



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF Environmental Protection

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Tallahassee, FL 32399

Ron DeSantis
Governor

Jeanette Nuñez
Lt. Governor

Alexis A. Lambert
Secretary

Jan. 1, 2025

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor, State of Florida
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

The Honorable Ben Albritton
President, Florida Senate
409 The Capitol
404 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1100

The Honorable Daniel Perez
Speaker, Florida House of Representatives
420 The Capitol
402 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1300

Dear Governor DeSantis, President Albritton and Speaker Perez:

Pursuant to section 259.032(9)(f)4, Florida Statutes (F.S.), the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is pleased to submit the 2024 State-Owned Lands Public Access Report. DEP is required to provide a report describing the percentage of public lands acquired under Chapter 259, F.S., to which the public has access and the efforts undertaken by the department to increase public access to such lands. The reports must be published annually by Jan. 1 and are incorporated herein.

Should you have any questions, please contact me at 850-245-2044 or Mara.Gambineri@FloridaDEP.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Mara Gambineri", is written over a horizontal line.

Mara Gambineri
Chief of Staff

Enclosure

cc: Brett Tubbs, Director of Legislative Affairs, DEP



2024 State-Owned Lands Public Access Report

**Division of State Lands
Florida Department of Environmental Protection
Jan. 1, 2025**



2024 State-Owned Lands Public Access Report

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Executive Summary

Pursuant to section 259.032(9)(f)4., Florida Statutes (F.S.), the Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Division of State Lands (DSL) prepares an annual report describing the percentage of conservation lands in Florida that are publicly accessible and the efforts of the managing agencies to increase public access to these lands.

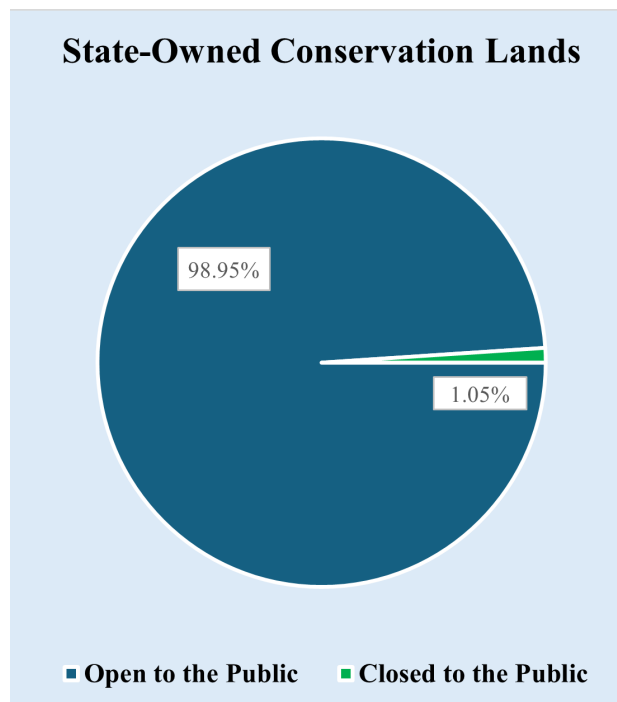
In preparation for this report, DSL analyzed land ownership information in the Florida State-Owned Lands and Records Information System (FL-SOLARIS) database that pertains to full-fee lands acquired by the state for conservation under Chapter 259, F.S. For these lands, DSL contacted the designated land managing agency to determine which parcels are closed to public access. In addition, the land managing agencies reported specific actions they are taking to increase public access to conservation lands in their stewardship, including efforts to increase public awareness and participation in existing recreational opportunities.

This year's State-Owned Lands Public Access Report determined that:

- Nearly all full-fee lands (98.95%) acquired by the state for conservation under Chapter 259, F.S., are open to public access.
- Land managing agencies are making a concerted effort to increase public access to the less than 1% of land that is not open to the public, where appropriate.
- There is an increased focus on enhancing public access and recreational opportunities on areas that are open to the public through traditional means and the use of new technologies.

