

# State-Owned Lands Public Access Report

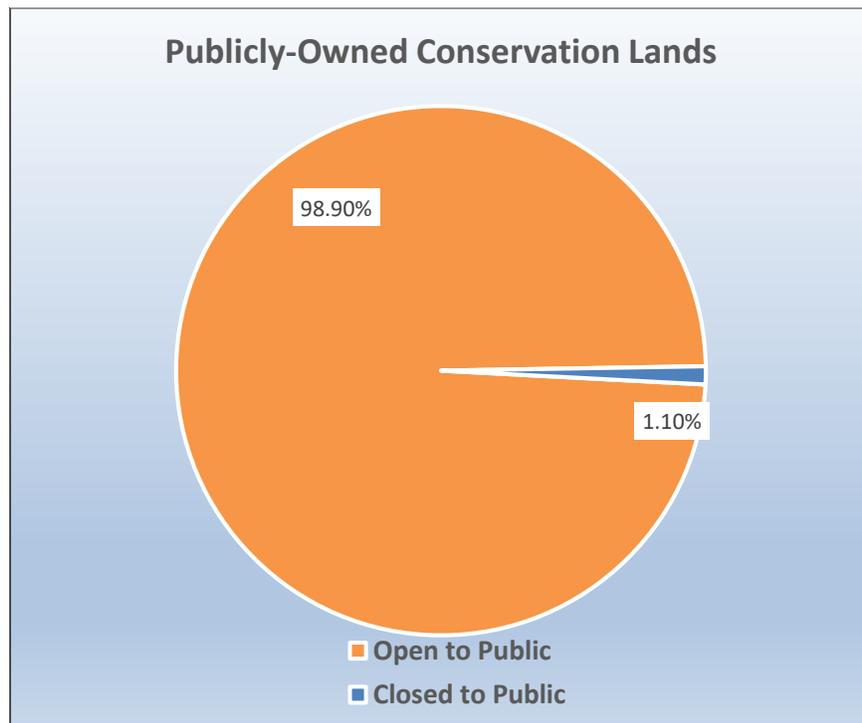
## Laws of Florida Chapter 2016-1

259.032(9)(f)4 Florida Statutes (F.S.) *By January 1 of each year, the department shall provide a report to the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives describing the percentage of public lands acquired under this chapter to which the public has access and the efforts undertaken by the department to increase public access to such lands.*

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Division of State Lands (DSL), was tasked to prepare a report describing the percentage of conservation lands in Florida that are publicly accessible and efforts of the managing agencies to increase public access to these lands. 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 of Florida for conservation under Chapter 259, F.S., as of June 30, 2017. For all such lands, DSL contacted the designated land manager to determine which tracts or parcels are closed to public access and why they are closed. [\(Part 1\)](#) In addition, DSL queried the land managing agencies to determine 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. [\(Part 2\)](#)

## Executive Summary

The conclusion to the report determined that almost all the full-fee lands (98.90%) acquired by the State of Florida for conservation under Chapter 259, Florida Statutes, as of June 30, 2017 are open to public access. All managing agencies are making a concerted effort to increase public access to the 1.10% of state-owned land that is not open to the public and increase public use on those acres that are open to the public through both traditional means and implementation of new technologies.



## Part 1. Percentage of State-owned Conservation Lands Open to the Public

The attached table represents State-owned conservation lands data provided by land managers and verified by FL-SOLARIS and FNAI databases. Parcel acreages closed to public access were verified by the managing agencies. Using these numbers, out of a total of 4,938,520.60 acres of State-owned managed conservation land, 98.90% is open to the public, with 54,156.61 acres closed to the public or 1.10%. Thus, 98.90% of all full-fee lands acquired by the State for conservation are open to public access. The attached table also lists the reason(s) these parcels are currently not open to the public and if appropriate efforts have been undertaken to open those lands to public access.

## Part 2. Efforts to Increase Public Use of State-owned Conservation Lands

To determine what state agencies and water management districts are doing to increase public access to the lands they manage, including efforts to increase public awareness and participation in existing recreational opportunities, DSL staff contacted each of the managing agencies. Each agency already submits detailed information about recreational opportunities and enhancements on its conservation lands to the Florida Outdoor Recreation Inventory (FORI) database managed by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP). In 2010, DRP released a comprehensive FORI report that is available on the agency's website, and the state managing agencies continue to submit data to FORI on a regular basis. Up-to-date specific recreational activities available on specific conservation land can be located on the respective land manager's website or the FORI database at DRP's website (<https://outdoorflorida.org>).

