



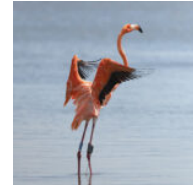
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# Cortez group wades into wetlands issues, preservation work

by Robert Anderson | Be the first to comment

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Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage board members listen Sept. 11 as Rusty Chinnis, center, gives a presentation at Fishermen’s Hall about a Save Our Wetlands petition circulated by Suncoast Waterkeepers at [suncoastwaterkeeper.org](http://suncoastwaterkeeper.org). Islander Photo: Robert Anderson

The Florida Institute of Saltwater Heritage’s board meeting Sept. 11 was a night of presentations.

The FISH board members heard from Manatee County resource management division manager Mike Elswick about the possibility of controlled burns at the FISH Preserve, 11655 Cortez Road W., Cortez.

FISH owns and manages the 95-acre preserve, which serves as both a buffer against development for the fishing village and as a nature sanctuary.

Elswick said the county uses prescription fire techniques to improve and maintain habitats for wildlife, as well as to deter exotic plant species from taking over an area.

“What we could do if you were interested is to try and find a plan for what habitats it might be useful for,” Elswick said. “Some of the mowing you guys have to do now, you might not have to do it as much.”

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group will need to discuss it after completion of a wetlands project at the preserve with the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program.

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With \$800,000 from the SBEP, FISH is completing the final leg of a four-phase project begun in 2000 to return the preserve back to its natural state.

The money is paying for the removal of invasive plants, the construction of a tidally linked wetland, the planting of native plants, and routine maintenance for up to three months after the project is completed later this month.

In other matters, Rusty Chinnis, chair of the environmental group Suncoast Waterkeepers, made a presentation to rally support against the Manatee County commission's vote to reduce wetland protections by reducing buffer zones.

Commissioners voted Aug. 17 to approve text amendments to the comprehensive plan and land development code allowing the reduction of wetland buffer zones by 5 feet or more.

"Right now, at a time when we should be doing more and more to protect the water quality, unfortunately, Manatee County is doing the opposite and going backward," Chinnis said, referring to the vote in August.

"I was at that last commission meeting, where I watched at least 36 people get up and speak passionately about why it was a bad idea. There were engineers, there were wetland scientists there and not one person spoke in favor of it. As soon as the public comment was over they called the question and voted 6-1 to approve," he continued.

Commissioner George Kruse was the dissenting vote.

Chinnis said the Suncoast Waterkeepers is circulating a Save Our Wetlands petition that as of Sept. 15 had more than 2,000 signatures.

He encouraged FISH members to sign the online petition at suncoastwaterkeeper.org.

"We need everybody's voice. We need the village of Cortez. We need the people who understand the water better than anybody to be speaking out and joining with us to fight this," Chinnis said.

Von Hahmann, a former county commissioner, said, "When I was in office, we increased the setback buffer required from the mangrove system from 35 to 50 feet."

She said current commissioners are making the changes under the guise of meeting

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Historical Society, spoke against the county commission's decision to move oversight of the historical resources department from the county clerk and comptroller's office to the county sports and leisure services department.

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She said the Florida Maritime Museum, 4415 119th St W., Cortez, which partners with the CVHS, is one institution to be impacted by the change.

Rogers also spoke Sept. 12 at a commission meeting, as did FISH board member Karen Bell.

“It makes sense that the county clerk’s office, which is responsible for maintaining most of the key public records for the county, has the expertise and the experience to manage our records and resources,” Rodgers said at the county meeting. “Given how well the current system seems to be working, we are very concerned about today’s presentation proposing to uproot the department.”

“As far as we can tell there has been no analysis about the advisability or feasibility of this move,” she continued.

Bell — president of Friends of the Florida Maritime Museum, which supports FMM through community outreach, education, events and financial support — also addressed commissioners.

“For the community, that’s very close to us,” Bell said of the museum. “That’s our history. We have our family’s artifacts there. So for this to be brought upon us with no notice, nobody to share with us that this is even a consideration. It’s hard for me to understand how that can be when we have a partnership with the county.”

She urged the commission not to rush to a decision.

The commission that day approved the change 6-1, with Kruse in opposition.

The next FISH meeting will be at 7 p.m. Monday, Oct. 9, at Fishermen’s Hall, 4515 124th St. W. The meeting was moved to the second Monday in October due to scheduling conflicts.

## About FISH

FISH, a volunteer nonprofit run by a 12-member board of directors, manages several properties in Cortez, including a 98-acre preserve, a boat shop, Fishermen’s Hall and the old Cortez fire station. The nonprofit formed in 1991 and is dedicated to the pro-



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sands to the oldest working fishing village in the state to celebrate the fishing industry and the bounty of the area’s local fishery.

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