

## CHAPTER 2021-181

### Committee Substitute for Committee Substitute for Senate Bill No. 976

An act relating to the protection of ecological systems; creating s. 259.1055, F.S.; providing a short title; providing legislative findings and a purpose for the Florida Wildlife Corridor Act; defining terms; requiring the Department of Environmental Protection to take certain actions to support the Florida wildlife corridor; providing construction; requiring the St. Johns River Water Management District, in consultation with the Department of Environmental Protection, Seminole County, the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and the Department of Transportation, to issue a report that includes information and updates regarding the implementation of recommendations from the Little Wekiva Watershed Management Plan Final Report dated November 2005 by a specified date; requiring the Department of Environmental Protection and the water management district to review certain permits along the Little Wekiva River; requiring certain enforcement actions to be taken against non-compliant permittees; providing an effective date.

Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida:

Section 1. Section 259.1055, Florida Statutes, is created to read:

259.1055 Florida wildlife corridor.—

(1) SHORT TITLE.—This section may be cited as the “Florida Wildlife Corridor Act.”

(2) LEGISLATIVE FINDINGS.—The Legislature finds that this state’s population is growing rapidly and that lands and waters that provide this state’s green infrastructure and vital habitat for wide-ranging wildlife, such as the Florida panther, need to be preserved and protected. The Legislature further finds that the Florida wildlife corridor is an existing physical, geographically defined area consisting of more than 18 million acres of land, 10 million of which are conservation lands.

(3) PURPOSE.—The purpose of this act, and of the Florida wildlife corridor itself, is to create incentives for conservation and sustainable development while sustaining and conserving the green infrastructure that is the foundation of this state’s economy and quality of life by doing all of the following:

(a) Maintaining wildlife access to the habitats needed to allow for migration of and genetic exchange amongst regional wildlife populations.

(b) Preventing fragmentation of wildlife habitats.

(c) Protecting the headwaters of major watersheds, including the Everglades and the St. Johns River.

(d) Providing ecological connectivity of the lands needed for flood and sea-level rise resiliency and large-scale ecosystem functions, such as water management and prescribed burns essential for land management and restoration.

(e) Preserving and protecting land and waters that are not only vital to wildlife but are critical to this state's groundwater recharge and that serve as watersheds that provide drinking water to most Floridians and help maintain the health of downstream coastal estuaries.

(f) Providing for wildlife crossings for the protection and safety of wildlife and the traveling public.

(g) Helping to sustain this state's working ranches, farms, and forests that provide compatible wildlife habitats while sustaining rural prosperity and agricultural production.

(4) DEFINITIONS.—As used in this section, the term:

(a) "Conserved lands" means federal, state, or local lands owned or managed for conservation purposes, including, but not limited to, federal, state, and local parks; federal and state forests; wildlife management areas; wildlife refuges; military bases and airports with conservation lands; properties owned by land trusts and managed for conservation; and privately owned land with a conservation easement, including, but not limited to, ranches, forestry operations, and groves.

(b) "Department" means the Department of Environmental Protection.

(c) "Florida Ecological Greenways Network" is a periodically updated model developed to delineate large connected areas of statewide ecological significance.

(d) "Florida wildlife corridor" means the conserved lands and opportunity areas defined by the department as priority one, two, and three categories of the Florida Ecological Greenways Network.

(e) "Opportunity area" means those lands and waters within the Florida wildlife corridor which are not conserved lands and the green spaces within the Florida wildlife corridor which lack conservation status, are contiguous to or between conserved lands, and provide an opportunity to develop the Florida wildlife corridor into a statewide conservation network.

(f) "Wildlife" has the same meaning as in Article II of the Wildlife Violator Compact Act, s. 379.2255.

(g) "Wildlife corridor" means a network of connected wildlife habitats required for the long-term survival of and genetic exchange amongst

regional wildlife populations which serves to prevent fragmentation by providing ecological connectivity of the lands needed to furnish adequate habitats and allow safe movement and dispersal.