All water management districts and state agencies are making a concerted effort 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 paragraphs below summarize each main land management agency's recent actions and efforts to increase public access and awareness.

**FL DEP Division of Recreation and Parks:** The Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) is responsible for the development of Florida's recreation and parks system. DRP promotes the state park system for the use, enjoyment and benefit of the people of Florida and visitors. DRP provides public access to the best of Florida's diverse natural and cultural sites by providing appropriate resource-based recreational opportunities and interpretation. The agency promotes a statewide outdoor recreation program by offering a diverse, connected and balanced system of outdoor recreational resources, facilities and programs. DRP maintains over 2,500 miles of trails, 100 miles of sandy beaches and 188 campgrounds 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 three-time Gold Medal Winner as awarded by the National Association of Recreation and Parks. Florida State Parks hosted over 32 million visitors last fiscal year representing over a 150% increase in state park attendance since 1995.

DRP's website ([www.floridastateparks.org](http://www.floridastateparks.org)) has various links for the public to learn more about the parks open for recreational use. The Florida State Parks Map Direct is a public online web map that can be launched on a desktop computer or smart phone and displays information most useful to park visitors, such as entrances, points of interest, structures, and trails. This is one of the most comprehensive and accessible web-based state park maps of its kind and has received over 12 million web hits per year at a rate of one view per 2 ½ seconds. The DRP also maintains the Florida Outdoor Recreation Inventory (FORI), a comprehensive inventory of existing outdoor resources and facilities in Florida. It provides details of

parks, recreation areas, open spaces and other outdoor sites in the state including federal, state, regional, county and municipal governments, commercial enterprises, non-profit organizations and clubs

**FL DEP Florida Coastal Office:** The Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Coastal Office (FCO) mission statement is “conserving and restoring Florida’s coastal and aquatic 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.

FCO amplified public awareness of, and access to, FCO-managed lands through a multitude of means, as evidenced in the increase in the number of visitors and volunteer hours over the years. According to Land Management Uniform Accounting Council annual reports from the period of 2010 to present, the number of visitors on FCO-managed lands increased 8.7%, from 627,000 in Fiscal Year 2009-10 to 681,477 in Fiscal Year 2017-18. Over the same timeframe, the public’s awareness and interest in FCO-managed lands improved as evidenced in the 97.0% increase in the number of volunteer hours donated, from 19,713 hours in Fiscal Year 2009-10 to 38,834 hours in Fiscal Year 2017-18.

Visitation increased through expanded education and outreach programs, some of which included: 1) adding new and revamping existing on-site programs, 2) conducting additional off-site programs, 3) maintaining and refreshing existing in-house and traveling exhibits, 4) producing and distributing informational items, 5) participating in local events, 6) hosting visiting researchers and university groups (Spring Break Alternative, internships, etc.), and 7) composing articles and announcements. Visitation also increased through enhancing existing on-site facilities and adding new opportunities such as: 1) opening a new state-of-the-art visitor center in the Panhandle, 2) adding primitive camping sites, 3) adding additional amenities (picnic tables, fire rings, etc.), 4) constructing additional ADA-compliant trails and boardwalks, 5) constructing an observation tower with a camera for remote viewing, 6) making existing roads/trails more accessible (paving, adding low water crossings, etc.), 7) constructing a new paddle craft launch site, 8) establishing self-guided tours, 9) enhancing media presence (Facebook, Twitter, website, etc.), and 10) expanding volunteer opportunities.

**FL DACS Florida Forest Service:** The Florida Forest Service (FFS) manages the Florida State Forests using a multiple-use management concept, one of which includes providing the public with outdoor recreational opportunities. The FFS makes every effort to utilize historic ground and vegetation disturbances which allows public access and recreation without additional impacts to the public land. The most common recreational activities include camping, hiking, biking, horseback riding, hunting, fishing and paddling.

