

Myakka River Management Coordinating Council
Colonial Oaks Park, 5300 Colonial Oaks Blvd, Sarasota, FL 34232
April 17, 2026
9:30 A. M. – 12:30 P.M.

MINUTES

The meeting began at 9:30 A.M. with Jono Miller presiding. This meeting was advertised in the Herald Tribune on April 3, 2026.

MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE

Jono Miller – Sierra Club
Michelle Keirse-MRSP
Ryan Pieper-City of North Port
Ann Hardy-SCLWV
Eric Strickland-FFS
Randall Shotto-City of Sarasota
Howard Berna-Sarasota County
Cristina Rimes-City of Venice
Jamie Richardson-FWC
Jennifer Krajcir-NPFWL

Glenn Compton-Manasota 88
Michelle McGill-CHNEP
Emily Barnett-FDOT
Stacey Mazza-Gilkison-Friends of Myakka
Esmeralda Figueras-BWLT
Jim Keltner-Charlotte County
Bob Clark-Venice Audubon
Kara Koenig-Manatee County
Frank Gargano-SFWMD

INTERESTED PARTIES

Chris Oliver – FDEP/FPS
Ray Westbrook-Homeowner
Miri Hardy- Myakka River Partnership
Alice Herman-Suncoast Searchlight
Kerri MacNutt-Monarch Ecology Group
Jon Robinson-Myakka River Partnership
Andrew Black-FWC
Hannah Turbiville-Sarasota County
Genevieve Houser-BWLT
Dylan Davis- O Bar O

Nadine Hallenbeck – FDEP/FPS
Zachary Westmark-FDEP/FPS
Jean Pichler-Venice Audubon
Chloe Lauer-FDEP/FPS
Tammy Lyday-Monarch Ecology Group
Victoria Hardeman-FDOT
Alissa Powers-Manatee County
Terri Roberts-Homeowner
Meghan Davis- O Bar O

- **Call to Order and Role Call.**
- **Approval of the Meeting Minutes from August 8, 2025.** Glenn Compton moved to approve the minutes and Bob Clark seconded.

Public Comments: None

Changes to Agenda: The elections were moved to the end of the meeting and Monarch Ecology's presentation on Wellen Park H was added to the agenda.

OLD BUSINESS

Jono Miller-Chair's Report

Jono started the [Chair's Report with slides](#) noting he called Dwayne Carbonneau. He is the Assistant Alligator Management Program Coordinator for FWC. Jono told him he wanted to understand what it would take for FWC to prohibit the recreational harvest of alligators in the Myakka Wild and Scenic

River. This harvest program does not deal with nuisance alligators; it is only sport hunting. Jono noted the Myakka was known as a top gator viewing location, that they are a resource value of the Wild and Scenic River, mentioned in the Designation Act. They have data from FWC that people have been illegally taking alligators in Lower Myakka Lake, which is part of the Myakka River State Park (MRSP).

Jono stated we now have crocodiles. He showed FWC's crocodile range map noting an increase in crocodile sightings in the Myakka River. When conditions are not ideal, it is hard to tell quickly which is which. They do not want people inadvertently to take crocodiles, especially in the Wild and Scenic River. Jono showed photographs of a crocodile in the Myakka near Border Road. Mr. Carbonneau sent him data for the period of time in which 81 alligators were taken in Sarasota County. Jono indicated FWC's concern was that if they stopped the taking of alligators in the Myakka River, that would shut down the whole county-wide hunt, the majority of the gators taken were in the Myakka. Separately he reviewed the publicly available data from 2008 through 2022 ([from FWC's website](#)). The most common location listed was "blank". How can FWC analyze data if they do not know where the gators were taken? The second most common location was Curry Creek, followed by the generic location "Myakka River" was third with 12 alligators. One entry for location said private, one was a country club, others mentioned were Shakett Creek, Blackburn Canal, and Deer Prairie Creek. The last one may be within the state and county owned preserve. There were 16 instances of harvest in the state park. Jono showed examples labelled "Lower Myakka Lake". While eliminating the Myakka would be a reduction, it would not mean the end of recreational harvest. Jono wrote to him and asked when reviewing the Management Objectives for alligators in Sarasota County, how does the status of the Myakka River as a Wild and Scenic River factor in? He wrote to him with that question twice and he did not respond. Jono does not think he should be responded to solely because he is chair of the Council. He thinks any citizen who inquires deserves an answer. Jono showed a draft language of a motion.

Motion: Glenn Compton motioned that whereas the Myakka River in Sarasota County is a widely publicized alligator viewing location that depends on having alligators to view and whereas alligators are a resource value of the Wild and Scenic section of the Myakka River and whereas pursuant to 62D-15.005(9), engaging in any other activity or practice which adversely affects resource values in the river area and for which no permit has been obtained under rule 62D-15.006 Florida Administrative Code, is a prohibited activity and no permit has been issued for recreational harvest. Whereas FWC has documented poaching alligators in Myakka River State Park, whereas crocodiles are now being sighted in the Myakka River and whereas crocodiles can be confused with alligators and whereas crocodiles are a threatened species with no legal recreational take. Whereas the Assistant Alligator Management Program Coordinator declined to respond to two requests to clarify how Myakka's Wild and Scenic status affects FWC's Alligator Management Objectives to the river, therefore the Myakka River Management Coordinating Council is petitioning the Florida Wildlife Commission to remove the Wild and Scenic section of the Myakka River in Sarasota County for future recreational harvest. Jennifer Krajcir seconded.

