

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C., 20240

Dear Secretary Haaland:

We write today to express our concern and opposition to any proposed wilderness designation for Big Cypress National Preserve (the Preserve). The Preserve has been home to the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida and the Seminole Tribe of Florida for centuries, and these sacred religious lands must be protected. As America's first nationally designated preserve, the State of Florida and the federal government have made—and will continue to make—critical investments to ensure the protection of the Preserve's wildlife, water resources, and sacred Tribal lands, while maintaining access throughout the entirety of the Preserve for all visitors.

Within the Preserve, the Miccosukee Tribe and Seminole Tribe are stewards to their homeland. With fifteen active traditional villages that are now cultural sites, and multiple ceremonial and burial grounds, the Preserve is sacred land and must remain entirely accessible. If the Preserve were to be designated as a wilderness area—which is defined by the Wilderness Act of 1964 as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor and does not remain”—this would restrict Tribal citizens' right to move freely about their homeland, limit access for hunters and fisherman, and lead to unnecessary restrictions for land management to properly respond to fires within the Preserve.

Big Cypress National Preserve welcomes roughly one million visitors every year and it is vital to the surrounding small businesses who rely on environmental tourism in South Florida. The Preserve serves as a realistic mechanism to spread important conservation education to all who visit. In Florida alone, it's estimated that there are over 900 established non-native plant and animal species. To note, not every invasive species constitutes a major concern, but the accumulation of several invasive species can create ecological devastation—as we've seen with the Burmese python in the greater Everglades region. Consequently, python hunting is a positive solution that addresses this challenging issue. However, under a wilderness designation, python hunting would be severely impacted due to the prohibition of vehicles and other hunting restrictions in wilderness areas. Additionally, various types of technology that may be used to track invasive species—including the use of drones—would be prohibited under the proposed wilderness designation.

Hendry County, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Tribal Nations, and many of our constituents have made their voices heard in vehement opposition to this proposed wilderness designation at Big Cypress National Preserve. Congress worked alongside these stakeholders to ensure critical protections were in place when establishing the Preserve in 1974, and any proposed wilderness designation would swiftly undermine these previous efforts.

From sacred cultural sites, to fishing, to hunting, to camping, the Preserve is a unique and beautiful area for individuals to visit and enjoy all that it has to offer. For these reasons, we request that you do not proceed with any proposed wilderness designation at America's first national preserve, Big Cypress National Preserve.

Sincerely,



Byron Donalds (FL-19)
Member of Congress



Scott Franklin (FL-18)
Member of Congress



Mario Díaz-Balart (FL-26)
Member of Congress



Michael Waltz (FL-06)
Member of Congress



Aaron Bean (FL-04)
Member of Congress



Jared Moskowitz (FL-23)
Member of Congress



Carlos Giménez (FL-28)
Member of Congress



Brian Mast (FL-21)
Member of Congress



María Salazar (FL-27)
Member of Congress



Laurel Lee (FL-15)
Member of Congress



Greg Steube (FL-17)
Member of Congress



Gus Bilirakis (FL-12)
Member of Congress



Daniel Webster (FL-11)
Member of Congress



Kat Cammack (FL-03)
Member of Congress



Bill Posey (FL-08)
Member of Congress



John Rutherford (FL-05)
Member of Congress



Matt Gaetz (FL-01)
Member of Congress



Cory Mills (FL-07)
Member of Congress