(h) “Wildlife crossing” means a landscape design element that connects two or more patches of wildlife habitat and that is meant to function as a safe conduit for wildlife over or beneath roads, waters, and other barriers to wildlife movement and that is designed to protect Florida panther and other critical wildlife habitat corridor connections and to reduce motor vehicle collisions with wildlife, to reduce the likelihood of injuries and mortalities to humans and wildlife from such collisions, and to reduce the potential for damage to motor vehicles from such collisions.

(5) DUTIES OF THE DEPARTMENT.—The department shall:

(a) Encourage all state, regional, and local agencies that acquire lands, including, but not limited to, the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the Department of Transportation, to include in their land-buying efforts the acquisition of sufficient legal interest in opportunity areas to ensure the continued viability of the Florida wildlife corridor.

(b) Encourage investment in conservation easements voluntarily entered into by private landowners to conserve opportunity areas.

(c) Encourage state land-buying agencies and state land management agencies to consider the conservation of opportunity areas as a multiphased project for the purpose of listing, acquisition, and management.

(d) Consider the inclusion of private funds to supplement the state’s contribution in its efforts to acquire a fee or less-than-fee interest in lands that contain recognized opportunity areas and conserved lands in the Florida wildlife corridor.

(e) Seek opportunities to attract new sources of federal funding and to strengthen existing programs to protect and conserve the Florida wildlife corridor.

(f) Encourage private landowners, through existing and future incentives and liability protections, to continue to allow their private property to be used for the preservation and enhancement of the Florida wildlife corridor.

(g) Encourage new approaches and novel financing mechanisms for long-term protection of the Florida wildlife corridor, including, but not limited to, public-private partnerships; payments for ecosystem services; blended financing for growth, resilience, and green infrastructure; and support for the sustainable growth of agriculture.

(h) Encourage state and local agencies with economic and ecotourism development responsibilities to recognize the importance of the Florida wildlife corridor in encouraging public access to wildlife areas and bringing

nature-based tourism to local communities and to support acquisition and development activities for preservation and enhancement of the Florida wildlife corridor.

(i) Encourage private investment in ecotourism focused on the Florida wildlife corridor.

(j) Encourage the protection, preservation, and enhancement of the natural value of the Florida wildlife corridor for current and future residents of this state.

(6) CONSTRUCTION.—This section may not be construed to authorize or affect the use of private property.

Section 2. (1) The St. Johns River Water Management District, in consultation with the Department of Environmental Protection, Seminole County, the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and the Department of Transportation, shall issue a report by December 31, 2021, that includes information and updates regarding the implementation of recommendations from the Little Wekiva Watershed Management Plan Final Report dated November 2005. The report must include, but not be limited to, the following information: a description of all projects or recommendations included in the report that have been implemented and their completion dates, an analysis of how the projects or recommendations achieved the results included in the report, an analysis of costs for ongoing operation and maintenance of the constructed projects completed, a list of permit violations which may have contributed to sediment buildup north of S.R. 436, an analysis of any new projects that may benefit the watershed, and recommendations and cost estimates for future studies or projects that may be necessary to identify new or potentially significant contributors of sediment accumulation in the Little Wekiva River.

(2)(a) The Department of Environmental Protection and the water management district shall immediately review, with the goal of identifying significant contributors of sediment accumulation, any permits which the water management district has determined may have contributed to sediment buildup north of S.R. 436 to assess whether the permittee is in violation of any permit conditions. Appropriate action to resolve compliance issues shall be undertaken pursuant to chapter 373, Florida Statutes, if the department or the water management district discovers a violation of any permit condition.

(b) As part of the review, the Department of Environmental Protection and the water management district shall review known violations of such permits since 2018 and attempt to determine, using existing information, what effects such violations may have had on sediment accumulation in the Little Wekiva River.

Section 3. This act shall take effect July 1, 2021.

Approved by the Governor June 29, 2021.

Filed in Office Secretary of State June 29, 2021.