Percentage of State-Owned Conservation Lands Open to the Public

The table below represents state-owned conservation land data provided by land managers and verified by FL-SOLARIS and Florida Natural Areas Inventory databases. Acres of state-owned conservation land closed to public access was verified by the managing agencies. A total of 5,057,548.73 acres (98.95%) of state-owned conservation land are open to the public, with 53,406.59 acres (1.05%) closed to the public.



Efforts to Increase Public Use of State-Owned Conservation Lands

DSL asked each of land managing agency to report what efforts are being made to increase public access to the land they manage, including efforts to increase public awareness and participation in recreational opportunities. Each agency submits detailed information about recreational opportunities and enhancements on its conservation lands to the Florida Outdoor Recreation Inventory (FORI) database managed by DEP's Division of Recreation and Parks. Recreational activities available on specific conservation lands can be accessed on the respective managing agency website or the FORI database.

Water management districts and state agencies are making concerted efforts to increase public use of the conservation lands they manage, both through traditional means (e.g., developing new trails and facilities) and by implementing new technologies (e.g., providing interactive maps on agency websites and GPS-enabled mobile applications). The information below summarizes each main land management agency's recent actions and efforts to increase public access and awareness.

Department of Environmental Protection – Division of Recreation and Parks

DEP's Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) is responsible for the development of Florida's recreation and parks system. DRP provides public access to the best of Florida's natural and cultural sites by providing appropriate resource-based recreational opportunities and interpretation. DRP promotes a statewide outdoor recreation program by offering a diverse, connected and balanced system of outdoor recreational resources, facilities and programs. DRP maintains over 2,275 miles of trails and approximately 101 miles of sandy beaches. There are 76 campgrounds located at 73 parks within a system of 175 separate management units located across the state. Recreational activities include bicycling, camping, canoeing, kayaking, boating, fishing, swimming, hiking, horseback riding, nature study, picnicking, beach activities and visits to archeological and historic sites. The Florida State Park system is recognized as one of the best state park systems in the country and is the nation's only four-time Gold Medal Winner, as awarded by the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration. Florida State Parks hosted over 30 million visitors in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023-24.

The Florida State Parks [website](#) contains links for the public to learn more about the parks open for recreational use. The Florida State Parks statewide map displays information most useful to park visitors, such as entrances, points of interest, structures and trails. It is one of the most comprehensive and accessible web-based state park maps of its kind and received 367,804 page views in FY 2023-24 at a rate of 42 views per hour and 1,007 views daily. DRP also maintains FORI, a comprehensive inventory of existing outdoor resources and facilities in Florida. This publicly-accessible database provides details of parks, recreation areas, open spaces and other outdoor sites in the state, including those managed by federal, state, regional, county and municipal governments, commercial enterprises, non-profit organizations and clubs.

Department of Environmental Protection – Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection

DEP's Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection's (ORCP) mission statement is "conserving and restoring Florida's coastal, aquatic, and ocean resources for the benefit of people and the environment." The "benefit of people" is through providing healthy ecosystems and fun, safe ways to experience those systems whether through on-site opportunities or off-site programs.

ORCP amplified public awareness of, and access to, ORCP-managed lands through a multitude of means, as evidenced by the continued increase in the number of visitors and volunteer hours over the years. The number of visitors on ORCP-managed lands continues to increase – from 798,363 in FY 2022-23 to 1,064,140 in FY 2023-24. The number of volunteer hours donated at ORCP's four upland reserves remains robust, with 71,109

hours donated in FY 2022-23 compared to 62,795 hours in FY 2023-24. Visitation increased through expanding education, outreach programs and existing facilities:

- Updating in-house and traveling exhibits.
- Continuing self-guided tours.
- Hosting visiting researchers and university groups (e.g., Alternative Spring Break, internships, etc.).
- Hosting and participating in local events.
- Enhancing ORCP's online presence through DEP and citizen support organization websites.
- Expanding volunteer opportunities.
- Opening new primitive camping sites.
- Installing additional amenities (e.g., picnic tables, fire rings, etc.).
- Constructing new Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant trails, boardwalks and an observation tower with a camera for remote viewing.
- Making existing roads/trails more accessible (e.g., paving, adding low water crossings, etc.).
- Constructing a new paddle craft launch site.

