

# Private Landowners and Wildlife in Florida

The state of wildlife management and future opportunities



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Photo: Robert Hoffman, University of Florida

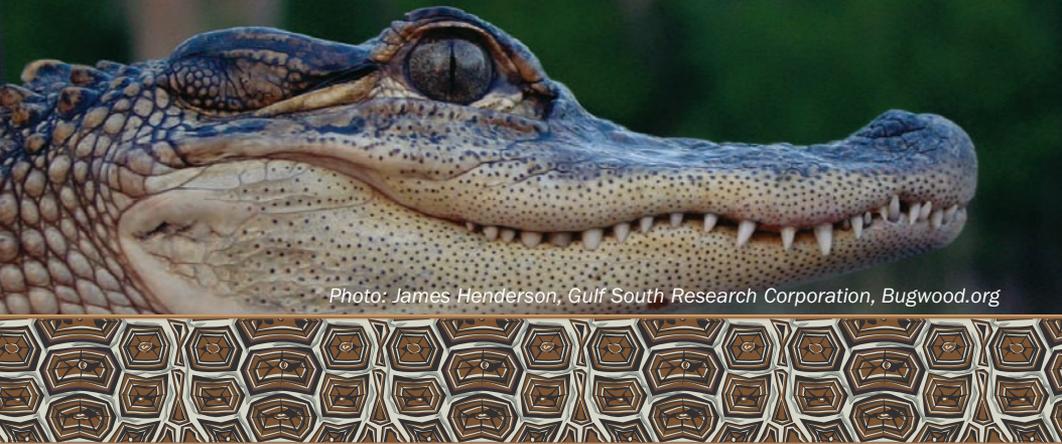


Photo: James Henderson, Gulf South Research Corporation, Bugwood.org

## Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge and thank all of the private landowners who participated in the focus groups used to design the survey and completed the survey. You have been invaluable in shaping the future of private lands wildlife management in Florida.

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I appreciate the opportunity to fill this out; I am always interested in managing my land for “natural Florida” habitat.

–Survey respondent

Florida’s natural lands and waters are invaluable to fish and wildlife and our quality of life. However, the recently published Wildlife 2060 report ([www.MyFWC.com/wildlife2060](http://www.MyFWC.com/wildlife2060)) projects a dismal future for fish and wildlife over the next 50 years, if our abundant natural habitats continue to be converted to urban uses in support of an ever-growing human population. The future for fish and wildlife greatly depends upon decisions made by private landowners who own and manage more than half of Florida’s natural resources. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) recognizes the critical role private landowners serve and is engaged in multiple efforts to support private landowner wildlife management. This booklet provides results of a recent effort initiated by the FWC to better understand private landowner wildlife perspectives.

During 2008, the FWC and the University of Florida Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation partnered to administer a “Florida Private Landowner Wildlife Survey.” The survey was conducted to better understand and document private landowner needs associated with wildlife management. The results will help FWC’s Landowner Assistance Program ([www.MyFWC.com/LAP](http://www.MyFWC.com/LAP)) and

likely many other agencies to tailor future services to landowner needs.

The survey was administered within Landowner Assistance Program focal areas, and directed at nearly 7,000 landowners that own 20 acres or more. Approximately 3,500 landowners were randomly selected to receive a survey and we achieved a 51% response rate (Figure 1). The questions answered are helping us better understand landowner demographics, landowner needs/concerns, and current levels of active management.

We thank you for taking the time to complete the survey, if you were selected. Given appropriate funding levels, we hope to conduct a similar survey in 2010 and look forward to your participation. This booklet was produced for private landowners and other interested parties and is designed to inform the reader about the survey results while also providing information about a few key wildlife programs. We hope you find the booklet useful and encourage your feedback.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission



University of Florida Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation



This survey was very important to our agency. By better understanding landowner needs and concerns, we are now able to provide specific programs to directly support their wildlife management interests.

–Scott Sanders, section leader, FWC



Isolated protected areas in a landscape of urbanizing and working agricultural lands likely will never be able to effectively conserve wildlife, as they are too small, fragmented, and of poor quality to provide the suitable habitat and connectivity that healthy wildlife populations require. In Florida—the state with the highest percentage of public lands in the Southeast—for 179 rare species, existing public lands inadequately protect at least 56 species. Therefore, wildlife conservation agencies must devise programs to encourage landowners to conserve healthy and stable populations of wildlife on private lands to compliment public lands programs.

