



| Gregory M. Lein, Alabama State Lands

FOREVER WILD

Protecting Alabama's Public Hunting Heritage

Within Alabama, the context for many outdoor recreational activities takes place on public and private land. If you enjoy boating or water-skiing, you need space and water to accomplish those activities. In a similar fashion, many citizens of Alabama who enjoy clean water and outdoor pursuits like backpacking, birding, camping, canoeing, fishing, hiking, hunting, horseback riding, or mountain bike riding, benefit from the expansive areas of public land that support these endeavors. When we take to the field to enjoy these activities, often referred to as quality-of-life opportunities, many of us go to a national forest, state park, or wildlife management area. These are special places, but they represent a very small portion of our state's land.

The State of Alabama is 50,744 square miles in size, which equals about 33,550,720 acres. Within that space, public land with restricted development (state parks, national forests, national wildlife refuges, state owned wildlife management areas, Forever Wild land, and military bases; both federal and state ownership), amounts to 1,451,621 acres (Figure 1). This value equates to 4.47 percent of the land area (rivers and reservoirs removed from calculations). Despite Forever Wild's accomplishments over the last 17 years, we have a smaller percentage of public land in Alabama than any other southeastern state.

When we consider our citizens' interest in outdoor recreation, and add to that an interest in habitat protection and good water quality, we begin to recognize the importance of continuing this public land program, and the conservation of Alabama's natural resources.



Alabama's Forever Wild Program: An Era of Land Protection

Considering the many conservation success stories in Alabama, our citizens have much to be proud of. Our state is steeped in a rich heritage that is inseparable from our natural resources. In the early 1900s, Alabama was entering a new era as a state. Our forests and game were depleted, and landowners were left in desperate conditions during and after the Great Depression. The next few decades witnessed a steady and deliberate stewardship of Alabama's natural resources. It was a period of conservation. As hallmarks of our hunting traditions, deer and turkey were diligently protected, and gradually relocated to new areas of the state where they could re-populate, and later flourish. Public hunting areas were established through a statewide system of Wildlife Management Areas. Alabama's State Park system was initially created in the 1930s, in conjunction with the Civilian Conservation Corps, and over a 50-year period, 22 parks were developed. Many of Alabama's rivers were impounded to control flooding and generate electricity. While those efforts altered and impaired riverine habitat, they also created new reservoirs. Fisheries were established, and our state became a new destination for recreational fishing.

These tremendous accomplishments continued to grow through the 1970s, much like Alabama. As we entered the 1980s, things in Alabama became different. Our metropolitan areas began to grow at a greater rate, and the face of Alabama, which had long reflected our rural heritage, slowly began to change. Once Interstate 65 was completed in 1982, linking our state from south to north, the pace of life quickened.

Many people debate all of the causes, but Alabama's citizens came together in the late 1980s to introduce the notion of establishing a new program that could serve to purchase public land for conservation. The interests were many, and within a few years, a broad coalition of sup-

Percentage of Protected Lands in the Southeast

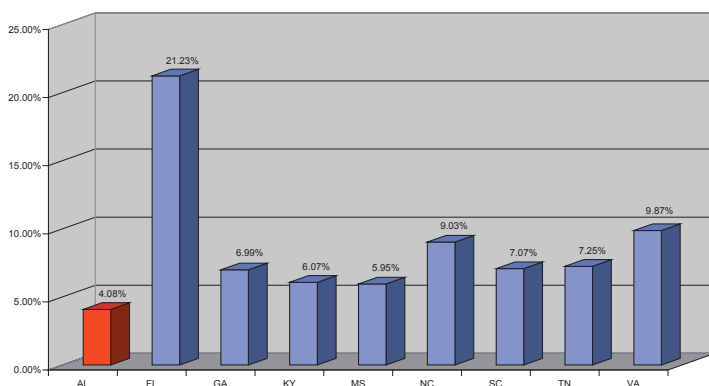


Figure 1. Percent of each state's land area that is permanently protected from degradation. Protected lands are managed for a variety of reasons, including, but not limited to, habitat restoration, recreation and protection of sensitive species. Data was obtained from the Protected Areas Database of the United States (PAD-US) online at <http://gapanalysis.nbil.gov>.

porters had mustered a broad coalition of support to lead a bill through Alabama's legislative process. Its intent was strong. Amend Alabama's Constitution to provide funding and structure for a dedicated land acquisition program. Through the leadership of then Commissioner of Conservation, James Martin, and after some debate over previous versions submitted in 1988, 1989, and 1990, a similar bill passed through the legislature in the Spring of 1991. The House vote was ninety-four to three, and the Senate vote on the identical bill was twenty-nine to one. This history demonstrates broad consensus among Alabama's lawmakers, mirroring the will of the citizens. The bill was ratified by the people during the electoral cycle on November 3, 1992.

