

The Synergy Between Cattle Ranches and Conservation

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In our [last advocacy article](#), we discussed the fact Florida Forever as Florida's premier conservation and recreation lands acquisition program. That article also discussed how Florida Forever could have a positive impact on the Refuge. In this article, we will discuss a field trip we recently took to understand more about the impact of conservation easements.

Since the last advocacy article was published, we attended a meeting in Myakka City, Florida, at [Blackbeard's Ranch](#). The purpose of the meeting was to bring together representatives from appropriate groups across Florida to meet with ranch owners to discuss the merits of putting Florida ranchland into conservation through the use of conservation easements. These easements would be funded either by Florida Forever or by a similar program, the Rural Family Lands Protection Program.

The day included presentations from Dr. Paul Gray, science coordinator for the Audubon Florida Everglades Program and Dr. Thomas Hctor, director of the University of Florida Center for Landscape Conservation Planning. It also included a guided ranch tour conducted by Jim Strickland, owner of Blackbeard's Ranch.

One of the primary purposes of the meeting was education. One of our key lessons of the day was the large amount of land in South Florida that is currently used for ranching. The other key lesson was the synergy between conservation and low-density ranching. As explained by Drs. Gray and Hector, unlike land that is used for intensive agriculture, land used for low-density ranching has a relatively small amount of excess nutrients and it often supports marsh lands. In a low-density ranch, the marshlands benefit because the cattle eat the brush that would otherwise tend to fill in the marshes.

No decisions were made at the meeting. That was not its purpose. The meeting did reinforce our belief that Florida Forever can have a major impact on the Refuge. It also helped us to understand how to maximize the impact of the scarce Florida Forever funding by placing conservation easements on key, well-placed ranches.