The latest improvements and upgrades include assuming management of a 0.6-mile boardwalk at the Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve to facilitate repairs.

Department of Military Affairs

The goal of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) is to allow public access to the Upchurch Millings property. Previously, access to this property by the public was not possible without traveling through the base secure perimeter, therefore restricting public access. During FY 2023-24, Army Compatible Use Buffer funds were leveraged to purchase property from the North Florida Land Trust. This property is adjacent to public roads and will allow public access to the site. Because it is a gopher tortoise recipient site, public access will be limited to low impact recreation and special use hunts.

In FY 2024-25, DMA will be pursuing the creation of access roads and parking areas with North Florida Land Trust and how best to provide a special use hunt with Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). It is anticipated that public access will be in place by FY 2025-26.

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

FWC provides a variety of wildlife-focused recreational opportunities statewide on areas within the wildlife management area (WMA) system. FWC maintains more than 2,100 miles of roads and more than 1,000 miles of trails that allow the public to access and explore agency-managed lands. Recreational opportunities include hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, hiking, paddling and horseback riding. FWC also maintains public access infrastructure on agency-managed areas such as boat launches, visitor entrances, check stations and wildlife viewing structures. The agency continues to improve access to state lands for people with disabilities by constructing facilities that meet or exceed Americans with Disabilities Act standards.

In 2024, FWC launched a Recreation Finder (gis.myfwc.com/RecreationMap) that allows visitors to search for specific areas, experiences, amenities and accessible facilities. Many WMAs are designated as part of FWC's Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail, which promotes awareness of the premier wildlife observation opportunities on public lands across the state. Several areas include sections of the Florida National Scenic Trail. Statewide visitation to WMAs exceeded 2.4 million in FY 2023-24.

FWC engages the public in planning access and recreational opportunities for each WMA through the management plan development and public hearing process. The agency increases public awareness of wildlife-focused recreation through outreach, interpretation and volunteer opportunities. The agency also

maintains campgrounds, shooting ranges, youth camps and a nature center on specific WMAs. FWC partners with VISIT FLORIDA and local and regional tourism organizations to promote awareness of the WMA system.

Florida Forest Service

The Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' Florida Forest Service (FFS) manages state forests using a multiple-use management concept, which includes providing the public with outdoor recreational opportunities. FFS makes every effort to utilize historic ground and vegetation disturbances, allowing public access and recreation without additional impacts to public land. The most common recreational activities include camping, hiking, biking, horseback riding, hunting, fishing and paddling.

FFS has implemented programs to increase public use of the state forests including an online reservation system, photo contest, Trailwalker program for hikers and Trailtrotter program for equestrian users. Many of the state forests contain segments of the 1,400-mile Florida National Scenic Trail, and others are part of the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail. Geocaching is another recreational opportunity in state forests allowing visitors an outdoor treasure-hunting adventure utilizing GPS devices. FFS also offers off-highway vehicle riding opportunities to the public in three state forests.

FFS' website contains information to assist the public with locating outdoor recreational opportunities and increase public awareness of cooperative initiatives including the Friends of Florida State Forests Inc. and Florida Scenic Highways. Florida's state forests also serve as outdoor classrooms for all ages through educational programs. FFS also provides Operation Outdoor Freedom events for wounded veterans with outdoor activities for their enjoyment at no cost.

Northwest Florida Water Management District

The Northwest Florida Water Management District (NFWFMD) has many facilities available to support public recreation on lands it owns and manages. These include boat ramps, tent and recreational vehicle campsites, canoe launches, fishing piers, hiking trails, horseback trails and parking areas, pavilions, picnic tables, restrooms and wildlife viewing trails.

NFWFMD has expanded public recreational activities on land purchased with public funds, with the most popular activities being hunting, fishing, camping, paddling, hiking and wildlife viewing. These recreational activities are compatible with natural resource protection and land use priorities. NFWFMD's website lists conservation lands and facilities available for public access and recreation.

