



# Florida Struggles to Accommodate Immigration-Fueled Population Growth as its Environmental Impacts Worsen

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## Why This Report?

FAIR remains one of the few organizations willing to shine a spotlight on how uncontrolled immigration compromises the many sensitive ecosystems existing throughout the United States. Large-scale immigration, which fuels rapid population growth, undeniably affects our environment. While this is considered a taboo topic for most environmental organizations, the fact remains that any increase in our population axiomatically taxes our natural resources.

Immigration is, by far, the number one driver of population growth in the United States. New immigrants and their U.S.-born children currently make up 75 to 80 percent of our annual population growth.<sup>1</sup> Most of this immigration is unplanned and leaves municipalities unprepared for the consequences that rising population has on their water supply, air quality, agriculture, biodiversity, wildlife, forests, and quality of life.

This report summarizes the cascading challenges of population growth in the Sunshine State and how each breached “rule” of environmentalism is taking its toll. While Florida is a desirable location for many Americans – one chosen by many retirees – its population explosion is mostly the result of irresponsible federal immigration policies ignoring the reality that infinite growth in finite spaces is not sustainable.

## Rule 1. Mass Immigration Fuels Population Growth

Florida’s population has skyrocketed from 18.8 million in 2010 to 21.9 million in 2021. During that same time period, the foreign-born share of that population increased from 20.4 percent to 22.4 percent.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the immigrant population in Florida is increasing faster than the U.S.-born population. It has become the eighth most densely populated state in the country, with 333.7 people per square mile.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Florida is home to an estimated 1,485,000 illegal aliens and their U.S.-born children, coming in third behind California and Texas.<sup>4</sup>

Miami has the highest share of immigrants for any major city in the United States. The city's population has increased by 20 percent since 2010 and is now the sixth fastest-growing region in the United States. As of 2021, 60 percent of the city's residents are foreign-born.<sup>5</sup> That figure increases even more if the surrounding areas that comprise the entire Miami metro area are included.

Concerns about environmental damage, as well as water quality and supply, continue to mount as urban sprawl in southern Florida grows at an alarming rate. Miami is encroaching on the Everglades to its west and Biscayne Bay to its east. While Biscayne National Park is a protected area, it remains a popular destination for recreational water sports, and urban development is crowding its borders. The result is an increase in pollution and other forms of environmental disruption damaging the park's sensitive ecosystem. This is just one of many issues created by unmanaged, immigration-fueled population growth.

## **Rule 2. Mass Population Then Exacerbates Urban Sprawl:**

America is suffering a loss of farmland, natural habitats, and open spaces around the fringes of cities and towns as each expands to accommodate growing masses of immigrants entering the country.

This expansion is called urban sprawl – a phenomenon that occurs due to poor community planning. Suburban neighborhoods expand outwards with low-density development due to city planners lacking the resources, information, and/or the authority necessary to properly plan future growth.<sup>6</sup> This increases the connectivity among urban areas while simultaneously reducing ecological habitats such as forests and grasslands. Between 1940-1980, the populations of Miami-Dade, Broward, and West Palm Beach Counties increased by 830 percent to 3.2 million people.<sup>7</sup> This rapid population growth led to the conversion of the eastern 12 percent of the Everglades into suburban development in order to cope with the influx of new residents.<sup>8</sup> As noted previously, since this time period, this population has continued to grow at an alarming rate, resulting in the conversion of even more wetlands into suburban areas.

This phenomenon is also evident in the northwestern region of the Everglades, as the city of Naples and surrounding areas continue to convert wetlands and rural country into residential developments and urban centers. Satellite images of the area from the early 1980s through 2020 show the increasing spread of urban areas through wetlands and formerly rural countryside.<sup>9</sup>

### **Rule 3. Urban Sprawl Then Threatens Endangered Species:**

The loss of suitable natural habitat is perhaps the greatest threat to endangered species and biodiversity in the United States. According to a 2001 report by the National Wildlife Federation, “rapid consumption of land could threaten the survival of nearly one out of every three imperiled species in the United States.”<sup>10</sup>

Over 1,300 species in the United States are endangered or threatened. As a growing population demands more and more resources, these species will have fewer places to live.<sup>11</sup> For an estimated 85 percent of these imperiled species, the loss or degradation of their habitats is identified as the primary threat to their continued existence. In 2005, 60 percent of the nation’s rarest and most endangered species were found within designated metropolitan areas, with the 35 fastest-growing large metropolitan areas being home to nearly 29 percent of these species.<sup>12</sup>

### **Rule 4: Someone or Something Pays: Ask the Iconic Florida Panther**

Due largely to urban sprawl and increasing population in the area, the Florida panther, native to the swamplands in southern Florida, is at risk of extinction. According to the National Wildlife Federation, there are only an estimated 120 to 130 Florida panthers left.<sup>13</sup> The most generous estimates available place the Florida panther population somewhere between 120-230.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, conservation experts believe that even 230 panthers – which would be on the high end of the highest estimate – is not a viable population size.

