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March 19, 2012

The Honorable Rick Scott
Governor of Florida
The Capitol
400 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Sent via email to jon.costello@eog.myflorida.com, carrie.orourke@eog.myflorida.com, and andrew.grayson@laspbs.state.fl.us.

RE: Audubon Recommended Veto for HB 1117

Dear Governor Scott:

On behalf of Audubon Florida, I respectfully request that you consider exercising your veto authority on HB 1117 (Conservation of Wildlife) from the 2012 Regular Legislative Session.

This legislation allows private zoos and aquaria to lease state conservation lands in order to construct and operate breeding facilities for exotic wildlife, including large hooved animals like zebras and rhinoceroses and aviaries for exotic birds.

While Audubon wholly supports wildlife conservation worldwide, we question the necessity of conducting these activities on public conservation lands for the following reasons:


- (1) **Use is contrary to the intent behind acquiring these lands:** These lands were acquired with public dollars to protect *native* imperiled wildlife. The bill's proposed use could supplant native wildlife with exotic.
- (2) **Undercutting the Private Sector:** Improved pasture on private lands is abundant in Florida. Ranchers and other private interests are better suited to enter into these partnerships which could provide an additional source of income for agricultural interests. This would be a desirable outcome for all Floridians concerned with the pressure agriculture is under to convert to other land uses. The opportunity for zoos to lease state lands, likely for less than a private land owner would negotiate, is an example of government competing with and undercutting the private sector.
- (3) **Not Revenue Positive:** Any revenue generated by the leases would be offset by costs—both in financial and resource values. Financially, conservation land managers would have additional responsibilities to monitor for invasive exotic plants (escaped from animal feed), monitor fence condition, manage more complicated prescribed fires, and protect yet another non-conservation asset in the event of wildfire.

- (4) **Ecological impacts within the facility's borders:** The assertions that grazing would not impact grasslands and large ungulates are equivalent to limited existing cattle leases are inaccurate. These large exotics could cause the collapse of threatened gopher tortoise burrows, spread zoonotic diseases to adjacent private cattle herds or native wildlife, and their presence could alter native plant communities and inhibit the use of prescribed fire.
- (5) **Ecological effects beyond the facility's borders:** Fencing associated with these facilities would not just restrict the captive animals' movements, but would create a barrier for native wildlife moving through the balance of the public conservation land surrounding the facility. The presence of a facility on a portion of a conservation property would diminish the ecological value of the entire property, not just the portion occupied by the breeding facility.
- (6) **Eliminating public access:** For their own safety, the public likely will not be allowed access to their own land where these facilities are constructed.

Given the private land alternatives available for these uses, we could easily assume the legislation anticipates very economical lease rates from the state, which would make state land preferable to existing opportunities with private landowners. Florida's public conservation lands should be known for their wildlife, water quality and recreational values, not as an incomparable lease bargain.

Audubon urges you to veto HB 1117. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Julie Wraithmell". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Julie Wraithmell
Director of Wildlife Conservation