The Florida Forest Service has implemented programs to increase public use of the state forests. Some of the programs include an online reservation system, the State Forest Photo Contest, the Trailwalker program for hikers, and the Trailtrotter program for equestrian users. Many of the state forests contain segments of the 1,400-mile Florida National Scenic Trail, and many others are part of the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail. Geocaching is another recreational opportunity on the forests allowing visitors an outdoor treasure hunting adventure that uses Global Positioning System (GPS) devices. The FFS also offers off-highway vehicle (OHV) riding opportunities to the public on three state forests.

The Florida Forest Service website contains vast information to assist the public with locating outdoor recreational opportunities and increasing public awareness of cooperative initiatives including the Friends of Florida State Forests, Inc., Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and the Florida Scenic Highways. The website also contains the regularly updated “10 Things to Do on Florida State Forests”, which provides unique recreational, historical, and ecological opportunities that are available on the state forests. The state forests also serve as outdoor classrooms for all ages through the state forest educational programs.

The Florida Forest Service also provides Operation Outdoor Freedom events on FFS managed lands for wounded veterans with the outdoor activities they enjoy at no cost.

**Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission:** The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) works to provide a variety of wildlife-centric recreational opportunities both statewide and on the Wildlife Management Area (WMA) system. FWC maintains over 2,100 miles of roads and over 950 miles of trails for the public to access and explore the FWC land managed areas in the WMA system. In addition, FWC has developed public access infrastructure on most land managed areas which includes access amenities (reported in the FORI database) such as boat launches, visitor entrances, and wildlife viewing structures. Area specific recreational opportunities are listed and detailed on the MyFWC website and include hunting, fishing, hiking, paddling, horseback riding, etc. Statewide programs such as the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail which encompasses over 500 sites and dozens of partners, is designed to encourage conservation of Florida's native habitats and species and provide access to many of Florida's premier wildlife viewing sites.

FWC engages in several activities to increase public awareness of and participation in recreational opportunities. The public is involved in planning public access and recreational opportunities for each management area through the agency's management plan development process. A variety of programs to educate the public about fish and wildlife conservation, hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, boating, and shooting sports are provided and new recreational opportunities or access improvements are often promoted through special events. FWC continues to expand volunteer opportunities statewide with volunteers participating in a variety of habitat restoration efforts, interpretive programs, and infrastructure development and maintenance.

FWC features WMA opportunities regularly through a variety of print and electronic media, and often partners with VISIT Florida and local and regional tourism organizations to promote awareness of the WMA system.

**FL Department of Military Affairs:** The goal of the Department of Military Affairs is to open the entire Upchurch Milling and Storage Company tract to public use once current natural community restoration work is completed. The agency is working on acquiring or establishing easements on adjacent private lands to facilitate public access to this conservation property which is managed by Camp Blanding Military Reservation.

**Northwest Florida Water Management District:** Northwest Florida Water Management District (NFWFMD) has many facilities available to support public recreation on the lands it owns and manages. These include boat ramps, tent and RV 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 dollars, with the most popular activities being hunting, fishing, camping, paddling, hiking, and wildlife viewing. The recreational activities are compatible with natural resource protection and land use priorities. NFWFMD has a very easy to follow link on its main web page that lists the conservation lands and the facilities available for public access and recreation in each area. The District's web page has the areas divided by region, making it very easy for the public to find and learn about a specific area of interest.

**Suwannee River Water Management District:** 4,969 acres purchased for a water supply/water quality project such as municipal wellfields or spray fields and currently closed to the public. Of these 4,969 acres, 2,677 acres are the Double Run Creek and West Ridge Tracts which were purchased for future water resource development projects and once completed they may be opened to the public. 60 acres are the Newberry Wellfield Tract which are leased to the City for water supply and recreation. The

Double Run Creek tract is managed by the Florida National Guard at Camp Blanding and has a hunting lease.

**St. Johns River Water Management District:** 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. SJRWMD holds regular recreational public meetings to discuss land management activities and recreation with stakeholders. SJRWMD works closely with agency and local government partners to identify opportunities to enhance SJRWMD-managed lands that not only provide valuable ecological benefits but also increase opportunities for outdoor recreation. SJRWMD partners with other 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 constructs and maintains a variety of infrastructure and capital improvements that enhance public use on SJRWMD managed lands, including: boat ramps, restrooms, picnic pavilions, storm shelters, observation towers and boardwalks. Informational kiosks on SJRWMD properties provide onsite guidance to visitors, while the SJRWMD website features an interactive recreation guide with detailed information about public access and recreational activities. The recreation webpages had nearly 320,000 hits in Fiscal Year 2017-18.