Currently, the Florida panther population is restricted to an area south of the Caloosahatchee River. Conservationists hoped that the 67-mile stretch of land would be a protected breeding ground for the panthers. However, these efforts have only yielded a slight population increase, and this unique species still faces a serious risk of extinction.<sup>15</sup> According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, for Florida panthers to eat, mate, and live, they require large and expansive areas to roam – upwards of 200 square miles of territory per cat.<sup>16</sup> The constant flow of people – again largely immigrants - moving to Florida has resulted in the conversion of rural and forest areas, where the panther typically lives, into developed areas.

The construction of roadways, homes, and airports has also destroyed many habitats for this species. Moreover, these new structures have pushed the Florida panther closer to roads, increasing the likelihood of them being struck by vehicles. In 2016, 34 Florida panthers were fatally struck by cars. In subsequent years, vehicle collisions claimed the lives of 30 panthers in 2018, 27 in 2019, 22 in 2020, and 20 panthers so far in 2021.<sup>17 18</sup>

## Rule 5: Clean Water is a Finite Supply

Similarly, urban sprawl is the most significant threat to the Everglades National Park in South Florida. Located at the southern tip of peninsular Florida, the Everglades National Park is the most famous wetland in the United States and one of the most distinct in the world. The Everglades is unique in its biological richness and diversity, boasting 300 different bird species, alligators, crocodiles, snail kites, and mangrove species. The habitats that support this lush grouping of species include ponds, sloughs, graminoid (grass-like wetlands), and forested wetlands.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike other wetlands around the world, the Everglades derives its water mostly from rainfall rather than river flooding.<sup>20</sup> However, the Everglades has linkages to Lake Okeechobee, the second-largest natural freshwater lake contained entirely within the contiguous 48 states, and the Kissimmee River, which provides 80 percent of the surface flow into Lake Okeechobee. The connectivity of these ecoregions must be protected to maintain ecosystem integrity.

However, decades of human interference to make South Florida habitable for residents, and profitable for agriculture, has redirected water away from the wetlands. In 1948, Congress authorized a Central and Southern Florida Flood Control Project that drained half of the original Everglades to keep properties and residential areas dry.<sup>21</sup> The project focused on controlling flooding from the Kissimmee River and Lake Okeechobee in the rainy months of summer and fall. The 1948 authorization created a complex system of levees, canals, and reservoirs to channel water away from farmlands south of Lake Okeechobee and other areas with growing populations. In order to mitigate droughts, three large water conservation areas were created to store water during high rainfall events and then release water during times of drought. However, water levels were kept abnormally high in these areas, leading to a decline in a number of plant populations, including sawgrass, which is damaged by prolonged high-water levels.<sup>22</sup> And naturally, as plant life became less diverse, so did the existence of other species that rely on it.

The remaining wetlands were then enclosed into two protected areas, the Everglades National Park and Big Cypress National Preserve.<sup>23</sup> This intensive overhaul of South Florida's water cycle brought significant consequences and greatly disrupted natural water flow throughout the area. Agriculture and urban centers in the region pollute waterways that feed into Lake Okeechobee, causing toxic algae blooms in the lake that are harmful to both wildlife and humans alike.<sup>24</sup> Regulated water discharges from the lake to control flooding then allows for these algal blooms to spread to the coasts, including the Everglades and Florida Bay.

The availability of fresh water in the United States has been a growing problem, with immigration-fueled population growth as the primary culprit. Water shortages have expanded from nearly exclusively south-western states (historically deserts and other low water regions) to Florida and the rest of the country. According to a FAIR report, Americans on average use 88 gallons of water in their homes each day for a total of

32,120 gallons of water per year. The demand for groundwater has become so high that more water is being pumped than can be recharged in most areas. It doesn't take a scientist to convince Americans that a negative water recharge rate cannot support a growing population indefinitely.

## Conclusion

Uncontrolled immigration brings about many consequences, but the environmental impacts are all too often left out of the conversation. In fact, most environmental groups refuse to even acknowledge the impact of immigration on the environment.<sup>25</sup>

As seen throughout this report, states like Florida are in grave danger of losing unique plant and animal species if future population growth is not carefully planned. Any legitimate discussion about conservation and protecting our environment must include an honest examination of how reckless immigration policies not only lead to inefficient urban planning, but also place our natural resources and sensitive ecosystems at risk.

## References

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