The Motion was tabled to later in the meeting. Jono projected some slides of Wellen Park. The green hatched areas are protected along the Myakka River. The majority of the land along the Myakka is either already developed or already protected and there are two big exceptions to that. One is the property, that peninsula north of Snook Haven which is owned by the Diocese of Venice. If you were to sit at the Snook Haven restaurant and look across the river to the east, the property to the south is protected, but the property to the north is also owned by the diocese and not protected. The other parcel is in Wellen Park. He showed a map highlighting the West Villages and part of Village H. This map shows the status of land in the area. The green colored areas are preserved areas, the yellow are developed. Just because it is developed does not mean there are no parks or natural areas within there. It just means primarily

developed just like the green areas could have a parking lot or some other park type facilities. The two pink islands were owned by Myakka River Club LLLP, Wellen Park. Some of those are undevelopable. Then you see the golden color was the rest of it. Adjacent Sarasota County owns a 25-acre parcel and SWFWMD has a 93-acre parcel further south on the river. Last September, Jono started talking to people to request a conversation with people from Wellen Park which happened in the week before the last Council meeting. When he first started looking into it, this was a project map he obtained from the city of North Port. There are some problems. For instance, the map had 150 and 50 feet, that is only 200 and the zone is 220 feet. This was the map they had of what they were planning to develop and what they were planning to protect. This was more what Jono had in mind that they would connect the 25-acres of the 93-acres with some trails and just draw a straight line across here, but it was too late to pitch that.

It is not final, but this is the current area that they are proposing to protect. Jono showed a LiDAR map. These green areas are wet. They are going to be mangrove and salt marsh vegetation. This would be transitional. This would be a little higher and the pink is higher still, but they are talking about the peninsula, it is never going to be very high. It is just higher relative to everything else. If they were to outline the boundary roughly between the more upland habitat and the lower habitat, it would look like that. If you compare that with what they are proposing to protect, in some cases they are protecting more, in some cases it intrudes into it, but they came close. The result is that they are proposing to either give or sell at a reduced rate, that property to Sarasota County along with those islands.

This entire stretch from the 93 acres up to the 25 acres would be protected along the river, which is fantastic. This would result in about two miles of the shoreline being protected. Jono showed a video that someone in North Port sent to Jono. That is the skinnier island and then the bigger island. This is amateur drone footage. You can see the dark areas. This would be black-rush, new marsh, more marsh here, transitioning area, and then cabbage palms, and then pines in the distance. It is beautiful property. There is nothing pristine in Sarasota County, but it is in pretty good shape. This is a still image from that video that was just viewed. You can see that the canopy of the cabbage palms nearly fills the circles with these trees that are further away. Then if you look at other trees, the canopies are not so big. Of course, these trees are closer to the camera, so you would think they would appear larger. These trees are suffering from inundation. In fact, these appear to have no canopy whatsoever. What is happening all along the coast of Florida is that as sea level rises, it stresses cabbage palms and the mature palms get these diminished canopies, but what is most significant is you fail to get any recruitment. You will not see seedlings coming up because it is more stressful for a seed to get established than for an old tree to persist. This is an area of demonstrable rising sea level, and they assume that it is going to continue.

Jono highlighted a blue line that is labeled line of “moderate wave action”. He stated that he does not know who generated that or whether it has any significance legally, but it was intimidating. These black dots are the high-risk flood zone. The red is an evacuation zone. All of this suggests that there is the potential for inundation. This light blue line is the coastal high hazard area, and it affects most of what they are talking about along the river. This line is another version of North Port's coastal high hazard area. This is the evacuation zone. You can see it is in the first evacuation zone. North Port has a number of policies, the city shall support initiatives, acquisition of lots and parcels along creeks, rivers, bays and harbors that decrease the number of residents and businesses located in the coastal high hazard area and FEMA Flood Zones A, adjacent to Myakkahatchee Creek and the Myakka River. To preserve and enhance under your floodplain and wetlands, the city will utilize transfer of development rights as demand for public land dictates, they will establish close coordination through negotiations with property owners, including outright purchase and transfer of development rights. In summary, Wellen Park knows what they want to do. They are not inclined to change anything they are proposing. If North Port wanted to change things, theoretically they could, but that is the status as I understand it.

Kerri McNutt-Environmental Consultant with Monarch Ecology

Kerri started noting Monarch Ecology are consultants working on the Wellen Park permitting. This property is considered part of Wellen Park. It is the first property that they are going through permitting on the east side of River Road. Kerri showed a printed map. It is a different one than any of the others that they have dealt with, which have all been on the west side of River Road. Roughly a year ago, they had to start with the city entitlement process to get the property rezoned and get what is called the Master Concept Plan approved, which is a very high-level concept plan. This project plan has gone through multiple reiterations. They are still going through reiterations with the city on that, but that process dragged out for a while. Recently they got to the point with Village H where they have now submitted construction plans to SWFWMD, the Army Corps, and the City of North Port. They do have the full design now for Village H, the project name is called Driftwater. At this stage in the process, they did nail down the limits of construction.