Fish and wildlife agency personnel have been criticized in the past for designing and producing materials and programs that do not meet the needs of their audience. Wildlife programs sometimes suffer from a lack of insight into stakeholder attitudes, beliefs, and values. This can cause biases and misperceptions that can negatively affect the utility, acceptance and effectiveness of wildlife programs. The Florida Fish and Wildlife

Conservation Commission (FWC) realizes the shortcomings of designing programs without sufficient stakeholder input and this survey is one of the means by which they are addressing the wildlife needs of all Floridians.

**PROJECT AREA:** The FWC identified 11 focus areas in which to initially concentrate technical and financial assistance for private landowners (Figure 2). The focal areas were developed to target high priority habitats identified in Florida's Wildlife Legacy Initiative, large blocks of private land adjacent to public lands, and clusters of landowners near areas with successful FWC private lands programs. The focal areas contained three general habitat types: scrub, sandhill and dry prairie.

Scrub is characterized by well-drained sandy soils, dominated by oak shrubs, Florida rosemary, ground lichens and open patches of barren sand. Scrub can contain an open or closed canopy of pines, and is largely restricted to Florida.

Sandhill is the elevated dry portion of the high pine ecosystem. It is typified by sandy soils, an open canopy of primarily pine and some



Photo: Brandon Schad, FWC



oak, and an understory of perennial grasses and forbs. Sandhill high pine is found throughout the coastal plain from Alabama and east Texas to southeastern Virginia.

Dry prairie is dominated by expanses of nearly treeless areas of grasses and forbs, acidic soils, and sparse palmettos and shrubs. Dry prairie can become covered with water in the height of the summer rainy season.

**METHODS:** We developed a mail back questionnaire survey based on FWC regional coordinator and private lands biologist surveys and private landowner focus groups. The questionnaire included items that measured land use, wildlife management activities, wildlife enterprises, wildlife recreation, and landowner demographics. We also asked a series of questions about wildlife management financial assistance and planning programs. Our target group was landowners who owned 20 or more acres in the focus areas. Addresses were obtained using the Florida property tax parcel Geographic Information System database. We administered surveys to a random sample of 3,377 landowners, stratified by

the 11 focal areas using a five-contact mailing. This included a pre-letter, the survey, a post card reminder, a replacement survey for nonrespondents, and a third survey for nonrespondents (Figure 1).

The data were analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques. Focus areas were grouped regionally based on demographic and land use variables to facilitate analysis and future wildlife program delivery.

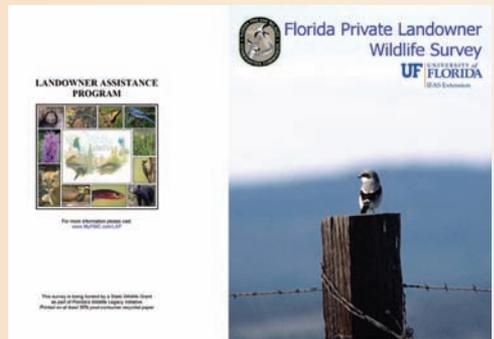


Figure 1: Florida Private Landowner Wildlife Survey questionnaire cover.



Photo: William M. Giuliano, University of Florida

**RESULTS:** Of the 3,271 deliverable addresses, we received 1,658 responses for an overall response rate of 51%.

**Demographics and land use** - The majority of landowner respondents were 50-64 years old (42%), white (95%), and male (76%). Statewide, the most frequently reported income category was \$50,000-\$99,000 (31%). Most landowners had bachelor's degrees (25%), followed by some college (22%), high school diplomas (20%), master's degrees (12%), associates degrees (6%), doctorates (5%), professional degrees (5%), and less than a high school diploma (4%).

Statewide, landowners held an average of 1,129 acres with a minimum of 20 and a maximum of 330,000 acres. Landowners and their families owned their property for an average of 23 years. Seventy-one percent of landowners indicated their primary land use was agriculture, followed by development (20%), and recreation (9%).

We asked landowners to further classify their land use, detailing the amount of land devoted to different

uses. Landowners in the focal areas of the Panhandle and northern parts of the state primarily reported having planted timber and native forest. The central portions of the state were fairly diverse, while the southern areas were dominated by planted grazing land, orchards and groves, native range, and native forest.

