

## A Major Project to Protect the Caloosahatchee Watershed

By Jim Metzler, Co-Chair Advocacy Committee

Over the last few years, a lot has been written about the impact Lake Okeechobee has on the quantity and quality of the water that surrounds the Refuge. While Lake O is important, in the typical year it contributes a minority of the nutrients that encircle the Refuge and can lead to harmful algal blooms. The majority of the nutrients typically come from runoff from the Caloosahatchee watershed.

This article will describe how the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society ) working with other organizations on a project that has the potential to improve the water that surrounds the Refuge by putting millions of acres of land under conservation easements.

### The Value of Conservation Easements

As described in [a previous article](#), there are several reasons why we favor working with willing land owners to implement conservation easements. This includes the fact that land in conservation:

- Doesn't have the same level of nutrients it would have if it were used for housing or agriculture. This reduces the flow of harmful nutrients into our water bodies.
- Can be used to implement projects that store and/or clean water.
- Stays in the family or company that owns the land as well as on the state's tax rolls.

As such, when done well, conservation easements are an example of an often-discussed, but seldom seen phenomena: a win-win.

### What we Hope to Accomplish

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), a *conservation area* is a type of national wildlife refuge that consists primarily or entirely of conservation easements on private lands. See [more](#).

DDWS is working in collaboration with [WildLandscapes Int'l](#), the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the National Wildlife Refuge Association, the Nature Conservancy, and the USFWS to establish the *Southwest Florida Conservation Area*. If successful, this effort will eventually result in up to 2,300,000 acres of the Caloosahatchee watershed being under conservation easements.

Located just west of Lake Okeechobee, the proposed Southwest Florida Conservation Area will sit within the Caloosahatchee and [Fisheating Creek watersheds](#). [A previous article](#) described the importance of Fisheating Creek to the Refuge. The proposed conservation area will be bordered on the north by the 745,000- acre [Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge](#) and on the south by Babcock Ranch.

### The Role of the Society

The task of establishing a conservation area is a complex administrative process within the USFWS based on rules that were established by the [National Environmental Protection Act \(NEPA\)](#). Part of that process is getting input from a range of stakeholders, including large landowners, sportspeople, and state agencies such as the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. The support of these stakeholders is critical to the successful creation of a conservation area. That support only comes if the stakeholders understand what is happening, feel involved and believe that their concerns are understood and being addressed.

Because of the dramatic impact the proposed *Southwest Florida Conservation Area* would have on the Refuge, the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society is helping to fund the work of a nonprofit organization, [WildLandscapes](#), that has expertise in providing an interface between groups of stakeholders and government organizations. The goal of this project is to engage the key stakeholders in a dialogue resulting in the successful and timely creation of the new conservation area.

The timeline for the creation of the Southwest Florida Conservation Area is undetermined, but it likely will be a lengthy process. We will keep you advised of progress as it occurs.

### **In Case You Missed It**

Farmers are using notably less phosphorus. See [more](#).

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