SENATE PASSES LEGISLATION TO SAFEGUARD FLORIDA’S WATER AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Tallahassee —

The Florida Senate today passed Senate Bill 552, Environmental Resources, sponsored by Senator Charlie Dean (R-Inverness) to implement a statewide policy to preserve and restore Florida’s water and natural resources for future generations.

“Passing this legislation today is a win for Floridians,” said President Andy Gardiner (R-Orlando). “This legislation increases public access to conservation lands for recreational purposes, protects Florida’s unique environment, and ensures Floridians have quality water for future use through restoration and conservation efforts of our water bodies. I am thankful for Senator Dean’s commitment in spearheading this legislation.”

“Today, the Senate approved legislation to transform the way Florida conserves our most valuable natural resources, making certain that we take a statewide, comprehensive approach on restoring and preserving our water and natural resources” said Senator Dean. “This bill establishes a systematic and transparent process to ensure taxpayer dollars are allocated to meaningful water quality and restoration projects and implements best management practices to increase our clean water supply.”

Public Access to Public Lands

The bill requires the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to publish an online, publicly accessible database of conservation lands on which public access is compatible with conservation and recreation purposes. The bill requires the database to be available online by July 1, 2017. The database must include at a minimum: the location of the lands; the types of allowable recreational opportunities; the points of public access; facilities or other amenities; and land use restrictions.

The bill also directs the DEP to create a downloadable mobile application to locate state lands available for public access using the user’s current location or activity of interest. Using a smartphone, users could locate recreational opportunities throughout Florida just as easily as people can currently locate hotels, restaurants, and gas stations.

Outstanding Florida Springs
SB 552 creates the Florida Springs and Aquifer Protection Act to provide for the protection and restoration of Outstanding Florida Springs (OFSs).

The bill defines “Outstanding Florida Springs” to include all historic first magnitude springs, including their associated spring runs, as determined by the DEP using the most recent version of the Florida Geological Survey’s springs bulletin. The following springs and their associated spring runs are also considered OFSs: Deleon Springs, Peacock Springs, Poe Spring Rock Springs, Wekiwa Springs, and Gemini Springs.

**Northern Everglades and Estuaries Protection**

SB 552 updates and restructures the Northern Everglades and Estuaries Protection Program to reflect and build upon the DEP’s completion of basin management action plans for Lake Okeechobee, the Caloosahatchee River and Estuary, and the St. Lucie River and Estuary, and the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services’ implementation of best management practices.

The enforcement mechanisms for best management practices are enhanced both in these watersheds and statewide. Within the Northern Everglades Estuaries Protection areas, additional monitoring and site inspection requirements are put in place. Statewide, the bill requires that rules be put in place for site inspections and other practices, such as monitoring, to help assure the proper implementation of agricultural best management practices.

**Water Conservation and Water Supply**

The bill requires additional information related to all water quality or water quantity projects as part of a 5-year work program. The following must be included in the Consolidated Water Management District Annual Report:

- All projects identified to implement a Basin Management Action Plan or recovery or prevention strategy;
- Priority ranking of each listed project, for which state funding through the water resources development work program is requested, which must be available for public comment at least 30 days before submission of the consolidated annual report;
- Estimated cost of each project;
- Estimated completion date for each project;
- Source and amount of financial assistance that will be made available by the DEP, a water management district (WMD), or some other entity for each project;
- A quantitative estimate of each project’s benefit to the watershed, waterbody, or water segment in which it is located;
- And, a grade for each watershed, waterbody, or water segment where a project is located representing the level of impairment and violations of adopted or interim minimum flow or minimum water level.

SB 552 also creates a pilot program for an alternative water supply in restricted allocation areas, a pilot program for innovative nutrient and sediment reduction and conservation, and revises certain considerations for water resource permits.

**Annual Review of Water Supply and Conservation Lands**

The legislation requires the Office of Economic and Demographic Research (EDR) to conduct an annual assessment of water resources and conservation lands and modifies water supply and resource planning and processes to make them more stringent.

Concerning water resources, the assessment must include:

- Historical and current expenditures and projections of future expenditures by federal, state, regional, and local governments and public and private utilities based upon historical trends and ongoing projects or initiatives associated with water supply and demand and water quality protection and restoration;
- An analysis and estimates of future expenditures necessary to comply with federal and state laws and regulations;
- A compilation of projected water supply and demand data;
- Forecasts of federal, state, regional, and local government revenues dedicated in current law for the purposes of the water supply demand and water quality protection and restoration, or that have been historically allocated for these purposes, as well as public and private utility revenues;
- And, an identification of gaps between projected revenues and projected and estimated expenditures.

Concerning conservation lands, the assessment must include:

- Historical and current expenditures and projections of future expenditures by federal, state, regional, and local governments based upon historical trends and
ongoing projects or initiatives associated with real property interests eligible for funding under the Florida Forever Act;

- An analysis and estimates of future expenditures necessary to purchase lands identified in plans produced by state agencies or WMDs;
- An analysis of the ad valorem tax impacts, by county, resulting from public ownership of conservation lands;
- Forecasts of federal, state, regional, and local government revenues dedicated in current law to maintain conservation lands and the gap between projected expenditures and revenues;
- And, the total percentage of Florida real property that is publicly owned for conservation purposes.

SB 552 also requires the DEP to conduct a feasibility study for creating and maintaining a web-based, interactive map of the state’s waterbodies as well as regulatory information about each waterbody.

For more information on SB 552, please visit www.FLSenate.gov.

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