Kerri continued noting one other process they were going through is a formal process with the DEP because they must confirm the river area delineation as far as what area is subject to 62D-15, and then what protection zones apply from there. Pointing to the map, she highlighted two tributaries, one that comes in here and another one that comes in here. They originally designed it this way where they were applying the river area more up here, but after conversations with DEP, they have not gotten through the final approval process yet. They will be going through that formal process with them, but the way the language reads it excludes tributaries. Every single tributary that they have going down the river, the intent is not to take the protection zone up those tributaries. It is to jump across them. On the graphic, it shows the protection zones they applied and the outermost line on that exhibit is the 220. On this map the 220 is shown in red. The only area changed is here, because this is still essentially the same as what it was before, but they jumped across this tributary. However, they are not changing any of the development footprint in this area. Essentially, they are providing all that additional preservation in that area, as well as a bunch of preservation shown throughout. All these areas shaded in light green are internal wetlands that are being preserved. The areas shown in the darker green, basically like upland islands and scattered fragments of uplands that are also being preserved. They try to avoid a lot of big wetlands that are going through the property.

They met with Jono on Monday, April 13, 2026. They had the applicant there, John Luczynski, the Senior Vice President for Wellen Park. They met in Kimley-Horn's office; they are the engineer that was working on the project.

Ray Westbrook asked if the blue area was water.

Kerri replied they are stormwater ponds.

Ray asked if digging the borrow pits close to the Myakka River is good environmentally. He said they have learned a lot with the construction of River Road. Look up and down the Myakka River. These pits have had tremendous environmental damage from the ones already put in. The equipment that was there when Ian flooded. He has pictures of oil going down the river. You should stay away from the river with heavy equipment, digging pits. If this is going in front of SWFWMD, there should be representation from the Council going up and letting them know that this is a bad idea.

Jono asked how deep these ponds would be? He is concerned, if you dig relatively deep pits near the tributary, and then during droughts, one would be dewatering the vegetation along the tributary.

Kerri was uncertain of the depth of the ponds but noted they must deal with these issues as they go through SWFWMD permitting. Not just looking at potential wetland impacts from a direct standpoint, they do have to address what is called secondary impacts, including hydrology. They have to go through very detailed analysis, on the stormwater side, engineering side, and the environmental side. They have to do pre-development and post-development hydrograph to show that they are maintaining hydrology. If any of that analysis showed they were adversely impacting hydrology for adjacent or receiving wetlands, then they would not be able to get it permitted. They have to go through a very detailed process to address those types of concerns during SWFWMD permitting. That will be addressed. These ponds are designed to maintain the hydrology. They will be pre-treating water before it is discharged, and the design must ensure that it maintains the same drainage patterns. They cannot redirect water somewhere else. They have to make sure the water is still going in the same direction.

Ray added that floods at permitted pond nine at the corner of Venice Avenue and River Road failed miserably. SWFWMD permitted a 10-foot depth, then went to 15, gave a five-year permit, dewatered constantly, killed hundreds of trees. In the flooding, which happened a couple of times, all the oil was going down the river. It was bad. They had to redesign it based on input and that lesson should be learned and SWFWMD should say no to this digging. Bring material in, if you need to raise the land because that is why you are digging the borrow pits, to get the elevation required. It is a bad design.

Bob Clark asked if the tributaries would provide any recreational access for Wellen Park to the river?

Jono replied, one thing he has learned serving on the county's parks advisory board, is neighbors do not like the public coming through their neighborhood to access parks. Jono indicated on a map, if there is going to be an area for public access to the river it would be on that 25-acre county parcel, a parking lot and access there. Wellen Park will be a gated community. The public is not going to be able to access it.

Kerri added, as part of the current application, they do not have any access to the river as far as proposed kayak launches, things like that. However, they have already had conversations with Sarasota County about potentially dedicating this land to the county, in which case it would provide that long conservation corridor, connecting to the north and the south. One thing the applicant wanted to do is maintain rights for at least one access point for a trail that goes down to a potential kayak launch or passive recreational use. Since they own all the land, they could have platted lots all along the river and platted lot lines down to the river, but they did not do that. They were trying to take a more conservative approach. If it is not Sarasota County, Wellen Park does have a West Village Improvement District. It is the entity that oversees all the conservation lands, the stormwater ponds and managing those lands in perpetuity. If it did not go to Sarasota County, it would still be placed in conservation. The only thing they would want to maintain is one access point to get down to the river, whether it be a kayak launch or something like that.

Bob mentioned the maps Jono showed earlier, asking for more detail on that blue dotted line that went down through the middle of the area that is proposed to be developed, is it a high flood line?

Jono reprojected the maps, noting that is a spooky line. When they talked with the principle, he said he was not aware of it ever flooding like that.

Kerri added that they have not had any flooding issues in Wellen Park. A lot of Wellen Park has now been built out and they have had a lot of storms in the last 10 years.

Jono replied, having said that, after Hurricane Ian, the aluminum and the Styrofoam covered these islands. You can see it on an aerial. You can probably see it from space. North Port has plenty of flooding problems right now. There are a lot of issues, particularly with freshwater. Every drop of water that enters

Charlotte Harbor from the Myakka watershed upstream of North Port must pass through North Port, and it is a big watershed. It is either coming down the river, flooding out of the river, coming overland, or soaking into the ground, but there is a lot of water that comes through.

Jono returned to the map; the blue line is the Limit of Moderate Wave Action (LiMWA).

Christina Rimes added the LiMWA is wave action between 1.5 to 3 feet. It is determined by FEMA.

Bob asked if it is not based on what is going to happen with sea level rise?

Christina replied that it is based on the past.

Bob asked if there is line or map projecting sea level rise? He thought there were state statutes now that say you need to account for sea level rise when you are doing any development project.

