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## **Texas company wants to drill in Big Cypress; Ag Commissioner Fried warns about impacts**

Agriculture Commissioner Nikki Fried is warning about the potential environmental impacts on Southwest Florida ahead of a Texas-based company, Burnett Oil CO., intending to drill in Big Cypress National Preserve in Collier County.

“Protecting Florida’s waters, wetlands, and ecosystems has always been a top priority for me, which is why I strongly opposed the state taking over wetlands permitting and ending crucial federal oversight,” Fried was quoted in a press release from her office. “Now, we’re already beginning to see exactly what we hoped to avoid — potential giveaways of our pristine environment to the fossil fuel industry. I called earlier this week to permanently prohibit oil drilling off Florida’s coasts, and we don’t need drilling in our wetlands, either. These folks can look for oil somewhere else — keep your drilling in Texas, and don’t mess with Florida.”

Per the Agriculture commissioner’s press release, according to environmental conservation groups, there were no public notices listed for the permit applications on the state’s wetlands permitting database.

**MORE:** [Comm. Nikki Fried: Reject Oil Drilling Permit in Big Cypress National Preserve](#)

From the coast to the wetlands, there is no shortage of beauty in Southwest Florida.

“Florida relies on tourism, and most of that tourism comes from people wanting to be here to explore the outdoors, and that includes Big Cypress,” said Jaclyn Lopez, the Florida director of Center for Biological Diversity.

Big Cypress also captured the eye Burnett Oil. It has applied for permits to start preparing for oil drilling in the preserve, including access roads.

"With oil and gas clearly on the decline and renewed efforts to just totally transition us to sustainable renewable energies, it simply doesn't seem worth the possibility of damaging this area," Lopez said.

A Burnett Oil spokesperson told us, in part, "We are committed to utilizing the least impactful methods for extracting the private minerals underlying the preserve."

While the mineral resources are privately owned, the preserve is protected.

For Don Duke, an FGCU environmental studies professor, it's a matter of choice for land use.

"Do we use it in a sustainable way to promote the quality of life that we'd like to see here in South Florida?" Duke said. "Do we use it for economic gain and especially for economic gain that is relatively short term such as petroleum extraction?"

The choice to drill or not to drill is one that could determine the future of the preserve.

Burnett Oil says it's working with the National Park Service and Florida Department of Environmental Protection to come up with a plan to compensate for the wetland impacts connected with its project.

Burnett Oil Co statement

*"The purpose of the recent applications filed with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, which were submitted in January, is to request approval for the construction of two small limestone pads accessed by single-lane limestone roads to access privately-owned mineral prospects located within the Big Cypress National Preserve. It is important to note that although the surface of the Big Cypress National Preserve is owned by the federal government, the underlying minerals are privately-owned. Our permit application is currently undergoing a rigorous technical review consistent with NEPA regulations. The environmental specialists engaged in the project do not foresee an adverse effect on the ecosystem or wildlife in the Preserve, but we await formal consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for a final determination. As stated in our permit applications, we are committed to utilizing the least impactful methods for*

*extracting the private minerals underlying the Preserve. In addition to minimizing impacts, we are working closely with the National Park Service and Florida's Department of Environmental Protection to formulate a compensatory mitigation plan with the goal of compensating for the wetland impacts associated with the project – effectively creating a net zero impact on wetlands in the Preserve.”*