

**Closing preserves may be costly**

■ **Conservationists say county's cost-cutting plan to save \$191K may cost more in the long run**

**By Susan Burgess**

Special to Treasure Coast Newspapers

ST. LUCIE COUNTY — A proposed county cost-cutting measure to save \$191,000 by temporarily closing 11 nature preserves for up to three years has some conservationists wondering if the move would cost more than it saves.

“The costs to maintain the preserves to keep out the exotic vegetation and then the start-up costs when they reopen them could be so high that they are being penny wise and pound foolish,” said Conservation Alliance President George Jones, former southeast Florida region state parks director for the state Department of Environmental Protection.

“I’ve been through these budget cuts (as state parks director) and I know what it’s like, but the Conservation Alliance can’t support this,” he said.

If there were no or limited maintenance, that would be a problem, said Conservation Alliance member and former

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**PRESERVES**

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Riverkeeper Kevin Stinnette.

“What distresses me is that if you don’t maintain a preserve — and the county has done a lot of work to

remove exotics and cut trails — t hree years of no maintenance would have a very adverse effect,” Stinnette said.

The proposal from the Environmental Resources Department came as county commissioners were considering budget cuts in recent workshops. No timetable has been set to possibly close the preserves, but county officials said the move could save \$191,000 “In trying to decide where we could save the most, we picked the sites that are the most intensive to manage,” county Environmental Resources Director Karen Smith said.

No date has been set for presenting additional information to county commissioners, but Smith said it will probably be in August.

Commissioners took a proposal to close the Oxbow Eco-Center on St. James Drive off the table. Commissioners said they want to keep the center open. It is popular with hikers, birdwatchers, kayakers and families with children.

All of the parks under consideration, which include the trail section of Lakewood Regional Park, Spruce Bluff, Paleo Hammock and Indrio Savannas, have trails and other amenities that normally are open to the public. Some are used by horseback riders, some are favored by mountain bikers and most are enjoyed by hikers and birdwatchers. Some have lakes suitable for fishing.

Jones said he believes families are turning to parks more because they can't afford entertainment in the current economy.

Liberta Scotto, a native of St. Lucie County and long-time environmental protector, said closing preserves to save money “would impact the public because they will not have access to lands they paid for with the bond issue they approved.”

The nearly 7,500 acres of preserves now managed by the Environmental Resources Department were purchased using a \$20 million bond issue approved by voters and matching funds from the Florida Communities Trust and the federal government.

The state puts restrictions on its money, Smith said, including requirements for public facilities and maintenance.

“The board asked us to find out whether the state will allow us to close any preserves temporarily and what the maintenance requirements will be,” Smith said. “We expect there will be some requirements including removal of exotics.”

Failure to comply with state rules could result in penalties which might include giving back the state's \$25 million in matching funds, she said.

Andy Brady, an Alliance vice president and Surfrider Foundation member, said he thought the county prided itself on saving natural lands.

“Seems like when it’s a matter of money, the environment always takes a hit,” Brady said.

**In trying to decide where we could save the most, we picked the sites that are most intensive to manage.”**

**Karen Smith,**

*Environmental Resources director*

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St. Lucie Preserves That Could Be Closed

- Indrio Savannas
- Tract G Indrio
- Indrio Scrub
- Paleo Hammock
- Teague Hammock
- Hackberry Hammock
- George Lestrangle Preserve
- Ancient Oaks
- Gordy Road Recreation Area
- Spruce Bluff
- Lakewood Regional Park’s trails