

Bold Reforms Recommended to Stem Dramatic Loss of Florida's Rural Lands

Tallahassee, Florida – (October 23, 2007) 1000 Friends of Florida today released a study identifying strategies to stem the dramatic loss of Florida's rural lands over the next 50 years. *Working to Sustain Florida's Rural and Natural Lands: A Call to Action*, is a follow-up to the group's chilling report, *Florida 2060*, which included the projection that the amount of urbanized land in the State of Florida will double by 2060, based on current development patterns.

"Losing 7 million acres of rural lands to urban development is unconscionable," says 1000 Friends of Florida Chairman Emeritus Nathaniel Reed. Unwilling to accept this proposition, Reed met with some of the state's leading conservationists, developers, planners and agricultural leaders to help chart a different course for Florida's future.

Reed used that input as he crafted the report, *Working to Sustain Florida's Rural and Natural Lands*. It includes a series of recommendations on how to better protect Florida's vanishing natural lands, covering such topics as visioning and public policy, economic strategies, planning strategies and citizen involvement.

Reed notes 1000 Friends intends to work with Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson, DCA Secretary Tom Pelham, DEP Secretary Mike Sole, DOT Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos and other state leaders to help implement the recommendations. The report will also be presented to the Century Commission for a Sustainable Florida and other statewide bodies to incorporate into their recommendations.

Florida Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson stresses the need for action: "The environmental and agricultural communities are in agreement on this issue – the need for proactive and creative solutions to retain open green space in Florida. Without rural land, the environmental health and beauty of Florida will degrade, we will be unable to grow crops to feed our people, and the state's economy will be deprived of one of its largest economic engines."

Recommendations include regional visioning to shape a statewide landscape vision. "Instead of saying what we don't want, we should be identifying what we do want," says Tim Jackson, President of the planning firm, Glatting Jackson.

Currently, development is often considered the "highest and best use" for rural lands, instead of agriculture. The report includes the recommendation to allow the conversion of rural lands to urban development only in return for public benefit, such as the permanent protection of sensitive natural and agricultural lands. "This can be a valuable complement to the state's land acquisition program," notes Audubon of Florida Deputy Director Eric Draper.

Increasing state funding for the acquisition of environmentally sensitive lands is essential too, according to Charles Pattison, President of 1000 Friends of Florida. "We must fit the right acquisition tools to the right lands," explains Pattison. The report includes the recommendation to expand use of these funds to protect rural and agricultural lands and buffer properties. Less-than-fee approaches might be appropriate for agricultural lands, allowing them to remain as working lands, on the tax rolls, and under private stewardship.

The report also calls for the judicious placement of well-planned new towns, but only in appropriate locations derived from an ecosystem-based approach to planning. Reed explains that the citizens of Florida must be engaged in every stage of this process, from determining how much growth is appropriate and where, to helping to identify how to make infill and redevelopment compatible with existing patterns of development.

The report places emphasis on the need to support agriculture. “The agriculture of today may not meet the needs of tomorrow,” notes Peter Spyke, President of Arapaho Citrus Management, Inc. Strategies should be directed toward finding new ways for local agriculture to provide irreplaceable benefits to urban dwellers and natural systems. “As new roles for agriculture emerge,” says Spyke, “we must ensure that the land will still be available as a component of urban planning.”

The report also calls for incentives to rural landowners for ecosystem services such as water recharge and storage, sequestration of carbon, and buffering development. At the same time, state infrastructure investment should be directed toward urbanized areas, and annexation policies refined.

Current planning tools, such as Transfer of Development Rights, mitigation banking and Rural Land Stewardship Areas need to be evaluated and rendered more effective, according to the report. Florida’s farmers and ranchers have a strong sense of land stewardship, according to Sonny Williamson, President of Williamson Cattle Company. He notes, “Those who work the land must be involved in helping to shape such strategies.”

Over the coming months, 1000 Friends of Florida will work with the contributors to the paper and others to develop specific, implementable strategies. We are also providing input to Florida Department of Community Affairs Secretary Tom Pelham on improvements to the state’s Rural Land Stewardship Area program, explains 1000 Friends’ Pattison. Sec. Pelham has also stated that he plans to develop cohesive rural policy for Florida. “1000 Friends intends to participate fully in that process,” says Pattison.

“Our hope,” says Reed, “is that this project launches an informed debate and results in concrete strategies on how to best protect Florida’s rural, natural and agricultural lands from the ravages of development.” He continues, “We must work now to leave a better legacy for our children and grandchildren.”