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NEWS RELEASE

Contacts:

Robin Lewis, President, Save Our Big Scrub, Inc.
352-546-4842, 813-505-3999 (mobile), LESRRL3@aol.com

Brett Paben, Staff Attorney, WildLaw Florida Office
850-878-6895, WildLawFL@comcast.net

Conservationists Successful in Appeal of the Ocala National Forest's Access Plan

Appeal Decision Results in the Removal of the 37-acre Rodman Pit as a Concentrated ORV Use Area

Tallahassee, FL – Yesterday, WildLaw received notice from the U.S. Forest Service that based upon WildLaw's appeal of the Ocala National Forest's Access Plan, the Rodman Pit Area will not be designated as a concentrated use area for off-road vehicles (ORVs). Under the Forest Service's previous proposal, the 37-acre Rodman Pit was to be designated as an ORV day-use area without specifically designated trails.

"This decision affirms our commitment to restrict motorized vehicles to designated trails in our National Forests," said WildLaw Staff Attorney, Brett Paben, who filed the appeal on behalf of Save Our Big Scrub, Inc. and Wild South.

Unmanaged recreation, including the use of ORVs, has been identified by the Chief of the Forest Service as one of the "Four Threats" facing our National Forests in the 21st Century.

"Unmanaged ORV use has been the biggest threat to the ecological integrity of the Ocala National Forest for years," said Robin Lewis, President of Save Our Big Scrub, the lead appellant in this challenge. "Now that the concentrated use area has been removed, the Ocala National Forest's ORV access plan is a model for other National Forests around the country to follow."

Other than the designation of the Rodman Pit as an area for cross-country travel, the environmental organizations that filed this appeal were largely supportive of the Forest Service's

Florida Office

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motorized access decision. While Save Our Big Scrub, Wild South and WildLaw still have some concerns over the implementation of the access plan – primarily related to monitoring and enforcement – these groups have never pursued a ban of ORVs on the Ocala Forest. However, these organizations believe that a system of well-maintained, well-marked, designated trails is necessary to significantly decrease the impacts of motorized recreation on the Forest.

In issuing the appeal ruling, the Forest Service Appeal Deciding Officer, Forest Supervisor Marsha Kearney, concluded: “I am reversing the decision for the Rodman Pit Area as a concentrated use area because this designation is not consistent with the Forest Plan.”

The Forest Plan is the document guiding overall management of the National Forests in Florida. All site-specific projects and decisions implemented on the Forests must be consistent with the Forest Plan.

The Forest Plan provides that in the “restricted areas” of the Forest, the portion of the Forest to which this Access Plan applies, that “motorized vehicles are restricted to travel on open classified roads and designated trails specified for their use.” The Forest Plan’s Forestwide goals and objectives also include “Provid[ing] a system of marked recreational trails and support facilities that will promote a variety of experiences for both motorized and nonmotorized trail users” and “develop[ing] implementation plans for a system of designated trails and marked, numbered roads...”

The Appeal Reviewing Officer, Michael Watkins, stated: “This designation would require cross-country travel which is not consistent with the Forest Plan. I recommend reversing the part of the [Decision] that designates Rodman Pit as a Concentrated Use Area.”

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The following contacts may provide the Forest Service’s perspective on this matter:

- Denise Rains, Public Affairs Officer, National Forests in Florida: 850-523-8568
- Marsha Kearney, Forest Supervisor, National Forests in Florida: 850-523-8549

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WildLaw is a non-profit environmental law firm whose mission is to defend the environmental integrity of human and natural communities through education, administrative actions and litigation. WildLaw is based in Montgomery, Alabama, with offices in Tallahassee, Florida, North Carolina and Virginia. On the web at www.wildlaw.org.

Save Our Big Scrub, Inc., is a Florida incorporated non-profit environmental membership organization located in Salt Springs, Florida, dedicated to protecting and restoring the quality of the Ocala National Forest and adjacent areas.

Wild South is a non-profit organization working on public land protection issues throughout the South.