The results were both surprising and rewarding. By a margin of 83 percent, Alabama voters approved the passage of Constitutional Amendment 543, creating the Forever Wild Land Trust. At the time, this level of public approval was the highest ever recorded for any state legislation establishing a governmental land acquisition program. Thus, in a move to compliment sound forestry management on private lands and a flourishing wildlife management program for our many game species, Forever Wild was created to serve as a new tool for Alabama's conservation toolbox.

Public Hunting

One of the most popular forms of outdoor recreation exists in the form of public hunting areas. Within Alabama, our effort to provide for these opportunities comes in the form of wildlife management areas. In the 1950s and 1960s, large landowners were eager to undertake lease agreements with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) to create public hunting areas. At the time, timber markets were still developing and the lack of abundant big-game depressed land value potential. Entering into lease agreements with the ADCNR made good sense because it placed resource professionals on-site where they could help protect the land and its recovering game species. Ironically, the success of restoring game species like deer and turkey, slowly created a recreational market for hunting leases. Over time, landowners determined to pursue better economic opportunities withdrew their lands from the state's WMA system. These losses reached their peak in the 1980s, creating another compelling reason for creating a state supported land acquisition program.

In conjunction with the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division's 65-year history of providing for these public hunting areas, the Forever Wild Program has made great strides in protecting a large base of land that can support Alabama's hunting legacy for the next 100 years. The advances go beyond simple acres of land acquired. Unlike the approach required with short-term, no-cost leases, when Forever Wild or ADCNR purchase land for the WMA system, this allows for long-term management strategies to be employed. The results are improved management strategies directed at the long-term benefit of wildlife and their necessary habitats. Despite these successes, leased public hunting areas are still being lost each year. Changing business models caused corporations to withdraw nearly 50,000 acres from the WMA system in 2007-2008. Fortunately, Forever Wild has been able to keep pace with these losses, maintaining a stable base of public hunting land. *Forever Wild is the only consistent mechanism for protecting or replacing these large areas of land...*

Wildlife Management Areas

Forever Wild's Wildlife Management Area (WMA) acquisitions are designed to create new WMAs, or provide additional acreage for existing WMAs. Because the majority of game species in Alabama exist on private property, the acquisition of public land for WMAs is important to provide the general public access to affordable hunting. For many citizens, subsistence hunting remains an important means of putting high quality protein on a family's table. In these times, that is no small consideration.

Since 1992, Forever Wild has secured over 183,603 acres of public hunting lands that are part of Alabama's WMA system. These lands are distributed within 13 WMAs in 12 counties. Forever Wild has been instrumental in the purchase of several tracts that have created entirely new WMAs where none previously existed (Riverton, Upper Delta and Perdido River), and the majority of land within Alabama's state-owned WMAs have been secured through the Forever Wild Program. Hunting opportunities vary depending on the characteristics of each WMA, including, waterfowl, big and small game, primitive and modern weapons use, as well as areas for hunters with physical disabilities.

To learn more about these Forever Wild tracts and the hunting opportunities that they offer, go to www.alabamaforeverwild.com.



KIMBERLY MOON

Wildlife Management Areas that have benefitted from Forever Wild projects include:

- Barbour Wildlife Management Area (26% owned by Forever Wild)
- Cahaba Wildlife Management Area (79% lease-owned by Forever Wild)
- Coosa Wildlife Management Area (26% owned by Forever Wild)
- Crow Creek Wildlife Management Area (8% owned by Forever Wild)
- Freedom Hills Wildlife Management Area (75% owned by Forever Wild)
- Lauderdale Wildlife Management Area (31% owned by Forever Wild)
- Lowndes Wildlife Management Area (15% owned by Forever Wild)
- Mobile-Tensaw Delta & W.L. Holland Wildlife Management Area (11% owned by Forever Wild)
- Mulberry Fork Wildlife Management Area (100% lease-owned by Forever Wild)
- Perdido River Wildlife Management Area (100% owned by Forever Wild and the State Lands Division)
- Riverton Wildlife Management Area (100% owned by Forever Wild)
- Skyline (James D. Martin) Wildlife Management Area (39% owned by Forever Wild)
- Upper Delta Wildlife Management Area (100% owned by Forever Wild)