January 23, 2020

Governor Ron DeSantis
State of Florida
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399

Re: Oil and Gas Exploration and Development in the Everglades

Dear Governor DeSantis,

We support the recent announcement that the state of Florida plans to purchase 20,000 acres of wetlands in the Everglades from the Kanter family, taking oil drilling on those lands permanently off the table and protecting Water Conservation Area 3 for recreation and restoration.[1] This is a significant step to protect the Greater Everglades watershed from the inevitable harms caused by oil and gas exploration and development and signals that new oil drilling has no place in the Everglades.

Unfortunately, the Kanter-proposed exploratory drilling is not the only threat posed by fossil fuel interests to the Everglades. New exploration for oil and gas began in the Big Cypress National Preserve in 2017. While oil development has historically taken place in discrete portions of the preserve, new areas have been made available to the Texas-based Burnett Oil Company for seismic testing to explore for oil by driving up to 33-ton "vibroseis" vehicles off-road throughout 110 square miles, consisting mostly of roadless wetland areas. The oil exploration that took place in 2017 and 2018 caused significant damage within sensitive environments, including unique dwarf cypress forests, high-diversity marl prairie wetlands, and habitat for listed species like the endangered Florida panther.[2] This is only the first of four planned phases of seismic testing, which would ultimately encompass 366 square miles, or one-third, of the Preserve.

[1] Harris, A. Jan. 15, 2020, *Florida plans to buy and protect Everglades land in Broward targeted for oil drilling*, Miami Herald, *available at*: https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/environment/article239311568.html.
[2] Quest Ecology, *Seismic Survey Inspection Report Big Cypress National Preserve* (June 2019), *available at*: https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/seismic-survey-inspection-report-20190615.pdf.

Big Cypress National Preserve plays an important role in the Greater Everglades. It comprises 720,567 acres of a water-dependent ecosystem and is the western extension of the Everglades hydrologic system. Water flows on the surface of the Preserve in marshes and sloughs and below ground through porous substrate in aquifers. Big Cypress Swamp serves as a significant aquifer recharge area to aquifers that provide drinking water to nearby communities. Notably, the Big Cypress basin provides over 40 percent of the water flowing into Everglades National Park and is a vast hydrologic network—among the least altered remaining in South Florida. The Big Cypress National Preserve also contributes to Florida's tourism industry and related jobs. More than a million people visited Big Cypress annually from 2013 to 2016.[3] Conversely, Florida oil production constitutes only a small share of Florida's gross domestic product – less than 0.2 percent.[4]

Everglades restoration is a multi-billion-dollar investment, which could be thwarted by new oil and gas exploration and extraction. The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) has expressed concerns about oil drilling in the Everglades and the protection of the Everglades ecosystem, aquifers, water supply sources, the environment, and to prevent secondary impacts associated with any producing wells. The SFWMD also cited concerns regarding "potential interruption of sheet flow to the Everglades National Park if contamination occurs" and that such drilling "will be in conflict with the Everglades restoration efforts and the significant public and private investments toward Everglades Restoration." *See* SFWMD Resolution No. 93-18, which is enclosed.

Further, new Everglades oil exploration and development jeopardizes Florida's tourism industry, including visitation to Everglades National Park, the Big Cypress National Preserve, and other nearby public lands. The restoration and protection of the Greater Everglades ecosystem is vital to protecting Florida's environment, economy, natural and cultural resources, and drinking water supplies; and is better accomplished by prevention of contamination and environmental degradation, rather than attempting to clean up contamination and restore degraded environments after the fact.

Based on the foregoing, we respectfully request that you direct the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to assess the potential for a purchase or trade of the private mineral rights beneath the Big Cypress National Preserve. Additionally, we request that the Department require full restoration and mitigation of the extensive damage caused by Burnett Oil Company's oil exploration in Big Cypress in 2017 and 2018, and refrain from issuing any new authorizations to explore or drill for oil, based on the nature and extent of the existing damage.

Thank you for your continued leadership to protect and restore the Everglades. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns at 727-490-9190 or jlopez@biologicaldiversity.org.

[3] Frank Ackerman, Ph.D., Synapse Energy Economics, *Why Drill for Oil in Florida? Tiny industry, huge risks* (2018) 7, *available at*: https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/why-drill-for-oil-in-florida-tiny-industry-huge-risks_2018-10-22.pdf.
[4] *Id*. at 3.

Sincerely,

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Enclosures
Cc: DEP and NPS