South Florida Water Management District

The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) provides a wide variety of nature-based recreational opportunities on public lands managed by the district. These activities are managed to maximize the diversity and extent of public recreational activities provided on SFWMD-managed lands while still providing resource protection measures necessary to ensure the lands are properly managed for their conservation values and long-term public benefits. Popular recreational activities provided include hiking, bicycling, fishing, camping, hunting, canoeing/kayaking, powerboating, air boating, horseback riding, wildlife viewing, star gazing and geocaching.

SFWMD owns approximately 335,727.82 acres of managed conservation lands, of which 333,822.57 acres (99.43%) are open to the public for recreation, and 1,905.25 acres (0.57%) are closed as part of two mitigation banks.

SFWMD constructs and maintains a variety of infrastructure and capital improvement facilities designed to enhance public access and support recreational opportunities on district-managed lands. These facilities and improvements include barns and paddocks to support equestrian use, restrooms and pavilions at campgrounds and day-use sites, canoe and kayak portages, boardwalks, hiking trails, boat ramps, trailheads with informational kiosks and parking areas. In addition to the construction and maintenance of recreational facilities, SFWMD hosts quarterly recreation forum meetings to solicit input and receive suggestions from the public on ways to expand and enhance recreational opportunities on public lands.

SFWMD's [website](#) provides area-specific recreation information, updates on new recreational opportunities or emergency actions that have the potential to affect public recreation, a recreational guide and a link to the Special Use License system where the public can reserve no-cost permits for camping, equestrian use, expanded vehicle use to access remote areas and other recreation-orientated activities. Special Use Licenses are utilized to provide public recreational opportunities on properties where space limitations require the number of participants to be regulated to maintain high-quality recreational experience and for resource management purposes. From Oct. 1, 2023-Sept. 30, 2024, SFWMD's recreation website was visited 128,602 times to obtain information and updates on public use and recreation opportunities on district-managed lands. The website was also utilized by the public to obtain 9,643 no-cost Special Use Licenses that expand recreational use on conservation lands in an environmentally sensitive manner. The website and utilization of Special Use Licenses continue to serve as valuable tools to promote recreational use and inform the public of the large number of recreational opportunities available on lands managed by SFWMD.

SFWMD also actively partners with other governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations to expand and facilitate the administration of recreational programs and activities. These partnerships include working with local governments to develop and maintain recreational infrastructure and public access sites, coordinating with state agencies to assist in the management and administration of hunting activities and collaborating with non-governmental organizations that actively participate in SFWMD's volunteer program to support and enhance recreational opportunities on district lands. The volunteer program provides campground hosts and other services such as trail posting, trail maintenance, and the construction of public-use pavilions that help support the district's recreation program.

Southwest Florida Water Management District

The Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) provides numerous recreational opportunities to the public while encouraging nature-based activities by providing information in a printed recreation guide and on the district's website that receives approximately one million page views a year. SWFWMD partners with state and local governments to acquire lands that protect water resources and provide additional recreational opportunities. Approximately 99% of these lands are available for public use and recreation. SWFWMD provides bird-watching opportunities that are part of the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail, paved and off-road biking, hiking including access to the Florida National Scenic Trail, boating, canoeing, backcountry, primitive and equestrian camping, fishing, horseback riding, hunting, inline skating, kayaking, picnic facilities and a multitude of wildlife viewing opportunities.

SWFWMD is committed to increasing public access to conservation lands. To increase the use of conservation lands, the district has updated their recreation guide, released news stories and produced podcasts. To improve wayfinding, kiosk maps, trail maps and trail markers have been improved and installed to now include latitude and longitude coordinates for entrances and trail intersections. Parking areas and entrance roads have been improved for better access. Fire rings, grills and picnic tables were replaced to improve campgrounds and trail counters have been installed to provide more accurate visitor counts to ensure efforts are effective.

St. Johns River Water Management District

The St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) provides a wide range of recreational opportunities available to the public on its managed lands including hiking, canoeing, kayaking, boating, fishing, bicycling, horseback riding, camping, geocaching, wildlife viewing and hunting. SJRWMD emphasizes ecosystem viability while also offering compatible public recreation opportunities. Staff in the Bureau of Land Resources hold regular recreational public meetings to discuss land management activities and recreation with stakeholders.