Data were examined to understand overall patterns with respect to income, land size and land use (Figure 2). Osceola Scrub, Lake Wales Ridge, and South Florida Dry Prairie (South) were grouped together because landowners were typically from higher income brackets (\$100,000-\$149,000), land acreage was larger (1,316-11,934 acres), and lands contained a large proportion of native and planted grasslands (45-60%).

A second group (Central) was formed with Chassahowitzka, Citrus/Marion, and Brooksville Ridge as properties in these areas were moderately sized (336-1,161 acres), landowners had the second highest income (\$50,000-\$99,999), and land use was mixed between grassland and forest uses (30-40% grassland, 35-45% forest).

With our ranch management, we benefit both livestock and wildlife.

-Survey respondent

The final grouping (North) contained Apalachicola/St. Marks, Camp Blanding Uplands, Ecofina, and Lake/Volusia Scrub. These areas were primarily native forests and planted timber (50-85%), landowners had statistically lower

incomes (\$50,000-\$99,999), and the properties were small (224-758 acres). These groupings will be referred to as South, Central and North throughout the remainder of this report, respectively.

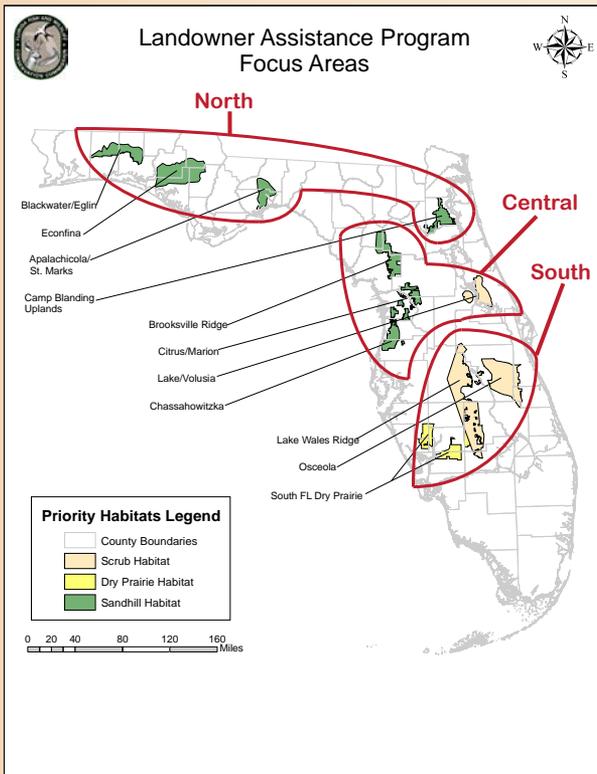


Figure 2: FWC Focus Areas grouped by demographic and land use similarities (i.e., South, Central, and North).

I really enjoy planting food plots for deer and other game. I like putting out feed for deer and other animals. Keeping a strong herd of deer and turkey flocks are key for me. I harvest only a small amount.

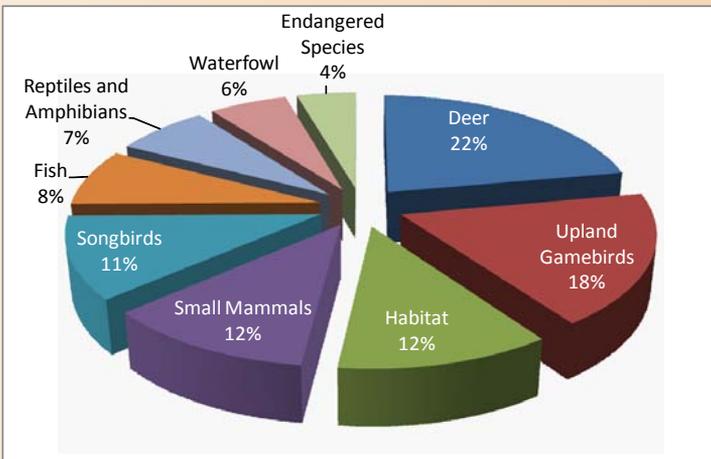
–Survey respondent

**Wildlife management and conservation** - Statewide, 68% of landowners thought that their regular land management practices benefited wildlife and habitat. Fifty-eight percent of landowners indicated that they actively managed for wildlife on their property.