More than 17% of those pageviews were to the Lake Apopka Wildlife Drive (LAWD) and Lake Apopka North Shore pages. LAWD is a popular outdoor recreation destination featuring 11 miles of driving trails along a network of wetlands, levees and canals and has attracted an estimated 300,000 visitors since its opening in May 2015. Following Hurricane Irma, significant infrastructural repairs were required at the LAWD to maintain public access. In FY 2017-18, the wildlife drive at Emerald Marsh Conservation Area was reopened along a new route that accommodated ongoing restoration efforts. The Emerald Wildlife Drive is approximately 3.5 miles in length and provides visitors an opportunity to experience the abundant wildlife that inhabit wetland restoration and water resource management projects within the conservation area. In June 2018, SJRWMD and partners (FDEP, FDOT, Brevard County) opened a new public access facility at the 458-acre Micco Water Management Area. The Micco facility includes 3.3 miles of trail, improvements for equestrians, a picnic area, and walk-through access to the St. Sebastian River Preserve State Park. Finally, a 3.8-mile-long hiking loop – highlighting active restoration efforts – was opened at Ocklawaha Prairie Restoration Area.

**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 agency. These activities are managed to maximize public recreational opportunities while still providing resource protection measures necessary to assure the lands are properly managed for their conservation values and long term public benefits. Recreational activities provided on SFWMD managed lands include hunting, fishing, air boating, canoeing, camping, horseback riding, hiking, biking, and wildlife viewing. The SFWMD constructs and maintains a variety of infrastructure and capital improvement projects that are designed to enhance public access and recreational opportunities on SFWMD managed lands. These facilities and improvements include barns and paddocks to support equestrian use, restrooms and pavilions at campgrounds and day-use sites, boat ramps, and parking areas with information kiosks to accommodate public access. Recent projects that have been completed to enhance recreational opportunities on SFWMD conservation lands include the refurbishment of the Dupuis Management Area Equestrian Campground and a parking area and access site used by the public to access the management area for recreational purposes. The campground refurbishment project included the renovation of three barns that are utilized by the public for equestrian use, the installation of two new

picnic shelters, the construction of new paddocks, and the installation of a new restroom and shower facility.

The SFWMD website contains a recreation webpage to promote public recreation on SFWMD managed lands. The webpage provides area specific recreation information, the SFWMD Recreational Guide, and a link to the Special Use License application where the public can reserve no-cost permits for camping, equestrian use, specialized vehicle use to access remote areas, and other activities. Special Use Licenses are utilized to provide public recreational opportunities on properties where spatial limitations require the number of participants be regulated to provide a high quality recreational experience and for resource management purposes. From October 1, 2017 to September 30, 2018, the SFWMD website had a total of 241,823 hits related to recreation. The website continues to serve as a valuable tool to expand recreational use and inform the public on the large number of recreational opportunities available on SFWMD managed lands. The SFWMD also actively partners with other governmental agencies and the private sector to help expand and facilitate the management of recreational programs and activities on lands managed by SFWMD. These partnerships include partnering with government agencies such as the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission who assists in the management and administration of hunting activities on SFWMD managed lands as well as partnering with the private sector to maintain an active volunteer program. The volunteer program provides campground hosts and other services such as trail posting and trail maintenance that help support the SFWMD's recreation program.

**Southwest Florida Water Management District:** The Southwest Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) encourages many recreational activities to increase public access on its conservation lands. The District and its management partners have also created many recreational activities that are ADA accessible. Lands owned and/or managed by the SFWMD provide both paved and unpaved bike trails, bird watching opportunities that are part of the Great Florida Birding Trail, boating, canoeing, kayaking, fishing, camping, equestrian, hiking, hunting, inline skating, and picnic facilities. SFWMD has an easy-to-follow website that provides an alphabetical listing of all managed areas and includes Florida species field guides. Each managed area has a separate web page that details all the recreational activities available at the site plus a map containing a detailed legend of the activities, trails and roads.

The SFWMD continues to update signage, sign-in boxes and kiosks throughout recreation areas to guide visitors to specific sites while maintaining campground amenities such as picnic tables and fire rings. The SFWMD has transitioned to an automated online camping reservation system and staff continue to enhance the site. An automated ADA permitting system will follow, providing a greater customer service experience to the public.

