



May 25, 2010

Jim Farr
Staff Director, Acquisition and Restoration Council
Office of Environmental Services-Division of State Lands
Florida Department of Environmental Protection
3900 Commonwealth Blvd. MS 100
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Re: Florida Forever Priority Ranking – Caloosahatchee Ecoscape Project

Dear Jim:

This letter supports a high numerical ranking for the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape Florida Forever project, for consideration by the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) at their next meeting. Please provide this letter and attachments to the members in advance of that meeting.

The Caloosahatchee Ecoscape project lies just east of Labelle, borders the Caloosahatchee River to the north and runs south to approximately the Twelve Mile Slough Florida Forever project. This letter provides in summary fashion a number of reasons why the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape should receive a high numerical ranking and the importance of the ranking to the area's future.

The Caloosahatchee Ecoscape is home to a number of endangered or threatened species, including Florida Panther, black bear, sandhill crane, woodstork, crested caracara, and other species that are of concern. If protected, this area would serve as one of the most critical linkages for Florida Panther movement in the state as it encompasses a significant portion of what is considered to be the dispersal zone as established by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Again, if protected, the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape could provide a true corridor for panther movement from south of the Caloosahatchee River to north of the river. Overall, the area remains in a fairly natural state, but restoration is needed in certain areas to make it more attractive for wildlife, including the panther, and to provide water quality and quantity benefits to the Caloosahatchee River.

Unlike many other priority projects of the Florida Forever program, the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape is relatively small, with roughly 15,000 acres. While the number of acres is small in comparison to other projects, the impact of protecting the remaining acreage in the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape would be significant. Recently, the Floriland Dairy property was established as a conservation bank for the Florida Panther, consisting of approximately 4,000 acres. As a result, only 11,000 acres remain to be protected. With a concerted effort and a high numerical Florida Forever ranking, this entire project could be protected in the very near future from any further development or fragmentation. This is critical if the panther dispersal zone is to be protected.

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There is a limited window of opportunity to protect the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape, as a result of the downturn in the real estate market, resulting in declining land values. However, prior to the downturn, the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape was under intense development pressure, and will soon be again.

Southwest Florida remains a desirable for development. When the real estate market returns, so too will the intense pressures to develop this area. As you will see from a review of the attached exhibits, starting at Fort Myers and heading east through Alva into Labelle along SR 80, development has already occurred. Given the past trends of development along SR 80 and considering the widening and improvement of SR80, it is likely that the development will continue to head east into the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape. Development already borders the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape to the west and southeast. If a concerted effort is not made in the very near future to protect what could become a corridor for panther movement to the north, this area will be further developed, essentially limiting future panther movement and repopulation of the panther to only south of the River.

Over the last eight months, we have been working with the owners of American Prime II LLC and The Estates at Port Labelle LLC, both located at the northern end of the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape, to try and achieve a conservation solution for these properties. The two parcels are commonly referred to as the Double Eagle Ranch. The Double Eagle Ranch consists of approximately 1,560 acres and includes almost 3 miles of river frontage along the Caloosahatchee River. The American Prime parcel is considered by many to be the lynchpin property for the dispersal zone.

The Double Eagle Ranch was originally purchased in 2004 for development purposes. The larger American Prime parcel is currently under contract and the potential purchaser is pursuing the creation of a panther conservation bank on the property, which would include restoration and would provide additional cover for the panther. As of the date of this letter, the potential purchaser and the USFWS have been working on such a solution and it is hoped that clarity for that use will be confirmed in the next few weeks. Upon receiving that clarity, we expect the potential purchaser to close on the contract and move forward with the creation of the bank. This is an effort we fully support and we are hopeful that USFWS acts quickly and sends written confirmation of the already verbally agreed upon parameters. If such a solution takes place, then the larger portion of the Double Eagle Ranch will be protected, and we can focus our energies on The Estates at Port Labelle parcel.

However, in the event the contract for the American Prime parcel does not close, the owner must preserve the ability move forward with other options, including possible development. The owner of the Double Eagle Ranch needs to do something quickly and while we will continue to work with them on a conservation solution, we cannot be certain that this property will not be otherwise sold or developed. While we understand that funding is extremely limited at the time, a high ranking may help to provide a conservation solution in the near future.

