

# Cattle ranchers want Florida to preserve their land. Will DeSantis, Legislature fund the programs?

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Cattle rancher Billy Kempfer would love for Florida to pay him for the development rights on his land, keeping it as ranchland forever. But it all comes down to the list.

His St. Cloud-based Kempfer Cattle Co.'s properties rank at 42 and 73, respectively, on a list of 258 properties that are priorities for the state to preserve. To buy out Kempfer and the other people who want to sell their land, the state needs way more money than it has—it would cost more than \$1 billion for all 258.

"There might be a chance for our first project but there's little to no chance for the second," Kempfer said, regarding the possibility of his 4,784 acres getting into the state [conservation program](#). "It is what it is and now it just comes down to what the Legislature does."

Cattlemen are banking on Florida's leaders to fund the programs that allow the state to purchase development rights. Those programs are underfunded and last year a planned \$100 million investment was vetoed by Gov. Ron DeSantis.

Meanwhile, ranchers like Kempfer grapple with whether to sell their land to developers for millions and watch the area they farmed turn into concrete structures, or sell development rights to the state and keep their cattle ranch in the family.

"There's so much of that going on right now, makes me sick, seeing everything ... all the apartments," Kempfer said. "We're not doing this for the money."

Even though many longtime landowners want to keep their ranching ways, the state may not be able to fully fund the [conservation programs](#) to buy their sprawling farms—even though some farmers are willing to take a smaller payout than they would get from a developer. Others, like

El Maximo Ranch, which sold 40,000 acres to FPL for \$212 million.

In Osceola County, more than 46,000 acres are on the list to be bought. While land value varies, in May DeSantis approved the purchase of nine areas for development rights at more than \$3,000 per acre, said Aaron Keller, spokesperson for the Florida Department of Agriculture in an email. So, at that price, the state would need at least \$138 million to buy out Osceola landowners.

The purchases take place through two common avenues: Florida Forever and Rural Family Lands Protection programs. The Rural Family Lands Protection Program is specifically designed for [agricultural land](#) still owned by the rancher, while in the Florida Forever Program, the land is turned over to the state.

Florida Agriculture Commissioner Wilton Simpson in October asked the Legislature for \$300 million to fund those programs, far short of the \$1.5 billion needed to purchase the properties on the list. That's a \$200 million increase from what was passed and then vetoed last session.

Still, Simpson insists he can secure the \$300 million in the upcoming session with the help of lobbying efforts from Conservation Florida and the Florida Cattlemen's Association, interest from senators in the agricultural sector and support from Senate President Kathleen Passidomo.

"I think that organizations like the cattlemen's association and others ... have really educated the legislators on these programs," Simpson said. "I think we have a good chance of getting at least \$100 million. I think there's a reasonable chance to believe that we would get \$300 million or more out of this year's budget."

In December, DeSantis announced his budget recommendations for

fiscal year 2024-25, which includes \$100 million for the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program, indicating a possible change of heart after his earlier veto.

"I think that, based on the fact that he's put it in his own budget, the Governor's budget, then I think that we've got a good chance of not having a veto this year," Simpson said.

Florida Cattlemen's Association and Conservation Florida plan to advocate through education and social media campaigns.

Roughly 27,000 acres of working lands are lost to development each year, Conservation Florida spokesperson Sarah Shepard said in an email. In Osceola County, Conservation Florida has worked to protect 5,000 acres of ranch lands and across the state over 15,000 acres have been protected, Shepard said.

"Our goal is that our combined voices will really emphasize the need to fund those programs and continue to fund those programs," said Traci Deen, CEO of Conservation Florida. "A sale of a conservation easement can be the deciding factor for a family as to whether or not to continue to ranch their land, and that infusion of funding can be the change maker when perhaps the family is approached to sell their land for more intensive use."

Dean Saunders is the founder and senior adviser at SVN | Saunders Ralston Dantzler Real Estate, who wrote legislation that led to the state buying development rights in the 1990s. He said state funding for so-called conservation easements used to be a higher priority and the \$300 million that Simpson is seeking is not enough.

"When you look back historically, \$300 million was what we used to get every year in the '90s," Saunders said. "The value of land has tripled in

that period of time so, you know, it just doesn't go as far."

As more people move to the state, the pressure on the already scarce resources increases, Saunders said. The biggest threats to conservation and agriculture right now are solar panels, he said.

"It's just with the cost of land and the values and demand for Florida land and we really need to get out there and conserve it before it all becomes solar farms," Saunders said, pointing to the recent Florida Power and Light purchase of 40,000 acres.

The original landowner of FPL's new purchase was cattle rancher Latt Maxcy who sold part of his acreage to investors and another part has bounced around the Florida Forever list since 2004 without being purchased by the state.

Florida Cattlemen's Association President Pat Durden, a seventh generation cattle rancher, and Kempfer argue that cattle ranchers and agriculture farmers are the best stewards of land for the Florida economy and environment.

"We are the original environmentalists," Kempfer said. "If we don't take care of our land, if we don't conserve our land, it's not going to take care of us."

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