Bureau of Land Resources staff work closely with state and local government partners to identify opportunities to enhance SJRWMD-managed lands to not only provide valuable ecological benefits but also increase opportunities for outdoor recreation. SJRWMD partners with state agencies on special hunts for youth and disabled veterans on its lands and actively promotes the array of recreational opportunities available through traditional outreach and social media. SJRWMD also administers Special Use Authorizations to parties seeking use of land not typically allowed due to district rules. This includes providing access for mobility-impaired hunters to conservation land through a vehicular access permitting process.

SJRWMD also constructs and maintains a variety of infrastructure and capital improvements that enhance public use, including boat ramps, restroom facilities, picnic pavilions, storm shelters, observation towers and boardwalks. Primitive tent camping is allowed at 70 different campsites on 24 properties. SJRWMD utilizes an online reservation system to manage reservations at 23 campsites where vehicle access is allowed. During FY 2023-24, these campsites were reserved for a combined total of more than 3,300 nights. The remaining 47 campsites are first-come, first-served back-country sites that can only be accessed on foot, bicycle, horseback or by boat. SJRWMD also issues vehicular access permits for two day-use parking areas and four additional boat launches that are located behind locked gates (a gate combination is provided with the permit) within the interior of certain properties. More than 1,300 annual permits for day-use access and nearly 1,850 daily boat access permits were issued.

Informational kiosks on SJRWMD properties provide on-site guidance to visitors, while the district's website features regularly updated content about public access and recreational activities. The kiosks include QR code placards linked to property-specific web pages that offer geo-referenced trail maps, providing visitors easy access to detailed property information on their mobile devices in real time. The recreation web pages had over 390,000 page views in FY 2023-24. Nearly 50% of those page views are linked to the Lake Apopka Wildlife Drive and Lake Apopka North Shore pages. The Lake Apopka Wildlife Drive is a popular destination featuring 11 miles of driving trails along levees within a network of wetlands. The wildlife drive and adjoining network of multi-use trails attracts an estimated 180,000 visitors annually. Another popular destination is the marshes of the Upper St. Johns River Basin and Headwaters Lake with its world-class largemouth bass fishery. SJRWMD also manages agreements with concessionaire groups that provide organized airboat tours of the upper basin marshes at Blue Cypress and Three Forks conservation areas. These agreements help increase recreational opportunities, support the local economy through ecotourism and allow SJRWMD to constrain impacts to the natural systems.

Suwannee River Water Management District

The Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD) owns 162,340.68 acres, of which 154,571.68 acres are open to the public for recreation. Public lands include a variety of facilities and features to enhance the public user experience. SRWMD engages with community and user groups to encourage youth and mobility-impaired hunts, further increasing access where possible. SRWMD launched a [Special Use Authorization](#) website that displays district lands and activities by special use. SRWMD issues an annual average of 675 Special Use Authorizations to the public.

Popular recreation activities on SRWMD lands include hunting, swimming, paddling, camping, fishing, all-terrain vehicle riding, nature study and hiking. SRWMD actively communicates information to the public through its [website](#), social media and public speaking engagements. An online [map](#) provides the public with locations and activities available on SRWMD lands.