The Double Eagle Ranch, in its entirety, is significant to the region and the state due to its natural resources, wildlife habitat, geographic location within the panther Dispersal Zone for the Florida Panther and restoration potential. The Double Eagle Ranch has been identified by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Committee's Environmental Resource Analysis as a Strategic Habitat Conservation Area and has also been identified by The Florida Natural Areas Inventory as a high priority Landscape-sized

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Protection Area. With almost 3 miles of river frontage, a restored Double Eagle Ranch could be important to the water quality of the Caloosahatchee River. In addition, The Double Eagle Ranch is considered the lynchpin from a wildlife corridor standpoint as it is one of the last remaining tracts providing direct connectivity to Caloosahatchee River for panthers and other wildlife species.

Currently, like many other properties in the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape, the Double Eagle Ranch is being used to graze cattle. The northern portion of the ranch has been classified as improved to semi-improved pasture, primarily covered by bahia grass, dog fennel, ragweed and other grasses. Historically, the northeastern portion of the property was ditched and drained by a previous landowner for agricultural purposes. Based upon its soil types and historical aerial photos, a majority (987 acres) of the property could have been characterized as a freshwater march. Included in this area is also the remnant signature of a historical lake, known as Lake Bonnet. Lake Bonnet has been targeted for restoration by the South Florida Water Management District in the past and feasibility studies have been completed as well.

Over the decades, ownership and uses of the area has changed multiple times, altering its natural plant and animal communities. We believe that a great opportunity exists for the Double Eagle Ranch to be protected and then restored, if funding can be arranged quickly. In addition, several agencies including NRCS, Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and environmental organizations including the Defenders of Wildlife, Audubon of Florida, The Conservancy of Southwest Florida, The Nature Conservancy and many others have expressed interest to try and protect the Double Eagle Ranch and the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape as a whole.

As previously mentioned, the property is currently under contract but has not yet closed. We hope the potential purchaser closes on the sale to pursue the Panther Conservation Bank, but a high ranking of this Florida Forever project would provide other alternatives in case the closing does not take place.

We hope this information is helpful. Please contact me with any questions or comments.