### State-Owned Conservation Land Open to Public Access (2018)

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
FL DACS Florida Forest Service	1,149,718.92	0.00	1,149,718.92	100.00%	0.00%	All acres are open to the public.
FL DEP Div. of Recreation & Parks	793,887.40	0.00	793,887.40	100.00%	0.00%	All acres are open to the public.
FL DEP Florida Coastal Office	59,094.00	0.00	59,094.00	100.00%	0.00%	All acres are open to the public.
FL DEP Mining and Mitigation Program	5,506.00	5,501.00	5.00	0.09%	99.91%	Tracts contain environmentally sensitive lands, predominately floodplain wetlands. Two opportunities for public access are available. The first is a sublease with Polk County for a canoe launch for public access onto the Peace River and is approximately 2.5 acres and the second is an easement with the City of Fort Meade for a 2.5-mile public trail and primitive kayak launch onto the Bowlegs Creek. A third opportunity for public access is under discussion with Polk County for a proposed trail that could be from 10-30 acres depending on the route.
FL Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission	1,433,867.00	37.00	1,433,830.00	100.00%	0.00%	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 January 1983. Janet Butterfield Brooks Preserve deed restriction requires the site to be open for guided tours only.
FL Dept. 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 Dept. of Military Affairs is working on acquiring or establishing access easements.
FL Dept. of Corrections (PRIDE)	18,237.00	9,097.00	9,140.00	50.12%	49.88%	The 9,140 acres of conservation lands open to the public represents the Raiford Wildlife Management Area, which is split between Union CI and Florida State Prison. The Raiford WMA is open to the public for hunting and other recreational use in accordance with FWC rules and regulations applicable to the WMA. Areas not open to the public are utilized by PRIDE and are not compatible with public use.
University of Florida	2,574.73	65.60	2,509.13	97.45%	2.55%	Life estate 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.
Northwest Florida Water Management District	211,152.00	0.00	211,152.00	100.00%	0.00%	All acres are open to the public.
South Florida Water Management District	330,187.55	1,888.72	328,298.83	99.43%	0.57%	The Loxahatchee Mitigation Bank and CREW Mitigation bank are currently managed through a public/private partnership agreement and are closed to public access due to on-going wetland restoration activities. These mitigation banks encompass a total of 1888.72 acres and will be open for public use once on-going restoration activities are complete.
St. Johns River Water Management District	428,317.93	27,109.72	401,208.21	93.67%	6.33%	At Twelve Mile Swamp Conservation Area, 19,534 acres are currently encumbered by a timber lease with private hunting rights reserved until 2025 – public access will open when the lease ends. At Fellsmere Water Management Area, 6,255.72 acres are closed to public access, due to pending water management project agreements and construction - public access will open when agreements and construction are completed. At Emerald Marsh Conservation Area, 1,320 acres are encumbered until 2026 by a peat harvesting lease - public access will open when the lease ends.

### State-Owned Conservation Land Open to Public Access (2018)

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
Suwannee River Water Management District	160,420.00	4,969.00	155,451.00	96.90%	3.10%	4,969 acres purchased for the purpose of a water supply/water quality project such as municipal wellfields or sprayfields and currently closed to the public. Of these 4,969 acres, 2,677 acres are the Double Run Creek and West Ridge Tracts which were purchased for future water resource development projects and once completed they may be opened to the public. 60 acres are the Newberry Wellfield Tract which are leased to the City for water supply and recreation. The Double Run Creek tract is managed by the Florida National Guard at Camp Blanding and has a hunting lease.
Southwest Florida Water Management District	343,981	3,911.50	340,069.50	98.86%	1.14%	1,431.27 acres are the Site of C. W. "Bill" Young Reservoir; of that, 1,100 acres are underwater and the remaining acreage is part of a conservation easement for mitigation required for the reservoir. 80.23 acres are a life estate approved in 1986 and public access will be allowed when the original owner is deceased or no longer lives adjacent to the property. 2,354 acres are the location of a regional water treatment system and requires ongoing operation and maintenance. 44 acres consist of a berm. 2 acres are a water control structure. (locks/gates)
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,938,520.60</b>	<b>54,156.61</b>	<b>4,884,363.99</b>	<b>98.90%</b>	<b>1.10%</b>	