Managing Agency	Total State-Owned Managed Conservation Acres	Acres Closed to Public Access	Acres Opened to Public Access	Percent of Land Open to Public Access	Percent of Land Closed to Public Access	Reasons Why Land is Closed to the Public
DEP – Division of Recreation and Parks	815,199.51	0.00	815,199.51	100.00%	0.00%	All acres are open to the public.
DEP – Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection	59,143.00	0.00	59,143.00	100.00%	0.00%	All acres are open to the public.
DEP – Mining and Mitigation Program	7,161.00	7,074.40	86.60	1.21%	98.79%	Closed acres include mitigation and reclamation sites currently under active restoration or monitoring. There are two opportunities for public access via canoe/kayak launches that are subleased to Polk County and hiking at Polk County’s Peace River Hammock Park.
Department of Corrections	18,237.00	9,097.00	9,140.00	50.12%	49.88%	Areas that are not open to the public are utilized by PRIDE and are not compatible with public use. The 9,140 acres of conservation lands open to the public represent the Raiford WMA, which is split between Union Correctional Institution and Florida State Prison. The WMA is open to the public for hunting and other recreational use in accordance with FWC rules and regulations applicable to the WMA.
Department of Military Affairs	1,577.07	1,577.07	0.00	0.00%	100.00%	Camp Blanding — Upchurch Milling and Storage Company Tract currently has no access without crossing military training lands or private property and is undergoing restoration of longleaf pine-wiregrass natural community. The Department of Military Affairs is working on acquiring or establishing access easements.
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission	1,537,194.00	356.00	1,536,838.00	99.98%	0.02%	A restriction in the deed prohibits public access to Judges Cave site because the cave is a maternity roost site for the federally endangered gray bat. The area was acquired by The Nature Conservancy and transferred to FWC in Jan. 1983. Janet Butterfield Brooks Preserve deed restriction requires the site to be open for guided tours only.
Florida Forest Service	1,185,632.73	0.00	1,185,632.73	100.00%	0.00%	All acres are open to the public.
Northwest Florida Water Management District	211,725.25	23.38	211,701.87	99.99%	0.01%	Life estate retained by Seller, his wife and children as recorded in O.R. Book 1594, page 0537, public records of Leon County, Florida.
South Florida Water Management District	335,727.82	1,905.25	333,822.57	99.43%	0.57%	The Loxahatchee Mitigation Bank and Corkscrew Mitigation Bank are currently managed through a public/private partnership agreement and are closed to public access due to ongoing wetland restoration activities. These mitigation banks encompass a total of 1,905.25 acres and will be open for public use once ongoing restoration activities are complete.
Southwest Florida Water Management District	343,188.64	4,479.89	338,703.64	98.69%	1.31%	1,926.41 acres are part of reservoirs, 1,521.23 acres are a regional water treatment system, 1,029.36 acres are mitigation sites, 2.70 acres are related to water control structures and 0.19 acres are data collection sites.

Managing Agency	Total State-Owned Managed Conservation Acres	Acres Closed to Public Access	Acres Opened to Public Access	Percent of Land Open to Public Access	Percent of Land Closed to Public Access	Reasons Why Land is Closed to the Public
St. Johns River Water Management District	431,259.00	21,059.00	410,200.00	95.12%	4.88%	At Twelve Mile Swamp Conservation Area, 19,534 acres are currently encumbered by a timber lease with private hunting rights reserved until the end of calendar year 2025 and public access will open when the lease ends. At Emeraldal Marsh Conservation Area, 1,320 acres are encumbered until 2026 by a peat harvesting lease and public access will open when the lease ends. An additional 145 acres at Emeraldal Marsh Conservation Area are closed for public safety reasons related to adjacent land use. The Crane Creek M-1 Canal Restoration Project includes a 60-acre water treatment parcel that is closed to the public.
Suwannee River Water Management District	162,340.68	7,769.00	154,571.68	95.21%	4.79%	Of these 7,769 acres closed to the public, 1,740 acres were purchased for the purposes of water supply/water quality projects such as municipal wellfields or sprayfields and are currently closed to the public except for the 60-acre Newberry Wellfield which is leased to the City for water supply and recreation purposes. The 2,686-acre Double Run Creek and West Ridge Tracts are managed by the Florida National Guard and closed to the public because they were purchased for future water resource development projects. Once completed, the tracts may be opened to the public. The 3,343-acre Lasky and Steinhatchee Springs Pinehatchee Addition Tracts were purchased in 2023 and require improvements before they can be made accessible. Once the improvements are complete, they will be opened to the public. Steinhatchee Springs Pinehatchee Addition is near completion. A planned project for improvements to the Lasky Tract is scheduled to commence in 2025.
University of Florida	2,574.73	65.60	2,509.13	97.45%	2.55%	Life estate was approved by the Board of Trustees in May 2002. Public access will be allowed when the original owner is deceased or no longer lives adjacent to the property.
Total	5,110,960.43	53,406.59	5,057,548.73	98.95%	1.05%	