Sincerely,

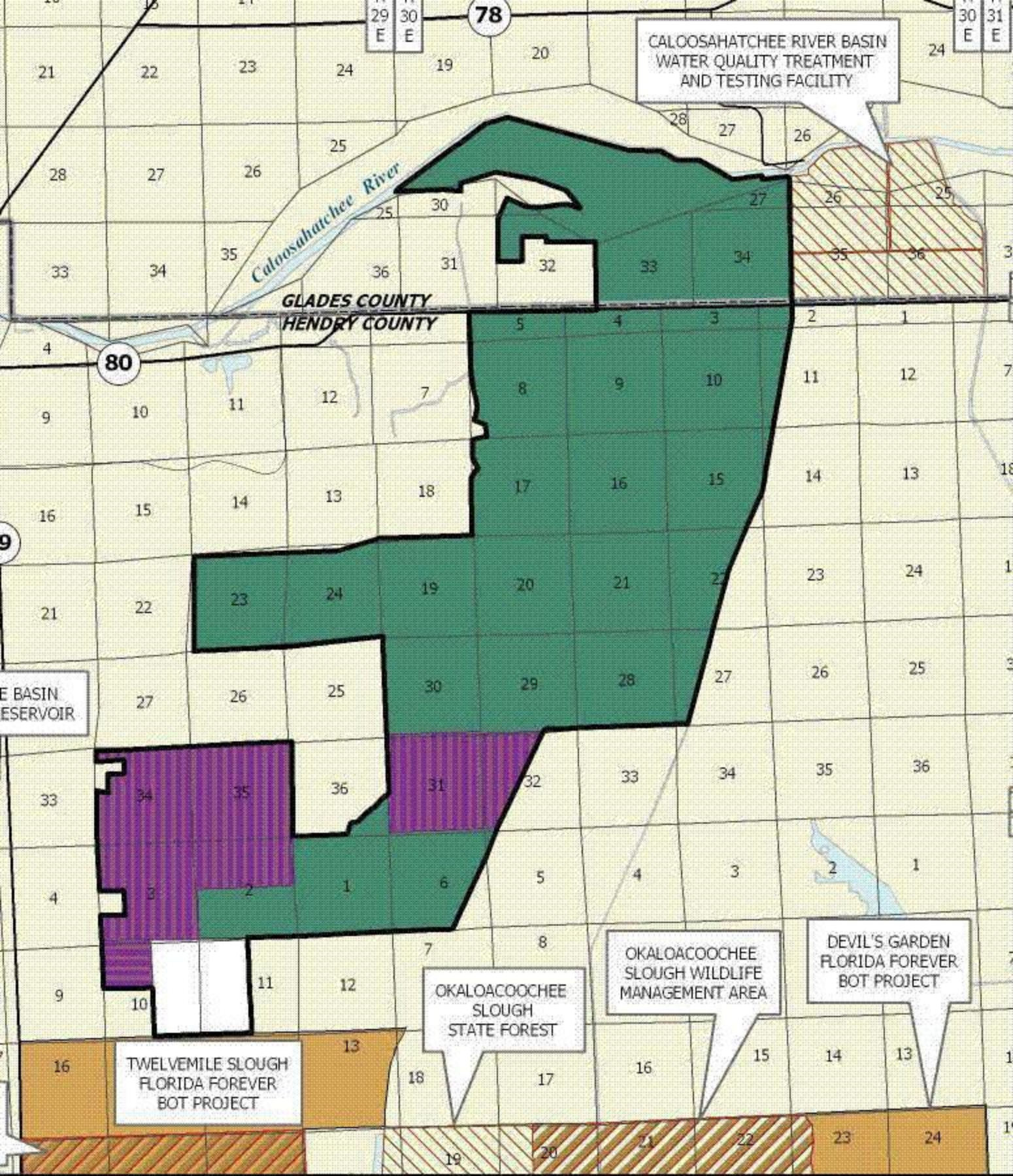


Ernie Cox
President

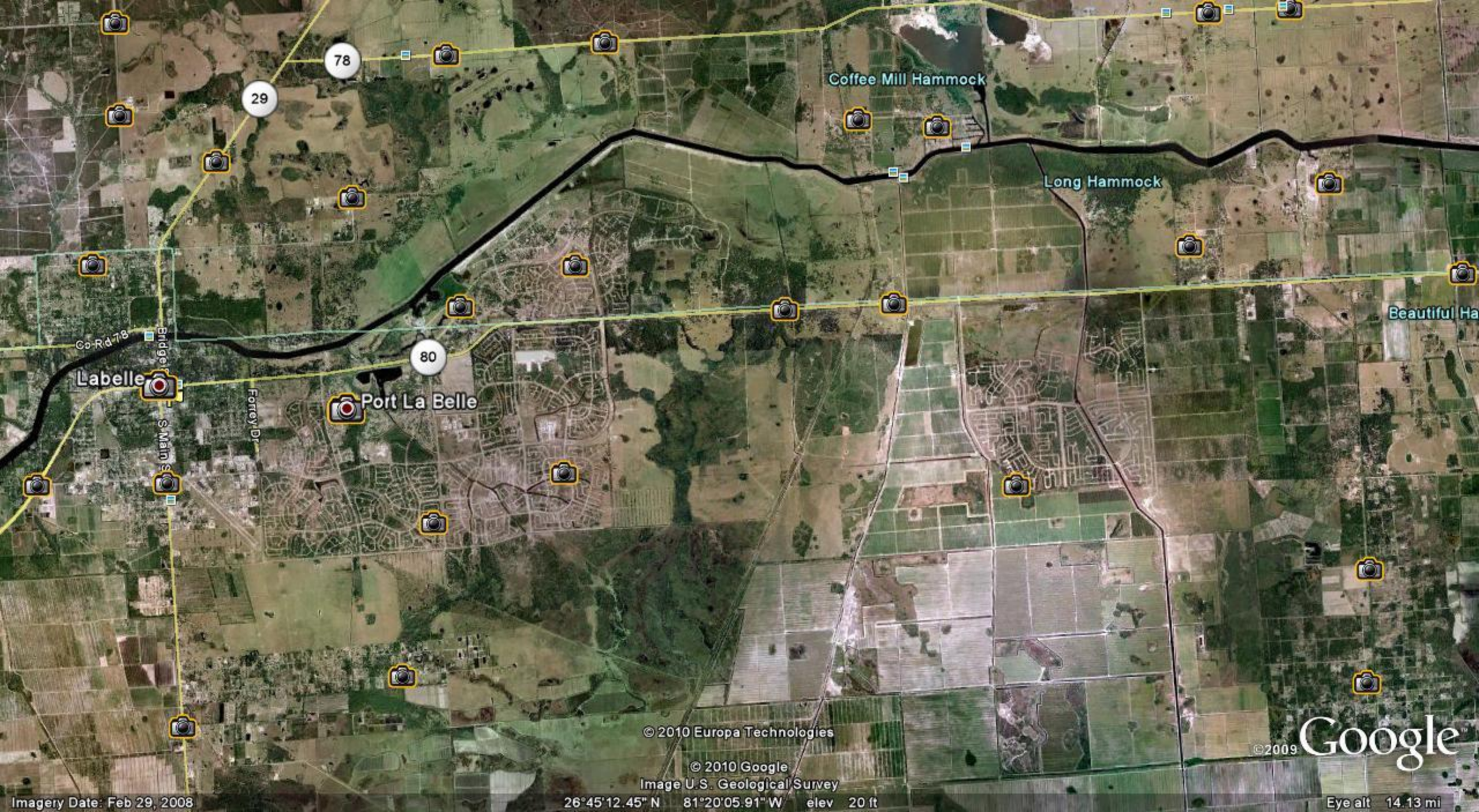
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Enclosures

