



May 19, 2025

Florida Department of Environmental Protection Division of State Lands
Office of Environmental Services
Members, Acquisition and Restoration Council
3900 Commonwealth Blvd., M.S. 100
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Subject: Joint Opposition to Proposed Land Swap Involving Property within the Guana River Wildlife Management Area

We, the undersigned Mayors of Jacksonville Beach, Atlantic Beach, and Neptune Beach, write to you with our unified and significant concerns regarding the proposed land swap involving cherished property located within the Guana River Wildlife Management Area (WMA), which is an integral part of the Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve (GTMNERR) in St. Johns County. Our three coastal communities directly benefit from and deeply value the ecological integrity, recreational opportunities, and natural beauty that this interconnected network of protected lands provides, including Guana River State Park, the WMA, and the broader GTMNERR.

The property in question, situated within the Guana River WMA, is more than just a green space; it is a vital component of a larger ecological corridor, a crucial buffer against coastal erosion, and a significant driver of our local economies through nature-based tourism and recreation. Its diverse habitats support a wealth of wildlife, contribute to the health of our estuaries, and offer unparalleled opportunities for our residents and visitors to engage with Florida's natural environment. Furthermore, as part of the GTMNERR, this land plays a critical role in long-term research, education, and the stewardship of our valuable estuarine environment. The WMA's specific management focus on wildlife and habitat conservation further underscores its importance.

We are deeply troubled by the potential negative impacts that a land swap could have on this invaluable resource within the Guana River WMA and the broader GTMNERR. Any exchange of land carries inherent risks, including the following:

- **Potential development:** There are well-founded fears that the 600 acres within the Guana River WMA, if swapped, could be developed, potentially harming the sensitive coastal environment and undermining the conservation purposes for which it was acquired.

- **Ecological impact:** The Guana River WMA is a valuable coastal habitat, specifically managed for its wildlife and ecological significance. Swapping this land for inland parcels could have detrimental ecological consequences, impacting flood control, water quality within the GTMNERR, and the diverse wildlife that depend on this area.
- **Loss of public access and recreation:** The Guana River WMA is a popular area for fishing, hunting, hiking, and other wildlife-dependent outdoor activities. This public access, specifically within the WMA, could be lost if the swap goes through, diminishing recreational opportunities tied to this unique environment.
- **Precedent:** Approving this swap involving land within the Guana River WMA could set a dangerous precedent for future exchanges of protected conservation lands throughout the state, potentially jeopardizing other vital natural areas.

We respectfully urge you to carefully consider the potential negative consequences of this proposed land swap and to prioritize the preservation of the existing property within the Guana River WMA, recognizing its crucial role within the larger GTMNERR. We request a transparent and comprehensive review process that includes meaningful consultation with local governments, environmental stakeholders, and the public, as well as thorough consideration for the specific wildlife conservation goals of the WMA and the broader research and conservation mandates of the National Estuarine Research Reserve System.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this critical matter. We look forward to your response and the opportunity to discuss this further.

Sincerely,

Christine Hoffman, Mayor, Jacksonville Beach
Curtis Ford, Mayor, Atlantic Beach
Cori Bylund, Mayor, Neptune Beach

Cc: The Honorable Ron DeSantis, Governor; the Honorable Kiyan Michael, State Representative; and the Honorable Clay Yarbrough, State Senator