Of the respondents who indicated they actively managed for wildlife, they primarily managed for deer (22%), followed by upland game birds, and general wildlife habitat (Figure 4). Considering the top five groups, there were differences among regions. Deer management was higher in the North than Central

and South, and higher in the South than Central. Upland game bird management was higher in the South than North and Central, but did not differ between the North and Central. General wildlife habitat management was not different between South and Central or Central and North, but South was higher than North. No differences were detected among regions for small mammals (squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, etc.) or songbirds.

We asked a series of questions about common land management practices that benefit wildlife including planting trees, grasses,



**Figure 4:** Wildlife and habitat managed for by Florida Private Landowner Wildlife survey respondents.



Photo: Chris Evans, River to River CWMA, Bugwood.org



shrubs, and food plots, feeding wildlife, using prescribed fire, and installing nest boxes or other wildlife shelters, with similar findings among regions (Figure 5).

**Wildlife problems** - Statewide, more than 50% of landowners reported having problems with wildlife. The South had more problems than North and Central, but there was no difference between Central and North. Landowners reported coyotes, hogs, armadillos, raccoons and rodents as the top five problem wildlife species.

**Wildlife recreation** - Forty-four percent of landowner respondents or their families hunted.

Respondents from the Central region hunted less than the North and South, and the North and South were not different. Statewide, 6% of landowners lease their land to hunters with no differences among regions. Twenty-two percent of landowners practice quality deer management. Only 3% of landowners conducted guided hunts and 4% conducted ecotourism, bird watching, or wildlife viewing tours.

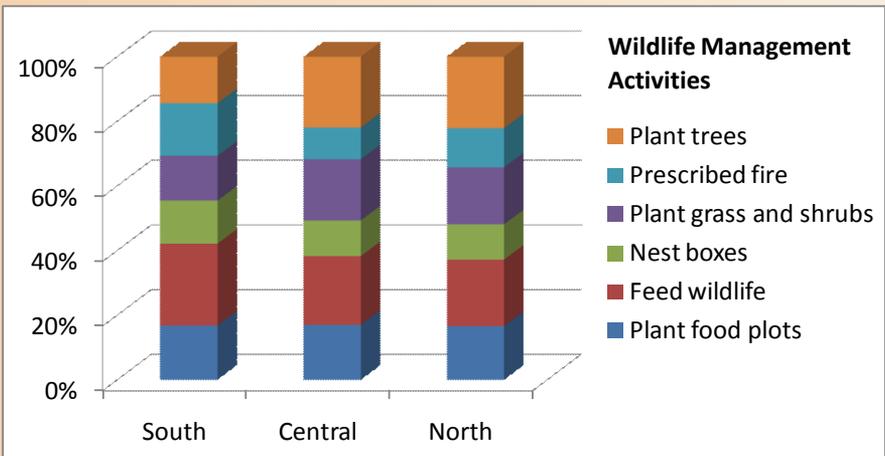


Figure 5: Beneficial wildlife land management activities reported by Florida Private Landowner Wildlife survey respondents.



Photo: Adam S. Willcox, University of Florida



### **Conservation program participation**

- Forty-two percent of landowners maintained a Greenbelt, which provides tax benefits for agriculturalists. Five percent of landowners had conservation easements on their property. The South had more reported easements than North and Central, but North and Central did not differ. Thirteen percent of landowners indicated they would be interested in placing a conservation easement on their property with no differences among regions.

Twenty-four percent of landowners indicated they had a land management plan, with no differences among regions. Of the people who had management plans, most were personally developed (50%), 29% had a Forest Stewardship plan, 13% had Natural Resource Conservation Service conservation plans, and 8% had private contractor developed plans.

Twenty-four percent of landowners indicated they have or are currently developing a conservation and land management plan, and 30% suggested they would like to develop

a conservation and management plan in the future.

Fourteen percent of landowners indicated they have received financial assistance for land management activities, with no differences among regions. The most frequent financial assistance program reported was the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP; 33%), followed by the Landowner Incentives Program (LIP; 28%), Conservation Reserves Program (CRP; 23%), and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP; 12%).

