if the level of new recreational property usage is sufficient to warrant construction of more permanent facilities. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> High visitation would indicate the need for additional infrastructure, such as visitor centers. Low visitation would indicate that no further development is warranted at this time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of services beyond the starter kits may negatively affect attendance at new recreational properties, especially in high population or tourism areas. Lower attendance due to lack of services would diminish overall revenues.

Option	Advantages	Disadvantages
Option 5 - Aggressively Seek to Maximize Revenue at Recreational Properties by Increasing Admission and Activity Fees and Expanding Revenue Producing Services		
Take steps to make the state recreational system more self-supporting by increasing entrance fees and expanding revenue producing services such as camping, cabins, and private concessions. Install honor boxes in locations throughout the statewide trail system and at parks that currently do not have admission fees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Would increase recreational properties' self-generated revenue, which would help move them toward self-sufficiency and provide more funds for management and capital improvements. If admission fees were increased at most popular recreational properties, visitors may be diverted to other less popular areas, which would help prevent overuse and damage to areas with high levels of visitation and increase the use of parks that have been historically underused. Would not require a statutory change, as current law allows recreational properties to charge fees but does not specify fee amounts. Therefore, it is within the department's current authority to set fees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher fees may reduce overall visitation, particularly among lower-income persons that studies have identified as a primary user of park recreation services. Lower attendance could diminish overall revenues. Additional commercial development of recreational properties for camping, cabins, and services could alter preservation of some recreational properties. May experience opposition from private recreational enterprises, which may perceive new recreational properties as competition.
Option 6 –Close Some Recreational Properties		
<p>Close recreational properties that have low visitation, are costly to maintain, and/or have relatively low cultural, historical, or environmental value. Affected properties could be</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> transferred to another state agency or local government or sold to a private entity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a precedent for transferring recreational properties to other agencies. For example, in 2006, DEP transferred the Tosahatchee State Park to the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; the commission expanded the services available at the park, offering hunting from September to March each year. Reduces need for state funding for recreational property operation, maintenance, and improvement. Would allow department to concentrate its efforts on those recreational properties with the greatest visitation, revenue production, and/or cultural, historical, recreational, and environmental significance. If recreational properties were sold to a private entity, land would likely be placed back on local property tax rolls. Funds from sale of recreational properties could be used to address capital project backlog. Staff at affected recreational properties could be eliminated or redirected. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Would negatively affect the state's preservation, interpretation, and restoration of natural and cultural resources. Based on department estimates, may result in reduction in overall economic impact of state recreational system. Prior to sale or transfer, would require determination of compliance with Florida Forever bond covenants.
Option 7 – Create an Independent Volunteer Foundation Board to Raise Funds for Parks and Other Recreational Properties		
Establish a foundation board to raise private philanthropic funds for state parks and other recreational properties.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Would generate funds that could be used to supplement or reduce annual legislative appropriation. May provide additional state-level guidance and coordination for existing citizen support organizations that currently raise funds. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fund levels not guaranteed and would likely fluctuate from year to year. Would require creating a system to ensure accountability over funds collected.

Source: OPPAGA analysis.

Appendix A

The Department of Environmental Protection Manages 161 Parks Around the State

