

The war on pythons: Florida Gov. DeSantis steps up the fight

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Gov. Ron DeSantis announced additional steps Wednesday to fight Burmese pythons, the giant snakes that have wiped out much of the mammal population of the Everglades.

The governor, speaking at a news conference at Everglades Holiday Park

in western Broward County, said state resources to fight the snakes would be doubled in the coming year.

DeSantis said the state has worked out a plan with the [federal government](#) to allow hunters greater access to Big Cypress National Preserve in the western Everglades. He said state agencies have agreed on a plan to fight the pythons in [state parks](#) and are working with local governments to remove them from locally owned land. And he said there will be annual Python Challenge contests to catch the most pythons.

"They're not native to this area and they're an incredibly invasive species," the governor said. "As these pythons have permeated through, they've really disrupted the natural food chain balance, they've threatened endangered species, they've decimated other animal populations. They can eat small alligators even. So they've been multiplying. We've been advancing [python](#) management policies for several years. There's been some success but we need to do more, and so we are here to announce some of the next steps we are taking."

Native to southern Asia, Burmese pythons that arrived in Florida through the exotic pet industry have colonized the Everglades, taking a huge toll on native mammals. Mammals such as raccoons, opossums and marsh rabbits have been wiped out of much of the Everglades. The huge snakes also kill and consume full-size deer. They can reach lengths of 26 feet, although the average caught in Florida is 8 to 10 feet, according to the state wildlife commission.

After the news conference, the governor's office put out a news release with quotes from other [state officials](#) praising him.

"We are grateful to Governor DeSantis for his bold leadership on this issue," said Eric Sutton, executive director of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

"I'm happy to join Governor DeSantis in celebrating another bold action for Florida's environment," said Noah Valenstein, secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. "Many Florida ecosystems are threatened by the effects of the Burmese Python. The Governor's leadership in coordinating state agencies, the South Florida Water Management District and researchers to address this issue will help prevent further infestation and preserve the state's native ecosystems."

"Thank you, Governor DeSantis, for your commitment to Everglades restoration," said Ron Bergeron, a board member of the South Florida Water Management District.

Matthew Schwartz, executive director of the South Florida Wildlands Association, said he supported attempts to attack the python population of Big Cypress National Preserve, one of the strongholds of the Florida panther. But he said he needed to see details to make sure the efforts wouldn't damage the preserve with off-road vehicles, which had chewed up many areas of the preserve in the past.

"We know what pythons have done to Everglades National Park. I go to the park and I see no mammals," he said. "The thought of that happening to the Big Cypress, one of the most bio-diverse pieces of land in North America, is just a terrible outcome."

"On the other hand, when the governor says—we're going to open it up to python removal—this is a very sensitive environment. We don't know what he means by the Big Cypress is inaccessible and we want to open it up. Does it mean he wants to drive off-road vehicles through the entire preserve to look for pythons?"

The state wildlife commission banned the private ownership of pythons in 2010, but that action came far too late to stop them from colonizing

the Everglades. With a camouflage pattern that turned out to be ideal for a marsh thousands of miles from their native range, they have become extremely difficult to find and catch. Various programs pay or encourage hunters to catch the snakes. While several thousand have been caught, state and federal officials have said they doubted pythons can ever be eradicated.

Bergeron, the Broward businessman and outdoorsman who serves on the water management commission, said the commission was increasing the number of hunters to remove them from its land, a program that has resulted in the removal of more than 3,000 snakes since 2017.

"Under the governor's leadership we're going to make a difference," he said. "And we're going to increase the pressure on a snake that is actually destroying all of our natural food chain."

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