United States Department of Agriculture

NRCS Natural Resources Conservation Service

USDA

2003

Florida Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program

Customer Focus

The Nature Conservancy has identified the Kissimmee Valley and other portions of the Lake Okeechobee drainage as critical to sustaining the habitat of a broad range of threatened and endangered plant and animal species, including the Florida panther, whooping crane, and the wood stork. Management of the Lake Okeechobee drainage has a profound effect on the health of the lake, the Everglades ecosystem, the Indian River Lagoon and the Caloosahatchee estuary, which receive overflows from the lake during times of high water.

Agriculture remains an important industry in the Kissimmee Valley and Fisheating Creek drainage areas. Cattle and citrus are the primary products, supplemented by some row crops. In the past, agriculture has been identified as contributing significant nutrient loads to the Kissimmee River and to Lake Okeechobee. In addition, the channelization of the Kissimmee River and the ditching and draining of wetlands throughout the basin have drastically reduced water storage within the basin. This channelization causes flooding downstream, an unnatural hydroperiod for the Everglades water system, reduced water quality for downstream users, and a loss of wildlife habitat in the basin.

The USDA Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), in partnership with the Nature Conservancy, recently purchased a 1,900-acre easement in this area to demonstrate how wetlands restoration and ranching can work hand-in-hand to improve water quality and protect wildlife. The 1,900-acre XL Ranch is home to some of Florida's most threatened and endangered species, including those mentioned above. By restoring wetlands and allowing cattle to graze over parts of the ranch, the natural lowland and grassland habitats preferred by these species are being enhanced.

The XL Ranch in Highlands County represents the first easement transaction that has occurred as part of the Nature Conservancy's new pilot project, named Florida Lands and Outstanding Waters (FLOW). Through this acquisition, NRCS and the Nature Conservancy hope to demonstrate that maintaining agricultural economic viability can co-exist with improved water management, water quality, and wildlife habitat in the Kissimmee basin.

Overview:

The USDA Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) helps farmers and ranchers keep their productive land in agriculture. The program partners with States, Tribes, local governments and non-profit organizations to purchase conservation easements for the purpose of protecting topsoil by limiting non-agricultural uses of the land. NRCS provides up to 50% of the fair market value of the easement to the cooperating entity, which acquires, manages, and enforces the easement. Landowners participate voluntarily, and protected farms remain in private ownership.

Conservation plans are developed on all highly erodible cropland. Nationally, over $101.3 million have been obligated to state and local entities since establishment of the program in 1996. The 2002 Farm Bill produced some changes in the program, including the addition of a provision providing for the protection of historical and archaeological resources on farm and ranchlands, and the inclusion of nongovernmental organizations as eligible entities. The Farm Bill also significantly increased the amount of financial assistance available under FRPP, authorizing nearly $600 million through Fiscal Year 2007. Sixty-seven million dollars was allocated to states to purchase easements in FY 2003.

Accomplishments:

Protecting large tracts of farm and ranchland, which not only preserves open space but also protects water quality and wildlife habitat, is the main objective of Florida's Farm and Ranchland Protection Program. Since the program's inception in 1996, FRPP has partnered with three local farmland protection programs: the St. John's River Water Management District, the City of Gainesville, and the Nature Conservancy. Through FY 2002, $2.73 million in FRPP funds have been awarded to purchase easements on approximately 9,600 acres of valuable agricultural land in Florida. The demand for FRPP money far exceeds available funds. In FY 2003, cooperating entities in Florida requested $18 million to protect over 30,000 acres of farm and ranchland. This request represents 27.6 percent of the total amount of FRPP funds available nationwide in FY 2003. Florida received $2,289,000 to purchase easements in FY 2003.

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Outlook:

In recent decades, the promise of a mild winter climate has invited many retirees and others to Florida. In 1950, Florida had a population of less than three million, making it the twentieth largest state in the United States. By 2000, its population had grown to almost 16 million. This five-fold increase has made Florida the fourth most populous state in the nation. Currently, the statewide population is growing at a rate of more than 750 people per day. One of the consequences of this population explosion has been the widespread conversion of vegetable cropland and citrus groves to non-agricultural uses. According to the 1997 National Resources Inventory, Florida is losing cropland at a rate of almost 246,000 acres per year. Each year, nearly 10 percent of the state's remaining cropland is converted to non-agricultural uses.

Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program - Florida Easements
as of June 2003
Number, Acres, Easement Costs by County

Florida					
	Easement Cost			Federal Payment	
County	Acres	Total ($)	Avg. ($/acre)	$	%
Osceola	1,932	962,136	498	432,961	45%
Alachua	1,777	1,510,450	850	600,000	40%
Highlands	1,813	1,268,946	700	634,473	50%
Total*	5,522	3,741,532	678	1,667,434	45%
*Totals do not include FY 2002 easements					

