

**House Natural Resources Committee
National Parks, Forests and Public Lands Sub-Committee
November 9, 2021**

Testimony in Support of H.R. 4404, Kissimmee River Wild and Scenic River Act

Chairman Neguse and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about H.R. 4404; to amend the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to designate segments of the Kissimmee River in the State of Florida as a component of the Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

My name is Garrett Wallace. I am the Government Relations Manager of The Nature Conservancy in Florida. Prior to my current position at The Nature Conservancy, I was the Director of Federal Affairs for the South Florida Water Management District overseeing Federal interactions regarding ecosystem restoration including America's Everglades and the restoration of the Kissimmee River.

The Nature Conservancy is an international, nonprofit conservation organization working around the world to protect ecologically important lands and waters for people and nature. We have hundreds of expert staff working all over the United States on related issues to bring science and community engagement together. Our mission is to conserve the lands and waters upon which all life depends.

The Kissimmee River once meandered for 103 miles through central Florida. Its floodplain, reaching up to three miles wide, was inundated for long periods by heavy seasonal rains. Native wetland plants, wading birds, and fish thrived there, but prolonged flooding in 1947 prompted a public outcry for federal assistance to reduce flood damage to property. In 1948, the U.S. Congress authorized the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to construct the Central and South Florida Project, which led to engineering changes to deepen, straighten, and widen the waterway.

In the 1960s, the Kissimmee River was channelized by cutting and dredging a 30-foot-deep straightaway known as the C-38 canal. Before channelization was complete, biologists suspected the project would have devastating ecological consequences. While the project delivered on the promise of flood protection, it also destroyed much of a floodplain-dependent ecosystem that nurtured threatened and endangered species, as well as hundreds of other native fish and wetland-dependent animals. More than 90 percent of the waterfowl that once graced the wetlands disappeared and the number of bald eagle nesting territories decreased by 70 percent. After the waterway was transformed into a straight, deep canal, it became oxygen-depleted and the fish community it supported changed dramatically.

After extensive planning, construction for the Kissimmee River Restoration Project began in 1999 with backfilling eight miles of the C-38 canal. Three construction phases are now complete, and continuous water flow has been re-established to 24 miles of the meandering Kissimmee River. Seasonal rains and flows now inundate the floodplain in the restored area.

The Kissimmee River Restoration Project has returned flow to 44 miles of the river's historic channel and restored about 40 square miles of river/floodplain ecosystem. The restoration project – a 50-50 partnership with the South Florida Water Management District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers – was completed earlier this year.

One of the many reasons The Nature Conservancy is engaged in this discussion is that we own the 11,500-acre Disney Wilderness Preserve in the Kissimmee River Watershed in Osceola County, Florida.

Home to more than 1,000 species of plants and animals, The Nature Conservancy's Disney Wilderness Preserve is an essential part of the Everglades ecosystem and contains 3,500 acres of restored wetlands that act as nature's "sponges" in the landscape; capturing rain, filtering out nutrients and replenishing our ground water.

The core of The Disney Wilderness Preserve is comprised of what was once an 8,500-acre cattle ranch situated at the head of the Greater Everglades watershed. In the early 1990s, the ranch was slated for extensive residential and commercial development which would have spelled the end for the property's degraded—but restorable—wetlands, as well as the destruction of significant habitat for endangered plants and wildlife.

Through our on-going partnership with the Walt Disney Company, we continue to preserve and protect this land for the enjoyment of future generations and contribute to the ecosystem restoration in the greater Kissimmee River watershed.

As we celebrate the recent completion of the Kissimmee River restoration by the State of Florida and the United States Army Corps of Engineers, including the fully restored Kissimmee River in the National Wild and Scenic River program is the well-deserved cap to a decades-long restoration project to preserve the restored river.

As a nearby landowner and conservation organization, The Nature Conservancy in Florida supports H.R. 4404 and thanks Congressman Soto for the bill's introduction.

I am happy to answer any questions.

Thank you.