Kerri replied that those questions are more for engineering team that has to do with flood staging and how they came up with the elevations, but the project must address those issues, for the city and SWFWMD.

Jono continued. Closer to Laurel Road, the flooding issues related to freshwater going beyond the bank flow. By the time they are down here, they are mostly talking about flooding related to water coming up from Charlotte Harbor and storm type events.

Ray stated in a surge the Tamiami Trail bridge acts somewhat like a dam, restricting the flow. In Ian, the first part of the storm, the flooding was more. The water was trying to push through that. Then after, it acted like a dam and held the water back and it took 12 days for the water to recede.

Jono added that the state has been kind of chintzy with bridge crossings on the Myakka and virtually every one of them tends to hold water back. Instead of putting up actual bridges, they have a lot of causeways with a little bridge and then a storm event that holds water upstream.

Chris stated that when you do permitting, including for bridges or this development, it is based on standards, including a 25-year rain event is standard. A 100-year would be the maximum that they would consider. Hurricane Ian was not one of those things, it was a bigger event. We are likely to have things like Hurricane Ian in the future. There was a rain gauge not far from Wellen Park at Grove City. They got 26.95 inches, almost 27 inches. That is roughly twice as much as any hundred-year storm.

Jono continued, if you go onto Google Earth, in certain years, you can see the woods roads, full of water. You can see standing water in this area.

Kerri left some business cards in case anyone had any further questions.

Jono noted on that 93-acres parcel that SWFWMD owns on the Myakka River. Allegedly, this owner is coming in here and mowing or clearing this habitat. In some cases, it is less than 50 feet from the tidal marsh. He does not think individual homeowners should be clearing preserved land.

Chris added, SWFWMD and the Florida Forest Service (FFS) have been trying to gain access to this parcel.

Eric Strickland replied that the FFS looked into this. The owner now knows.

Jono replied that in future aerial imagery, they should expect to see this filling in.

Jono moved to the next topic. He was at a meeting of the Peace River Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority, and showed a slide that said, "Flatford Swamp Project provides opportunity for water supply projects." That is the water that goes into the Myakka Wild and Scenic River. Someone from SWFWMD should come and talk to the Council about those plans. Jono projected the illustration of another project. This pipeline, a large diameter transmission line to Venice Garden's water treatment plant. They have four potential crossings, one at U.S. 41, one that they have talked about previously that is already permitted, but they are showing two crossings going across this preserve land. That does not seem like a very good idea. He noted the policy of trying to co-locate infrastructure. New infrastructure, they want them to do it where it is already impacted rather than creating a new impact area. This is in North Port. In terms of land protection, does anyone know the status? They had talked about it previously and he heard that the owner wanted to have it protected and the commission wanted to see it developed.

Ryan Pieper added that a couple of entities were pushing for a conservation easement to be placed over it and the property owner was interested, but the commission was not in line with that proposal at the time. He does not think anything is being proposed at this point to impact the site.

Jono showed a map with Rocky Ford highlighting the remaining parcel from the Gene Green Trust. This is going to be a conservation easement that the county is seeking with Terry Green, the owner.

Jono moved to his last item, 897 Brentwood Drive. He noted you can see it is on the outer bend of a river. This is going to be the most prone to eroding, and you can see there is some accretion in here. The inside curve is going to fill in somewhat. This is an old development along the river. Jono showed a photograph. This is a historic aerial from 2020, and he circled two cabbage palm canopies as reference points. Then they move forward in time. This is an oak tree that was between the house and the river, oak canopy. Then in 2025, the tree is gone. These cabbage palms are still there, but now there are no trees. Switching to the bank view, this is a photo in 2020. You can see the oak tree, and these are exotic Bromeliads that someone has planted there. This is the southernmost piling associated with the dock, and this is the well pipe. It is fair to say this was in the land when it was first placed there. This is from December of 2020, and that piling is way over there on the left of that yellow arrow, and here is the shoreline. You can see there is a lot of erosion and not much to hold the bank. This homeowner has a problem. He has been trying to solve it for about five years. He has had a series of engineers trying to work on this. Here is a photo from 2022. There is some vegetation either going on the bank or spilling over the bank. The area north and south looks pretty good. The issue is just right in front of the house. This is a 2023 photo. The oak is gone and there is lower vegetation here along the bank. Then in January 2026, there is the slightest amount of vegetation growing there. He has gone through a number of consultants which unless they have worked on the Myakka River before, are usually unaware of what is going on. Mr. Cope lost his staircase to his deck in one of the storms. That is back in place now. Jono has met with the gentleman and suggested a couple of different consultants. One thing he stressed to him, to try and hire someone that has already done work on the Myakka. He is now in touch with someone and hopefully soon he will see a softer solution that is not a vertical sea wall. One of the problems that Chris has documented, is that it is really hard to find vegetation that does well in front of a wall along the Myakka River in the freshwater portions because there is such a dynamic range of flow, from the dry season lows, and then experiencing these high flows. When you have high flow against a solid wall, that creates tremendous scouring action.

Chris added that they had several examples of hardened features that have been permitted where mitigation was required to preserve the viewshed with plantings. None of them ever got any vegetation.

