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Environment

Texas-based oil company applies to build well pads and roads in the Everglades

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Texas-based oil company applied for permits to build well pads and access roads inside Big Cypress National Preserve as it prepares to drill for oil in the sensitive habitat. Tim Chapman
Miami Herald Staff

A Texas-based oil company has applied for permits to build well pads and access roads in preparation for future oil drilling inside Big Cypress National Preserve, which provides habitat for endangered species such as the Florida panther.

Burnett Oil Co., which already did seismic testing to look for oil in Big Cypress in 2017 and 2018, filed two applications to Florida's Department of Environmental Protection to fill in wetlands and build new infrastructure. The requests were filed late last month, just days after the Trump administration gave the state permitting authority under the federal government's Section 404 of the Clean Water Act.

The company is asking to build the infrastructure in two new locations, according to the permit applications. The applications refer only to dredging and filling wetlands for the well pads and access roads in the Nobles Grade area and in the Tamiami area, and not to any drilling activity.

Conservation groups sent a letter to DEP's Secretary Noah Valenstein and to the National Park Service this week opposing the company's request and complaining about the lack of transparency in the process.

"We became aware of these permit applications as a result of an exploratory search of the Department's new Section 404 permit program database. The website itself lists no public notices regarding any Section 404 permit," representatives from the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, the National Parks Conservation Association and the Center for Biological Diversity wrote in the letter.

Oil exploration in Big Cypress has been [going on since the 1940s](#). When the preserve was created in 1974, the National Park Service, which manages the area, allowed the Collier family, which owned part of the land, to continue to drill for oil in areas north of Alligator Alley and east of what is now the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge. A few years later, oil was discovered in an area southwest of the Miccosukee reservation, and new wells were drilled.

Environmentalists, who have opposed the industry's sporadic plans to expand exploration and drilling in an important freshwater wetland, were surprised by the applications.

“We are trying to reduce emissions and help resolve the climate crisis while protecting sensitive ecosystems; this project goes in the opposite direction,” said Melissa Abdo, Sun Coast regional director for the National Parks Conservation Association.

Burnett Oil didn't reply to requests for comment on its plans for the new wells.