



## Preserving Old Florida

Before the sun crests the horizon, Cary Lightsey saddles up to round up the 250-head herd. Cary, his son, 6-year-old grandson and hired cowboys are separating the calves from the cows today, just like they do every May.

The Lightsey family has been running cattle in central Florida since the 1850s, but [with 1,000 people moving to Florida daily](#), development encroaches on their legacy and the natural resources that support it.

According to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#), in 2017 Florida was among the five fastest-growing states in the U.S.

## The Legacy

Cary and his brother Layne have put 90 percent of their land on 10 ranches into easements located in Osceola, Polk and Highlands counties. "It belongs to Layne and me, three generations, with our kids and grandchildren: 32 of us in all," he says.

USDA's [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) helped him restore three wetlands on 2,800 acres. The Lightseys acquired conservation easements on the rest of their property through other state and non-profit organizations dedicated to protecting sensitive ecosystems and open spaces.

In Florida the agency has provided financial and technical assistance for landowners to restore 184,792 acres of wetlands since 1998 and preserve 67,198 acres of agricultural land since 1996 through easements.

"A lot of good reasons for easements," says Cary. "Conservation easements preserve the land. This land is going to stay just the way it was."

## Betting on the Future

The Lightseys joined the [Florida Conservation Group](#), a coalition of ranchers that advocates for conservation easement funding. Julie Morris, the organization's president, formed the group to help landowners apply for easements with federal and state organizations.

She says development is encroaching from the north to south-central Florida into the northern Everglades and creeping from the east to the west coast. "We're in a race against time to protect our most sensitive areas," Julie says.



Ranching is Florida's heritage, dating back to the 16th century when the Spanish arrived.

The [total value of cattle in Florida exceeds \\$1 billion](#) and the Florida beef industry has an economic impact of \$900 million annually.

Florida lost an average of 62,028 acres of agricultural land a year between 1982-2007 according to the [National Resources Inventory](#), converted into subdivisions, strip malls and asphalt.

*The "Mapping Florida's Future -- Alternative Patters of Development" project used moderate population growth projections by Florida Bureau of Economic and Business Research to estimate approximately 33.7 million residents living in Florida by 2070, 14.9 million more than in 2010.*

*This [map](#) shows the land use patterns if development distribution follows the current trend. (November 2016, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, University of Florida's Geoplan Center and 1000 Friends of Florida)*

## Nature's Best

Pristine native vegetation, endangered species and rare orchids abound on the Lightseys' ranches.

Taking a break in a hammock not far from the cattle pens, Cary gazes up at a tiny Florida Tampa Butterfly Orchid growing on the bark of a 150-year-old oak tree.

Just north of the hammock, Tiger Lake spreads into the distance, wading birds border the water's edge and eagles perch on nearby Cypress trees scanning for prey. Cary has seen two endangered snail kites nesting here.

"This land is developing too fast. Once they develop it, it's gone – lost productivity that was going to feed a hungry world," says Cary.

Are you a private landowner interested in a conservation easement?

[Wetland reserve easements](#) provide financial and technical assistance to ranchers and farmers to protect and restore wetlands. [Agricultural land easements](#) provide funds to partners, such as state and local governments, Indian tribes and non-profits, to purchase conservation easements on agricultural lands.



For more information about USDA programs and services, contact your [local USDA service center](#).

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