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## Texas Company Searching For Oil In Big Cypress Wants To Start Drilling Next Year

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Raccoon Point was constructed in the 1970s and is one of two oil drilling sites in Big Cypress. Burnett Oil wants to expand drilling in the preserve to two additional locations.

A Texas company conducting [controversial oil exploration](#) in the Big Cypress National Preserve wants to expand operations and hopes to start drilling by 2022.

According to applications submitted to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection last week, Burnett Oil Co. has asked to construct two new roads and drilling pads about a mile east of Raccoon Point — one of two drilling sites constructed in the 1970s — and south of Interstate 75. The work would cover more than 30 acres.

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Burnett said the new pads would be used to accommodate directional drilling in the Tamiami Prospect and Nobles Grade Prospect. The Tamiami work cuts through an area with multiple panther sightings.

Burnett did not respond to an email request for comment.

Environmentalists who have closely monitored the project in a years-long battle to stop expanded drilling, said the move came as a surprise.

“We only discovered these pending applications through our own [search] of the DEP’s website. We weren’t notified, even though this is something these conservation organizations have been tracking for a very long time,” said Jaclyn Lopez, an attorney at the Center For Biological Diversity.

Burnett [won permission](#) to search oil in 2015 — across more than 100 miles that still belong to the Collier family, which sold the land to the state but held onto mineral rights. Since the 1970s, Exxon has operated two drilling facilities including the Bear Island field, which was discovered in 1972 and includes 23 wells on nine pads and 17 wells in the Raccoon Point field, which was discovered in 1978.

Environmentalists [challenged the approval](#), arguing in court that the National Park Service failed to adequately assess the potential damage from 30-ton trucks crisscrossing wetlands using sound waves to find oil. A judge rejected the claim.

But last year, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which at the time administered wetlands work, found Burnett had in fact damaged wetlands, leaving deep ruts and impairing water quality. The Corps said the work violated the Clean Water Act.

Lopez said environmental groups including the National Parks Conservation Association and Natural Resources Defense Council, are still searching for documents to determine what the application means.

“We haven’t located all of the application materials yet, so we still don’t have the clear picture,” she said.

According to the applications, Burnett hopes to begin site prep work in December 2021 on the site south of I-75, in time to begin drilling the well in June 2022. The site would be used for 30 years or more.

The applications for construction work on wetlands would be a test of the state’s new authority to oversee the process after the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [handed over control in December](#). That made Florida only the third state in the nation to assume control and the first to use a speedier adjudication process.

Environmental groups, including the center, [have challenged the approval](#), arguing that the DEP, which plans to use existing staff to oversee the program, is ill-equipped to handle the complicated applications and has no plans to enforce environmental protections as stringent as the federal government.

In a letter Wednesday, to FDEP Secretary Noah Valenstien, the groups complained that little public notice of the applications was given and urged Valenstien not to issue the

permits. They also said Burnett has so far failed to fix the damage caused by exploration work.

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