

DEP Steverson Persists In His Mission

January 29, 2016



Paynes Prairie South of Gainesville

Gainesville Sun editor Nathan Crabbe wrote an editorial Jan. 28, 2016 about Florida DEP Secretary Steverson who persists in his obsession to defeat the purpose of our state parks, in spite of criticism and advice to the contrary. Steverson is indeed the appointee of Mr. Rick Scott, who sees our best resources as objects to exploit for money.

Read on for this information and our thanks go to Nathan Crabbe and the [Gainesville Sun](#) for standing up for the will of the people.



Editorial: Public must protect parks

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Florida Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Jon Steverson should have gotten the message about allowing more grazing, hunting and logging in state parks.

Steverson has heard opposition to the plan from state lawmakers, members of the Florida Cabinet and the general public. About 300 people rallied Saturday in Gainesville against opening up Paynes Prairie Preserve and other state parks to such uses.

Rather than dropping the idea, Steverson has changed his rationale. He no longer talks about making parks self-sufficient, now portraying his plan as expanding resource management tools already in use.

Don't fall for it. The only way to stop Steverson's plan is for the public to continue to speak against it and encourage others to do the same.

"We'll win or lose either on action or apathy," said Jim Stevenson, a former chief naturalist for the Florida Park Service who spoke at Saturday's rally.

It's no wonder why the DEP secretary altered his approach. It was ludicrous to suggest parks weren't pulling their weight because they covered just 77 percent of their expenses, as Steverson last year told a state Senate committee.

The figure is higher than most other park systems and leaves out the Florida system's \$2.1 billion economic impact on the state, according to the DEP's own analysis. Florida's park system has been recognized three times as the nation's best and last year attracted more than 31 million visitors.

From the natural springs of North Florida to the coral reefs off the Florida Keys, Florida's parks protect and showcase the natural beauty that makes our state great. Steverson's plan would detract from the features that attract visitors while diminishing protections for the flora and fauna within our parks.

Public opposition helped pop a trial balloon in Steverson's plan: a cattle grazing program in Myakka River State Park near Sarasota. But in dropping the plan last month, DEP officials left open the possibility it could be considered at Paynes Prairie or other parks.

The same goes for logging and hunting. Local lawmakers have made clear their concerns about the incompatibility of those activities with camping, hiking and other park uses.

State Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam advised Steverson at a Cabinet meeting in August to delete the plan from his priority list. Instead of heeding the advice, Steverson shifted tactics.

At a confirmation hearing last week before a state Senate committee, he portrayed his plan as no different from the limited hunting, grazing and logging now allowed in parks.

"I am certainly willing to explore issues that have been used in parks to help us reach our resource management goals," Steverson said, as Floridapolitics.com reported. "I want to do more of that, and I want to do it faster."

Timber harvesting has been done in 34 parks in recent years to restore pine plantations to a natural state, while cattle grazing is done in a handful of parks on land previously altered for that purpose. Steverson is proposing to expand those activities to far more of the state's 174 parks to a level beyond what resource managers have determined appropriate.

With hunting now allowed in just three state parks, Steverson has hired the operator of a private quail hunting preserve to expand the activity to other parks. He told the Senate committee that he started a "Wounded Warrior" hunt while he was at the Northwest Florida Water Management District and would like to do the same elsewhere.

Such a step would just be a foot in the door. Members of the public must stop Steverson's plan in its tracks. While opposition led him to change tactics, the public must exert more pressure to get him to drop the plan entirely.