



GULF COAST CONSERVANCY

"Working to Keep the Nature Coast Natural"

Post Office Box 738 Aripeka, Florida 34679

SWFWMD to Trade Valuable Bear Habitat to Developer

In an apparent reversal of an original land acquisition decision, Southwest Florida Water Management District's (SWFWMD) Land Resources Department is asking their Basin and Governing Boards for permission to trade 90 acres of core bear habitat known as the Wooley parcel to developers of SunWest Harbortowne. The swap could be approved as early as February of this year.

If approved, the swap will allow developers to include a private golf course in their proposed SunWest Harbortowne Development of Regional Impact. Scientists who have studied the local bear population have concluded that the resulting loss of core black bear habitat could result in the extinction of the Chassahowitzka bear population, the smallest independent population known in the United States. The future of these bears will be decided with this decision.

Renowned wildlife biologist David Maehr, Ph.D. was commissioned by SWFWMD to study this local bear population, and his 5-year study revealed that the Wooley parcel was part of the home range of several bears and a denning site for one female bear. In a memorandum written shortly before his untimely death in a plane crash last spring, Dr. Maehr assessed the viability of the Chassahowitzka bear population, stating "What this population needs is *expanding* suitable habitat, not the continued fragmentation and outright loss of the unique forests in the region." He concluded that the Chassahowitzka black bears can survive with proactive conservation efforts focused on preserving their remaining core habitat.

Tom Hctor, Ph.D., of the GeoPlan Center at the University of Florida, recently modeled the effect of the proposed land swap on black bear habitat and determined that over 700 acres of habitat would be lost both directly by conversion to development and by isolation of remaining habitat south of the DRI.

Conservation land swaps should only occur when there is a **clear and very significant benefit to natural resource conservation.** Given the large negative impact to the Greater Chassahowitzka Ecosystem bear population that will occur if this land swap proceeds, **this important test for functional land swaps has not been met,** and SWFWMD would be violating their commitment (and the public trust) to pursue policy to protect our unique and increasingly fragile natural resources.

BACKGROUND:

SWFWMD acquired the 90-acre Wooley property in 2001. In a July 9th, 2001 memorandum to the SWFWMD Coastal Rivers Basin Board Executive Director, SWFWMD asserted that acquisition of the Wooley property provide the following water management benefits:

1. Preserve and/or restore natural ecosystems and their functions,
2. Preserve and/or enhance water quality
3. Protect habitats and associated wildlife resources
4. Provide flood protection.

In August 2001, SWFWMD requested and later received Florida Forever Trust funds to pay for the purchase. Between 2001 and 2006, the parcel was developed into a public access park with parking and restroom facilities. Longleaf pine habitat restoration is ongoing.

In the fall of 2006, Water Management District staff began the process of swapping the Wooley property for a larger expanse of coastal uplands/wetlands adjacent to other SWFWMD holdings. The stated rationale was

that an impending development to the north would isolate the Wooley property and sever core black bear habitat. At that time the District concluded that this swap would add value to their existing coastal holdings.

Since then, things have drastically changed. Pasco County's environmental lands acquisition program (ELAMP) acquired and placed in preservation the parcel to the north whose impending development had been cited as isolating Wooley. As a consequence, the Wooley property is now more strategic as black bear habitat and corridor than when SWFWMD originally purchased it. Wooley now forms a critical link in a chain of preserved core habitat for the Chassahowitzka population of the Florida Black Bear that stretches from northern Pasco across Hernando and well into Citrus County.

Nevertheless, SWFWMD has elected to follow through with the swap, trading land contiguous with other public conservation lands for land that will be effectively surrounded by development, unsuitable as large mammal habitat, and inaccessible to the public. Instead of providing a clear net benefit to critical ecological and wildlife resources, this proposed land swap will lead to significant loss of hundreds of acres of black bear habitat, which could result in the extinction of the local bear population. This decision to continue on with the proposed swap will be a disaster for taxpayers and for bears if it is approved by the District Basin and Governing Boards.

The Coastal Rivers Basin Board is tentatively scheduled to hear this issue at a meeting on February 12th, with the Governing Board meeting following on February 24th. **The Gulf Coast Conservancy urges letters of opposition to this developer giveaway. Address letters to the Chairs of the respective boards:**

Ms Judith Whitehead, Chair Ex Officio
Coastal Rivers Basin Board
Southwest Florida Water Management District
2379 Broad Street
Brooksville, FL 34604-6899

and

Mr. Neil Combee, Chair
SWFWMD Governing Board
Southwest Florida Water Management District
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