Partnership Wild and Scenic Designation Process

Miri Founder of [Myakka River Partnership](#) gave an update on her efforts since the last meeting. She has been working to build the strategy and organizational infrastructure for the Myakka River Partnership and supporting congressional staff as the work continues toward advancing the designation bill. She discussed the very clear need for a new nonprofit organization that can serve as an independent voice for the river to both unify the support that is in the room and also serve as a catalyst to recognize new opportunities. The keyword independent, which means, for example, she can be talking to Jono outside of meetings, she can be talking to individual members outside of meetings. This is an important need also given the structure of the Partnership Wild and Scenic River (PWSR) Program, which is a community-driven form of river protection and what that means. Community is not just citizens but also the local government and the local agencies. When they talk about PWSRs, that is what they are talking about as opposed to the traditional Wild and Scenic Rivers that were designated as a result of the 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act which run through federal lands, it is very clear who is managing those rivers.

One of the first things that was important and has happened since the Council last met in August was to create a website which allows the collection of important information so that there is knowledge that can live on and does not live in one or two people's heads. Folks in DC, be it the National Park Service or the folks on the Hill, track interest in bills. This is a way to share information with them, with the community, and continue to generate the clear indication that they want this and they are ready for this.

She acknowledged Jon Robinson, who is the chair of the board of this new organization. They are incorporated in the State of Florida now. They have filed their IRS Form 1023. They do not have their letter of determination. Once they do have that letter, they are going to be seeking capacity-building funding which would allow them to build capacity to continue to do important work that needs to happen to support the river. Miri facilitated the first official visit to MRSP by Commissioner Mast. It was a great opportunity for her to learn about important work. Miri projected a photo of the Commissioner standing by the remains of the Upper Myakka Lake Weir. They talked about the important efforts that have been happening in the park to restore the natural flow of the Wild and Scenic River. Park Manager Steve Giguere did an amazing job explaining to her how critical this river is for the community. They were heartened to learn about her own personal connection with the river and how much the river means to her. They had conversations about a very important anniversary that was coming up, which was the 50th anniversary of the first time Sarasota County sought National Wild and Scenic Designation. Commissioner Mast was really excited about the idea of the county commemorating the date and also using this as an opportunity to highlight how much has happened since. Thanks to those efforts, they now are deemed by the National Park Service, a section of the river in Sarasota County does have the criteria that are necessary for it to be designated in this new hybrid model called the PWSR. This was a fantastic proclamation that was made as a result of Commissioner Mast's motion to commemorate the day. Jono, Anne Hardy and Jon Thaxton were also there. Commissioner Mast said some meaningful words about why this matters and why the work that will bring the river to the next level of protection is important.

Jono added that Anne was there because it was the League of Women's Voters that went to the County Commission in 1975 and asked if the Myakka should be a Wild and Scenic River.

Miri continued noting another important visit, Congressman Steube visited MRSP. This was his first official visit to the park. What was intended to be a 15-minute photo opp turned into an incredible tour of the Wilderness Preserve and great appreciation of what a gem they have that his legislation is going to help not only protect but enhance for future generations. These kinds of meetings not only enforce his understanding and his staff's understanding of what this bill will do. It also gives him important talking points about the river and for the purpose of showing everyone how wonderful a resource they have here that they are working to protect, this is invaluable. She has been working closely with the congressman's

staff. They are doing incredible work. The staff are the frontline on the Hill. They are the ones that must field the questions that they get so, the more they understand the river, the better. Bringing them to the park, they went down to the site of the former Downs' Dam and illustrated to them why free-flowing rivers are important and also how much work has to go into restoration to keep a river healthy. When you take someone who has never experienced the Wild and Scenic Myakka River, and it takes so long to get to the water because you are going through a vast protected area, it kind of blows their mind. They take that appreciation and the kind of things that you see when you go into the wild like a gator that suddenly decides to lie in the middle of a trail. A fantastic opportunity for them to learn.

PWSRs are not about just agencies or MRSP. It is very important opportunity to highlight the important role that the private landowners play in protecting the Myakka River watershed and especially a property like the Hawkins Ranch that is immediately abutting the park and, as Mrs. Hawkins pointed out, hydrologically linked to the Wilderness Preserve. This was another case of the congressman having 15 minutes but then spending three hours and not wanting to leave. He brought his wife and his son, they all got to experience what is an amazing property.

Miri brought up another site visit to Myakka State Forest and mentioned that Eric Strickland and Ryan Pieper were there. This was another important opportunity to not only highlight the various partners that make this partnership important but also serve as a work session. After the last meeting, she had a conversation with Stefan Kalev from the City of North Port, and they discussed some of the current developments and rezoning. They decided to do a site visit, bringing together these important partners. Eric hosted them and gave a fantastic presentation about the history of the forest and the important work that they are doing, the challenges, and opportunities. One thing that stands out from the data, was the fact that, when the forest was first purchased by SWFWMD, it was clear cut. It had been clear cut for development and the magnificent resource that Eric and his staff took us through. Now 30 years of planting and working and diligence, and what an amazing resource it is.

Inspired by that fantastic site visit, they have been working to bring additional partners together to talk about the river and the opportunities moving forward. Miri showed slides of another field visit, that is the Mayor of Venice, Nick Pachota, with his City Manager, James Clinch. That is Congressman Steube's Legislative Assistant, Ronnie Carabbia. They were hosted graciously by an officer from FWC. They spent four hours on a boat on the river exploring the Critical Wildlife Area to the south and then heading north to explore the river all the way up to Snook Haven, a fantastic opportunity to discuss the City of Venice's commitment to the river and what opportunities lie ahead to enhance the resource that they have.