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CALOOSAHATCHEE ECOSCAPE



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Coffee Mill Hammock

Long Hammock

Beautiful Ha

Labelle

Port La Belle

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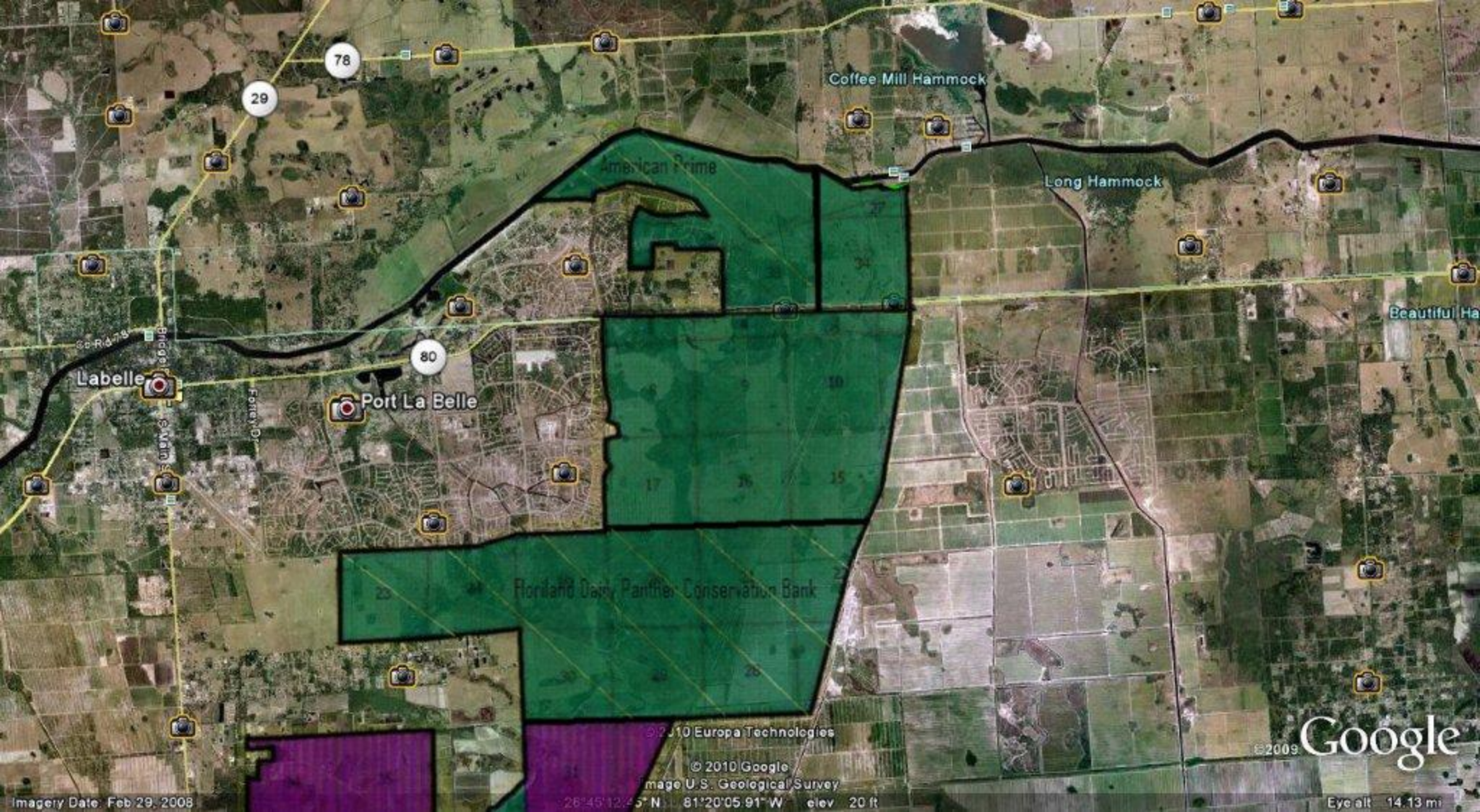
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Coffee Mill Hammock

Long Hammock

Beautiful Ha

American Prime

Port La Belle

Labelle

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