Seven percent of landowners participated in financial assistance programs for wildlife habitat management, and 13% of landowners indicated they plan to apply for wildlife management financial assistance programs in the future.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Wildlife management already plays a major role on private lands in Florida, with nearly 70% of respondents indicating that their routine land management activities benefit wildlife and nearly 60% of them actively managing to promote wildlife on their property. At the same time, more than 50%

**I would like some help to get a good management plan started. It would not take a lot of money to make my farm nice for cattle, gophers, rabbits, birds and many more species ...I could make this farm a thing of beauty forever.**

**–Survey respondent**



of landowners reported having problems with wildlife.

Because of this, the FWC is designing and modifying private lands wildlife management and conservation programs with the understanding that wildlife have benefits but also may lead to problems, sometimes on the same property. The FWC is preparing their private lands wildlife biologists to address these issues simultaneously to achieve individual landowner goals of protecting some land uses while increasing wildlife populations on the property.

The 44% of landowners and their families who hunt in Florida is much greater than the general public's 4% regional average and the 5% national public average.

With hunting remaining very popular with private landowners in the state, the FWC is currently evaluating their game species management programs for private landowners.

Our results showed a strong preference for deer management in the North, whereas landowners in the South showed an inclination toward

upland game birds. And, landowners across the state were interested in general wildlife habitat management. Consequently, the FWC is pairing a species focus with general habitat management tailored to regional preferences, where appropriate.

Even where FWC goals primarily focus on nongame or threatened and endangered species, tailoring programs to popular game species with similar needs can directly and indirectly accomplish those goals as many of these animals share similar habitats. Additionally, landowner-preferred species programs are initiating and strengthening positive relationships, potentially increasing the opportunity to promote other wildlife programs.

**Landowners should be rewarded for having endangered species on their property rather than penalized with rules, regulations and restrictions.**

**–Survey respondent**



Landowners listing agriculture, including forestry and livestock production, as their primary land use were in the majority (70%). Therefore, the FWC is focusing their private lands wildlife management programs in agricultural systems to increase quality and quantity of preferred species while minimizing crop depredation. Additionally, the FWC is supporting applied research studies that tackle technical issues related to wildlife and agriculture. For example, they have recently funded research projects investigating the effects of prescribed burning and roller chopping on vegetation and wildlife in South Florida, translocation of bobwhite quail to repopulate private lands, and wild turkey habitat preferences. The FWC, in cooperation with UF/IFAS Extension, is also adapting their outreach and extension programs to include a significant agricultural component through demonstration plots, field days and workshops.

Land management and conservation plans are popular with landowners. This is true for

both those who currently have or are developing plans and those who intend to develop them in the future. The FWC private lands biologists will continue to support and provide technical assistance to landowners that request planning assistance. The FWC has also initiated an information campaign. This brochure is part of that campaign to provide information to landowners about the benefits of conservation plans and the technical assistance programs available to assist private landowners with planning. Additionally, the FWC has expanded its financial assistance cost-share programs to focus on high-priority habitats. This will allow people owning land in those areas to use these funds for many different species including both game and nongame wildlife.

There is substantial participation in programs such as Greenbelt that reduce taxes or evaluate agricultural property values differently than other land uses. With recent passage of a state constitutional amendment to qualify private conservation lands for tax relief, the FWC will work closely with landowners wanting to participate.



Photo: Adam S. Willcox, University of Florida



This will likely be linked to existing planning programs including Forest Stewardship and NRCS conservation plans that could potentially certify landowners for tax relief or other financial assistance.

Although there is currently not much participation in conservation easement programs, 13% of landowners were interested in placing a conservation easement on their property. Conservation easements provide tax relief for landowners, while conserving the land in perpetuity and can allow for continued use including agriculture. The FWC will continue promoting conservation easements and strengthen partnerships with nongovernmental conservation easement organizations to provide information and technical assistance to interested landowners.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Private landowners in Florida continue to be the stewards of the vast majority of wildlife and wild places. The FWC is very encouraged by this and adapting current private lands technical and financial programs to better meet landowner needs.

The FWC realizes the primary focus of private lands in Florida remains agriculture, so they are designing and implementing wildlife programs that integrate agricultural and wildlife land uses for the landowner's benefit.

The best approach to achieving integration may be through holistic land and conservation planning. These planning processes incorporate wildlife into normal land use operations where possible and address wildlife issues contrary to the primary land use. These plans provide assistance to increase wildlife quantity and quality specific to landowner preferred wildlife species and habitat. Plans will also expedite targeted financial assistance and tax relief programs to interested landowners. The planning process will facilitate the passage of knowledge between landowner and agency biologists so that they can work together to effectively integrate wildlife management on private lands.