An important aspect of what she has been doing has been creating strong relationships with partners, including at the national level. One such organization is American Rivers, which supports and protects rivers nationwide. They have been very impressed with the work that has been done in Sarasota County to protect the Myakka River. The bill is one of the top three bills that they are supporting, they have been excited to highlight work that has been happening as a success story. They invited Miri to join the Coalition of Wild and Scenic Rivers, and she has been participating in their bimonthly Zoom calls, each time highlighting something exciting. American Rivers featured them in a media blast where they were trying to highlight the different aspects of river protection. In our case they spoke specifically about dam removal as a way to restore rivers. Thanks to that good relationship with American Rivers, when the Wild and Scenic Rivers Hill Week came up, they wanted to be able to highlight the Myakka River. They invited her to DC, and paid for her way, which was very generous. While there she had meetings with the Florida delegation. She met with six key representative offices and with senior legislative staffers in both of the Florida Senate offices. Senator Scott has a Senate companion bill to Steube's bill. They are also

hoping that Senator Moody joins in on that bill to highlight that everyone is behind this. To that end, she had a great chat with the senator and the work to get more support continues.

She was invited to attend a meeting with National Park Service leadership. She had informal conversations and formal meetings, sitting at the table, learning about their priorities, understanding what they want to see from existing designated rivers and also rivers who are vying for designation is important, and learning more about what the designation would give to the community. They outlined the suite of programs that they would be eligible for once the river is designated, which is exciting. There are a bunch of areas where there are clear needs on the river like shoreline restoration, invasive removal and dark sky protections. They shared a pamphlet that they are working on that talks about a guide for living on a protected river with specific best practices and advice.

Miri was invited to give a presentation during a congressional briefing. This was a presentation that was geared towards congressional staff to help them understand more about the Wild and Scenic Program in general. There was information about the traditional program, because there are bills out there to designate rivers that go through federal lands and this Partnership Wild and Scenic Program of which they are one of the bills.

She met with Congressman Steube who also wrote about these efforts in his weekly email update that he sends out. This goes out to over a hundred thousand people. He wanted them to know about this work, and that is meaningful. They now have an additional co-sponsorship on Congressman Steube's bill from Congressman Darren Soto. Congressman Soto is on the House Committee for Natural Resources, which is the next step for the bill, this is significant on many levels.

What happens next and what are the needs? The next step for the bill is a hearing with the House Committee. One bit of advice that she got is, we all need to be prepared for the long game. The other thing that is important for everyone to understand is that the designation itself is not a gold star. It is empowering to continue to do the work that everyone here has been doing and to do it better. What that means is the process of designation is already the gold star. There is still work to be done. Continuing to generate additional letters of support. The Venice City Council approved the motion for the City of Venice to write a letter of support, which is extremely meaningful. They are looking for other such letters of support. She created a one-page sheet that summarizes information succinctly about the program, about the benefits to Sarasota County and about why they are eligible for this.

She gave credit to the Gulf Coast Community Foundation. This is a lot of work, and it has not happened for free. The foundation has been paying Miri as an independent contractor. She acknowledged the importance of their investment in the community, without which, this work would not be happening. The idea would be that, once Myakka River Partnership is a nonprofit, the organization is going to seek capacity-building funding so that they can employ someone to continue to do work to support the river. There is a lot of excitement not only locally, but also at the national level about the Myakka River and the keen interest of everyone in getting this to the finish line. She thanked everyone for everything, what they have done to help make this happen.

Bob commended Miri on everything she is doing.

Motion: Bob Clark motioned that the chair of the MRMCC send a letter to the Gulf Coast Community Foundation thanking them for their efforts to protect the Myakka River and get it into

the National Partnership Wild and Scenic Program. Glenn Compton seconded. Frank Gargano abstained. Motion passed.

Bob asked if there was anything more the Council could do to help Miri in her efforts.

Miri replied that this is perhaps a new way of thinking of how stakeholders work together with the idea that this is a new way of doing things. The river in Sarasota County is eligible for being included with the nation's top rivers, because Sarasota County has done the work. She had a fantastic meeting with Nicole Rissler and the team over at PRNR. Highlighting the river and opportunities to tell the stories are important.

Break 10:50-11:00

NEW BUSINESS

Jono reintroduced the alligator harvest motion.

Motion: Glenn Compton motioned that whereas the Myakka River in Sarasota County is a widely publicized alligator viewing location that depends on having alligators to view and whereas alligators are a resource value of the Wild and Scenic section of the Myakka River and whereas pursuant to 62D-15.005(9), engaging in any other activity or practice which adversely affects resource values in the river area and for which no permit has been obtained under rule 62D-15.006 Florida Administrative Code, is a prohibited activity and no permit has been issued for recreational harvest. Whereas FWC has documented poaching alligators in Myakka River State Park, whereas crocodiles are now being sighted in the Myakka River and whereas crocodiles can be confused with alligators and whereas crocodiles are a threatened species with no legal recreational take. Whereas the Assistant Alligator Management Program Coordinator declined to respond to two requests to clarify how Myakka's Wild and Scenic status affects FWC's Alligator Management Objectives to the river, therefore the Myakka River Management Coordinating Council is petitioning the Florida Wildlife Commission to remove the Wild and Scenic section of the Myakka River in Sarasota County for future recreational harvest. Jennifer Krajcir seconded. Jamie Richardson and Frank Gargano abstained. Motion Passed.

Howard Berna-Sarasota County

Howard noted that they had an application several years ago for 897 Brentwood. Procedurally, this type of shoreline hardening on the Myakka River requires the Board of County Commissioners approval through a Myakka River variance, and what is their Water and Navigation Control Authority Major Work Permit. That applicant at that time was unable to respond to some questions that were in the plan set. They failed to move forward with it. He has heard that they are looking to come back with an application. Any help that Jono can provide to them in getting the right people is appreciated.

