

A land grab

Orlando Sentinel
Editorial
March 1, 2006

Our position: Selling off part of the Ocala National Forest makes no sense.

This is a joke, right?

The Bush administration wants to support "rural education" by selling 300,000 acres of forestland, including almost 1,000 acres in the Ocala National Forest.

Doesn't this rob the communities of the very thing that defines them as rural? Are we missing something here?

Not only does this idea threaten the very communities it claims to provide for, it doesn't even make sense financially.

Charles Lee, senior vice president of Audubon of Florida, observed that it is tantamount to a homeowner taking out a mortgage and then using the money to buy groceries. He is right. It's foolish to burn up capital for ongoing expenses.

Yet that's precisely what will happen if Congress supports this nonsensical proposal.

At issue is the rural-schools subsidy, which compensates rural areas for the fact that national forests are on nontaxable land. The schools get 25 percent of federal forest-timber-sale proceeds, but those sales have dropped dramatically, resulting in a loss of revenue.

To make up for it, Congress passed the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000, which provided five years of stable payments.

That program ends this year, but the schools still need money. By selling chunks of forestland, the government says it could raise \$800 million to extend the program another five years.

Federal officials say the loss of land would be minuscule and that the plots are isolated, not the crown jewels. But in Ocala, maps created by Audubon of Florida show significant portions front rivers and lakes.

There is a real concern that land now belonging to all of us could become a private waterfront playground for those chosen few who can afford to buy and build there.

Maybe some less desirable parcels could be exchanged for more ecologically important ones. Selling them, however, eliminates that option.

Environmental concerns aside, the land sell off does not solve the rural schools' financial problems. If the government sells the land and it is developed, the result is a need for more schools and roads when there's not enough money for the existing ones.

myregion.org
In the News
Volume 4, Issue 3
March 2, 2006



The \$800 million the program is to generate is not that much compared to the \$63.4 billion in the president's 2007 budget request for education. Surely, some money for rural schools can be found in there. If not, the government ought to look elsewhere.

Even for a cause as worthy as helping rural schools, selling the nation's forestland teaches the wrong lesson—that it's OK to rob the country of natural resources to make a quick buck.

Rural families, more than anyone else, should know this is a bad idea.

Let's hope Congress sees the folly of it as well.