Photo: Johnny N. Dell, Bugwood.org



### **CURRENT WILDLIFE PROGRAMS:**

Many wildlife and habitat management programs were discussed in this report. Several of these have been reauthorized and expanded in the 2008 edition of the Food Conservation and Energy Act, a.k.a. “Farm Bill.” Below, you will find brief descriptions of programs currently available and their Internet addresses. On the following page, we also offer phone numbers for the FWC regional and extension offices. We encourage you to contact the FWC and UF/IFAS Extension for more information regarding these programs and application processes. Finally, for a complete report of the survey please visit [www.MyFWC.com/CONSERVATION/ConservationYou\\_LAP\\_index.htm](http://www.MyFWC.com/CONSERVATION/ConservationYou_LAP_index.htm) to download a copy.

#### **Landowner Assistance Program**

- Administered by the FWC, this program seeks to improve habitat conditions for high priority habitats. FWC biologists meet with landowners to recommend habitat improvement techniques and possibly offer financial assistance. [www.MyFWC.com/CONSERVATION/ConservationYou\\_LAP\\_index.htm](http://www.MyFWC.com/CONSERVATION/ConservationYou_LAP_index.htm)

#### **Habitat Management Workshops and Field Days**

- The FWC and their partners offer technical wildlife management workshops year round for the public. They are listed at [www.MyFWC.com/CONSERVATION/ConservationYou\\_LAP\\_workshops.htm](http://www.MyFWC.com/CONSERVATION/ConservationYou_LAP_workshops.htm)

#### **Wildlife Habitat Management Calendar**

- The FWC and other partners produce an annual calendar with wildlife management tips and critical dates. Contact your FWC regional office for a copy.

#### **Forest Stewardship Program**

- Administered by Florida’s Division of Forestry, it helps landowners develop plans to improve forestlands and the environment. Both the FWC private lands biologists and IFAS Extension help implement this program. [www.fl-dof.com/forest\\_management/cfa\\_steward\\_index.html](http://www.fl-dof.com/forest_management/cfa_steward_index.html)

**UF/IFAS Wildlife Extension** - The IFAS Wildlife Extension program offers many wildlife management programs for private landowners in Florida. You should contact your local county extension office or the State Wildlife Specialist for further information.

[www.solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/](http://www.solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/)

# How do I find out more about the issues in this survey? –Survey respondent



**Farm Bill Programs** - The Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency administer many programs designed to assist landowners, groups, and communities with conservation and maintenance of natural resources. One of the most important programs is Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) which helps landowners develop a “whole farm plan.” To learn more about CTA and many other Farm Bill Programs please visit: [www.fl.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/index.html](http://www.fl.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/index.html)

**Partners for Fish and Wildlife** - Administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, this program seeks to efficiently achieve voluntary habitat restoration on private lands, through financial and technical assistance, for the benefit of Federal Trust Species. [www.fws.gov/partners/](http://www.fws.gov/partners/)

**Other useful links for landowners** - Florida Forest Steward Newsletter: [www.sfrc.ufl.edu/Extension/florida\\_forestry\\_information/additional\\_pages/newsletter.html](http://www.sfrc.ufl.edu/Extension/florida_forestry_information/additional_pages/newsletter.html)

Florida Invasive Species Partnership: [www.floridainvasives.org/index.html](http://www.floridainvasives.org/index.html)

Private Landowner Virtual Network: [www.privatelandownernetwork.com](http://www.privatelandownernetwork.com)

**CONTACT INFORMATION:** Please contact your regional FWC office by phone or email. They can provide you with more information regarding private lands programs and answer questions you may have. You can e-mail the FWC private lands regional coordinators here: [www.MyFWC.com/CONSERVATION/ConservationYou\\_LAP\\_contact.htm](http://www.MyFWC.com/CONSERVATION/ConservationYou_LAP_contact.htm)

**Northwest Region**  
**850-265-3676**

**Southwest Region**  
**863-648-3200**

**North Central Region**  
**386-758-0525**

**South Region**  
**561-625-5122**

**Northeast Region**  
**352-732-1225**

You can also contact your local UF/IFAS County Extension office or Bill Giuliano, the State Wildlife Specialist, for further information on these programs: 352-846-0575 or e-mail [docg@ufl.edu](mailto:docg@ufl.edu)



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