Jono added that agency people are constrained. The owner asked the DEP staff from the South District Office for recommendations, but they said they cannot do that. They could give him a list of different consultants, but they are legally constrained from saying anyone is better. Some firms with Myakka experience are so big they do not want to work on a residence. It would be great to have a model, when there is an issue, they can point to this and say, "This worked and it looks better than the alternative."

Chris added that there was a bill that passed this session that goes into effect July 1, 2026, HB1305. It is where DEP has been directed to emphasize and create incentives for living shoreline approaches. There will be a whole new framework. It will create new regulatory process that incentivizes alternates to hardened seawalls, so there will be at least another path that has a lower permit cost and other incentives.

Howard continued, they have another application under review that is tentatively going to the board on May 19, 2026, or June 2, 2026. Those who are interested watch the board agenda item. It is at the Lazy River Marina. They are looking to put in a retaining wall between the road and the top of the bank to protect the road.

Jono asked if it is visible from the river.

Howard replied it is not. It is an offshoot cove. It is in the river area. The shoreline is lined pretty well with mangroves. There is no impact to the mangroves. All the work is landward from the top of the bank between the road. There is a narrow strip, about 300 feet. Howard is retiring June 19, 2026.

Kara Koenig-Manatee County

Kara Koenig introduced herself. She has taken over the county's Environmental Lands Program Manager role three months ago. There was the unfortunate passing of Commissioner Felts in February 2026, she was a huge proponent of Myakka River Corridor Protection and a Myakka City resident. She noted a public memorial service at David J. Crane Park Saturday, April 18, 2026, at 10:00 AM, because the 13 acres that the county acquired as an addition to that park is being dedicated as a preserve in her name.

There was a discussion about Environmental Field Technician positions for the Myakka River and site compliance types of development projects. The appropriate county staff are compiling that information and that will be brought before the board next week on Tuesday, April 21, 2026, regular hearing.

Jim Keltner-Charlotte County

There is going to be a new park on the Myakka River. It is 130 acres. It is going to be passive recreation. There is going to be an off-road bike track, overlook boardwalk, fishing pier, and kayak launch. That is about a mile or two north of where the Myakka River discharges into the Peace River. Jim handed out some maps of where it is going to be located. Construction is supposed to start taking place in about the next 30 to 60 days. He added that for the most part, it is all preserved with boardwalks. There is a lot of activity, but if you go to the website, it will give you a better description.

Ryan Pieper-City of North Port

Ryan noted that Shanell Bosch, their Environmental Planner, has been reviewing the proposal for Village H in Wellen Park. Some of those areas are not clear with the delineation of where that buffer zone is. They are requesting that the DEP verify those before they can give a full review. They are waiting on those verifications, to establish the required buffers to protect our residences and natural resources.

The city has been approved for a Land Acquisition Program. They were approved for \$2.5 million and they are identifying which ones are the most viable resources for them to go after first. That can be perspective driven too. Is it corridor interest? Is it for drinking water? They are trying to identify which

properties they are going to go after initially. It is exciting for environmental protection and conservation throughout the City of North Port.

Christina Rimes-City of Venice

The mayor and the city manager went out to the Myakka River in support of Congressman Steube.

Michelle McGill- Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)

The CHNEP is currently hiring for a Restoration Manager position at CHNEP. They will be responsible for leading and managing restoration projects throughout the CHNEP area. The CHNEP awarded a conservation grant to the MRMCC in September 2025 to continue their website. They will continue to assist with that. They are funding the Warm Mineral Springs Habitat Restoration and Education Initiative with the state report to remove invasive plant species, to plant natives and install educational signage. They have revamped the Water Atlas Basin pages. On the Myakka River Basin page, they have snapshots of water quality along with a bunch of other data and information related to the Myakka River.

Emily Barnett-FDOT

The construction on River Road is anticipated to finish in early 2027.

Andrew Black-FWC

FWC is currently working on sending crews out to the Myakka River to manage water hyacinth blockage. They are in a drought right now, and the water level has been low making boat access difficult.

Jono asked if that is chemical or mechanical.

Andrew replied that it is chemical, but it is selective.

Chris added that these blockages are largely water hyacinth. Currently, most of these are far down past Deep Hole. Let us say they had an aquatic harvester, getting one down there would be incredibly difficult. In remote areas, there are not many solutions other than herbicide use for these floating aquatic plants.

Jono added that when Bill Byle used to represent Charlotte County, he was curious about whether any work had been done with manatees and them ingesting aquatic vegetation that had been sprayed.

Chris thinks there was a paper that was published about manatees and herbicide.

Andrew added that they are not allowed to apply at all if there are manatees present.

Chris replied that is a complication because this water body is dark water. They are probably nearing an ideal time, the lowest sufficient water level to treat by airboat, it is less likely that manatees have gone through the constriction points of low water as you approach the state park. It is also easier to see them at lower water. As the water level rises, it also increases the chance that manatees are in the area.

Glenn asked if they do drone applications.

Andrew replied that they have started doing drone applications now. He continued noting that FWC is trying to keep natives and get rid of the non-natives. Similar to how AHRES does projects, they try to get

rid of all the giant areas that are covered in paragrass or other invasives and try to give the natives a chance to come back because without that, they would never be able to.