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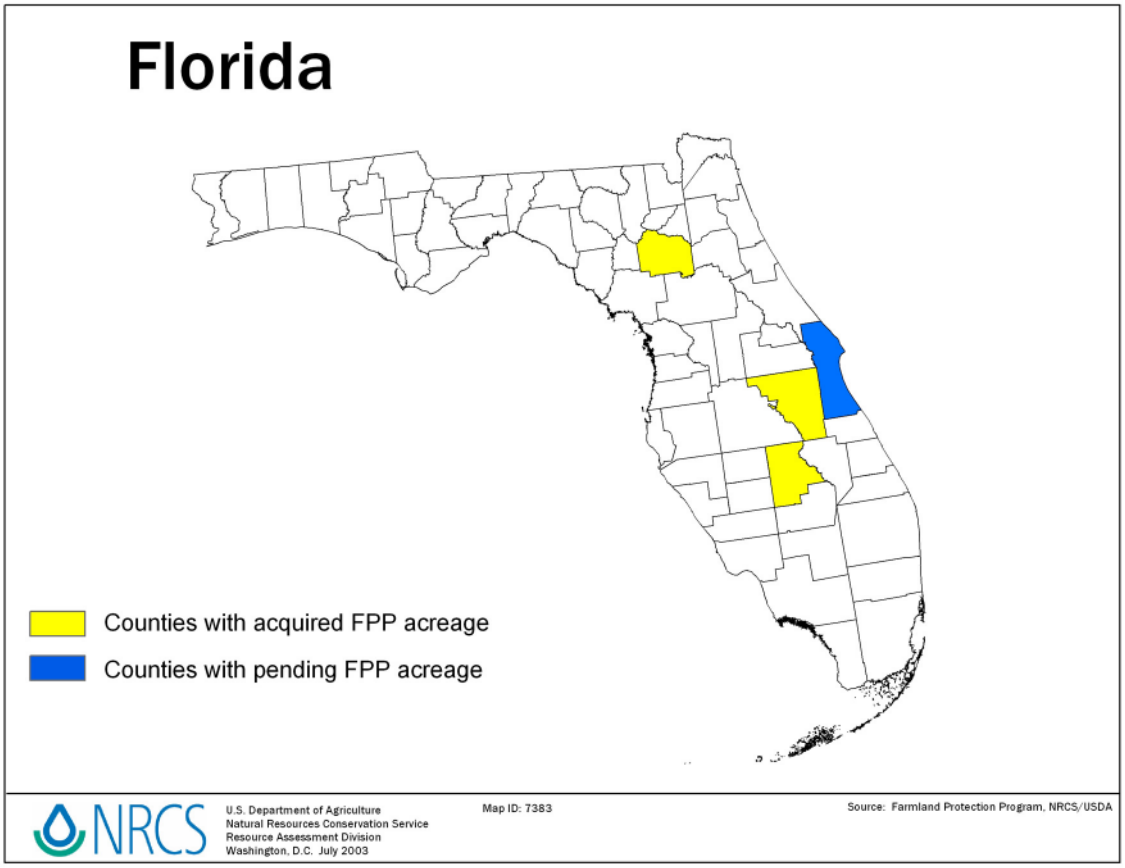
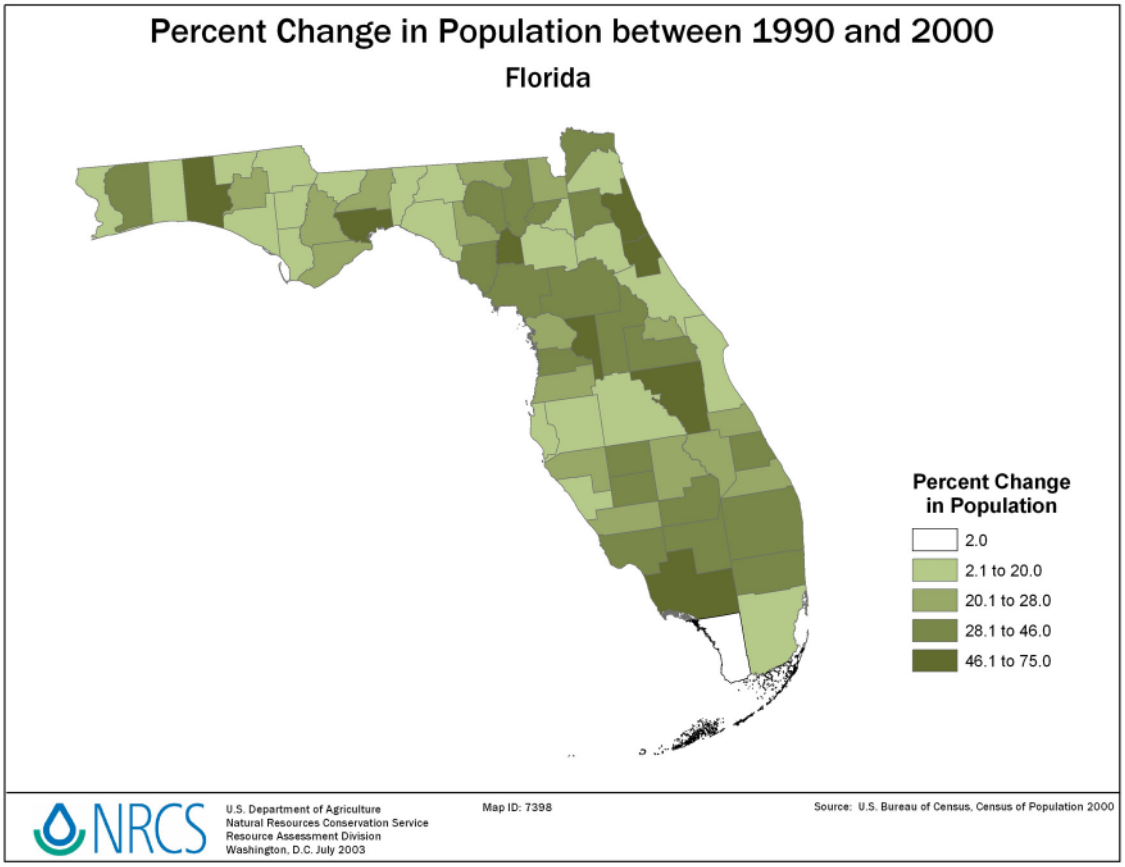
Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program - Florida Easements as of June 2003
Counties with Acquired and Pending FRPP Easements



Trends in Population by County - Florida 1990 to 2000 (Census Data)