

## **Kissimmee – St. Johns – Ocala Critical Linkage**

Spanning more than seven counties from Okeechobee to Volusia, the Ocala–St. Johns–Kissimmee Critical Linkage covers one of the largest expanses of Priority One lands in the Florida Ecological Greenways Network (FEGN) and Florida Wildlife Corridor; a natural and rural land thread for Florida’s east coast. This landscape, including ranchlands, freshwater wetlands, and river systems, provides essential flood control, water quality protection, and aquifer recharge for Central Florida’s rapidly growing population.

The linkage overlaps with the upper and middle St. Johns River Basin, defined by marshes, sawgrass, cypress domes, and peat-rich soils that store and filter surface waters. Tributaries and streams branch from the St. Johns, Florida’s longest river, creating a dense network across a still-rural region between central Florida’s development and Atlantic coastal towns. Originating in the marshes of Blue Cypress Lake, the St. Johns flows more than 300 miles north, dropping less than an inch per mile, with tidal influences reversing flows twice daily in its northern reach. In Brevard County, the system becomes a navigable river that meanders north through ranchlands, lakes, and tributaries before reaching the Atlantic Ocean. Protecting the headwaters is essential, as all conservation action here directly affects the future health of the St. Johns River.

Ranchlands, wetland and mesic flatwoods dominate the linkage, providing wildlife corridors and maintaining connectivity between the St. Johns system, uplands, and human communities across central and east Florida. With the Orlando metropolitan area already consuming much of the state’s center, this eastern region provides the most viable north–south connection for the FEGN and Florida Wildlife Corridor. The southern extent also supports some of the last dry prairie, where the endangered Florida grasshopper sparrow was recently re-discovered on private ranchlands, including the DeLuca Preserve managed by the University of Florida.

Despite its importance, the Ocala–St. Johns–Kissimmee is the most threatened of all ten Critical Linkages. According to the *Florida 2070* analysis, 62% of the landscape is projected to be developed, with nearly a quarter of that loss expected by 2040 under current zoning in Osceola, Orange, Seminole, Volusia, and Brevard counties. The linkage is increasingly pressured by development spreading inland from Atlantic coastal cities and even more so from sprawling growth radiating out of central Florida. The landscape is also continuously severed by expanding road and rail infrastructure, which further fragments habitat and reduces corridor functionality. Road and rail networks with few wildlife crossings already fragment the region, and new toll roads and rail expansions would create additional barriers in areas where conservation seeks to restore connectivity. These projects have historically lacked adequate planning for wildlife movement and stakeholder involvement, compounding fragmentation.

The long-term viability of the Ocala–St. Johns–Kissimmee Critical Linkage will depend on coordinated planning and collaboration among conservation groups, governments, and developers. Ensuring future growth incorporates corridor-compatible design and mitigation measures is essential to maintaining connectivity, sustaining hydrological function, and securing the ecological integrity of this Priority One landscape.



