



OPEN SPACE PRESERVATION



When the privately owned Babcock Ranch, a critical landscape connection between Charlotte Harbor and Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades, became vulnerable to urban development in 2004, the community's concern increased. The 91,361-acre property provides essential wildlife habitat, and houses one of the area's largest natural water storage tracts. Naturally, concerns were voiced about the need to preserve the integrity of this important stretch of coastal land—so the Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program (CHNEP) stepped in to facilitate a solution.

THE NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM IN ACTION

Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program

The CHNEP presented \$5,000 in seed money and a staff member to establish the Babcock Preservation Partnership, a grassroots initiative that raised funds and organized a coalition of stakeholders that could influence the acquisition and management of the property. The effort was a remarkable success that eventually led the state and Lee County to purchase and preserve 80 percent of the Ranch with ambitious efforts still in progress to ensure the remaining acreage remains intact.

To make it happen, a core group of stakeholders—including local

hunting, sporting and environmental groups, realtors, the water management district, private businesses, educators, citizens, and students—stepped in to donate time and resources to the effort. Chico's, the women's clothing retailer headquartered in Florida, got on board with a donation that enabled the group to hire another staff member to run the partnership and launched an advertising campaign that used the Ranch as its model-shoot location.

The newspaper in Lee County underwrote the design and production of 5,000 educational



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pamphlets for use during outreach events and direct mailings. Reporters, editors and an editorial cartoonist also worked to keep the story alive. A local resident also contacted family friend Jim Fowler, the well-known naturalist and TV host, who donated his time as spokesman for the effort. Lee County offered its helicopter and pilot to capture Fowler on video flying over the Ranch and explaining the importance of preserving the property. The messages aired regularly on local cable and radio stations—free of charge.

In addition, Lee County and a local restaurant, the Blue Pepper, underwrote the costs of two busloads of activists to travel to the state capital to testify at the state's Conservation Lands Committee hearing in support of purchasing the Ranch. Elected state officials were called, sent letters,

e-mailed, and visited to demonstrate the broad-based support for legislation to authorize the expenditure of state dollars to purchase the Ranch.

With over a quarter-million of local fundraising dollars and the support of the governor and other elected officials in securing state and Federal funding, 73,000 acres were purchased by the State of Florida and Lee County in 2006. This acquisition permanently protects water quality and quantity, provides habitat and preserves open space for generations to come, and demonstrates the strength of the NEP approach to facilitating cooperation among diverse stakeholders in order to protect and preserve the watershed.

Visit **www.chnep.org** to learn more about this and other CHNEP efforts.

EPA's National Estuary Program (NEP) is a unique and successful coastal watershed-based program established in 1987 under the Clean Water Act Amendments. The NEP involves the public and collaborates with partners to protect, restore, and maintain the water quality and ecological integrity of 28 estuaries of national significance located in 18 coastal states and Puerto Rico.

For more information about the NEP go to www.epa.gov/owow/estuaries.