Frank Gargano-SFWMD

Frank is the Ombudsman for the district. Flatford Swamp is a recharge project and there may be some benefit where it will reduce the regular saltwater intrusion. Operational testing is complete and currently the district is working with the Peace River Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority to potentially take over the operation long-term. The Water Supply Authority may expand the operation too. DEP issued the draft renewal permit for the UIC, which is Underground Injection Control. The permit was publicly noticed on April 1, 2026.

Chris questioned that in the past, the idea was that district was making an injection of excess water. The Council liked the idea if they were taking excess agricultural water and removing it from the system. Then it was going to go down to the aquifer real deep, and that would eventually help to bring up the aquifer level. Are we just doing injection or are they talking about water supply?

Frank replied that it will probably be used in combination with their water supply program that they already have established.

Chris asked so they will not be capturing or pulling water off for water supply. They will be injecting and then pulling water back out. Down with one pipe, up with another?

Frank replied that it would be like other aquifer storage recovery products, potentially.

Jono asked if it would be a surface water withdrawal from the Myakka?

Frank replied it would not be.

Chris added that this is up at Flatford. They built a facility that diverted some water off to a holding pond and then that water was cleaned to drinking water standards and then injected into the ground.

Glenn asked about the rule that you cannot disrupt 10% of the flow of a river if you are going to do an injection? Is that not applied in this case?

Frank was not sure.

Jono added that it would be good if they could have someone who is central to that project come talk to the Council at some point in the future.

Ray suggested having the commissioners look long and hard at allowing any borrow pits close to the Myakka for Wellen Park. It is dangerous.

Frank stated that the rules are defined by statute, if a project meets criteria for issuance of a permit, SFWMD is obligated to issue that permit. It is black and white, it is not feeling, it is not emotion. The District is not able to say, "Oh, you are working in this particular location. They are going to set a different standard for you as they are going to set for somebody else."

Ray added that there are lessons learned and so some of that should change, but he understands what Frank is saying.

Eric Strickland-Florida Forest Service (FFS)

Eric noted he is the Resource Administrator for the district. This year, their fire numbers are down. With the drought they have not been doing as much burning. They try to burn a percentage of the forest every year, but they have been doing some mechanical treatment for fuel reduction, so when they do get burning, it will be good. It is also for wildlife enhancement. Their strike team has been working on invasive species control, and they have done some projects and are getting ready to submit those projects for another year through FWC. Some of the things they treat are Brazilian pepper, lygodium, and cogon grass. Those are some of the big problems they still work with.

Esmeralda Figueras-Big Waters Land Trust

Their new land stewardship manager is Ray Vinson. His email is available on their website. He has worked in Sarasota County, Manatee County and at Boyd Hill Preserve. He can burn, so they are excited; for their prescribed fire. They continue to manage their lands within the Myakka River watershed to the best of their abilities with all the strange things including the weather and the water levels. The aquatics soda apple (ASA) did appear to be impacted, top dead from the freeze. It would be nice if it stayed dead.

They did get their results back from the bat survey. No bonneted bats, which is disappointing, but not too surprising, but there are indeed tri-colored bats in Flatford Swamp, that was exciting. Eight other species of bats were recorded by the auditory monitoring device.

Michelle Keirse-Myakka River State Park (MRSP)

Michelle is the Volunteer Manager with MRSP. They are struggling to get fire on the ground with the drought. The park did do a 700 acre burn on Wednesday in a zone that had at least four burrowing owls that were hanging out during the fire. It is exciting to see those kinds of results in the area after the burn. Michelle introduced Zack Westmark as a biologist for MRSP.

Zack had some slides, starting with an aerial treatment in the Big Flats Marsh, October 2025. It is important for the visitors, it is high profile and ecologically significant because it has that important mud flat for some of the imperiled bird species that use that area. In May 2026, their focus is going to be doing some in-house treatment along the park drive that is north of that before they flood, because they use integrated pest management. They try to be strategic about how they apply herbicide and when they apply herbicide. He will be testing some grass only selective herbicides called TIGR and Fusilade II in conjunction with mowing. They did some mowing last season in advance of the aerial treatment to try to knock some of that biomass down so the herbicide would be more effective. They are going to continue this year before it floods and then use the flood as a third stressor for the paragrass.

MRSP has been battling ASA, also known as wetland nightshade. In November 2025, they had their traveling exotics team in the district come in to map the infestation and to find out whether it was still contained within the initial area of discovery. They treated those outside satellite populations so they could try to contain it on a single site. They did a great job. They surveyed about 200 acres of some challenging floodplain terrain. They are planning a DEP workday in May 2026 to continue the work. They put in a grant application with FWC's Aquatic Habitat Restoration and Enhancement Section. They are hoping that they can do some follow-up contractor treatment in that area to knock it back.

Zach projected a vicinity map and gave an update on some in-house re-vegetation efforts they have made. He showed images of planting after Downs' Dam was removed. He discussed plantings and some seeding. The project area is about a 30-minute drive from the main entrance where their office and support facilities are located. There are some challenges and opportunities associated with this project. Depending on the time of year, you cannot get there. Zach thanked the Friends of Myakka River. They were huge in supporting this project. They had some local volunteers that came out and helped in-house staff to make this happen. The species that they planted were state endangered, lowland loosestrife, creeping primrose willow, and smartweed, among others. The original planting in May 2025, and they were lucky that they got the summer rains shortly after, because the big concern is the time and fuel it takes to get down to that site to irrigate. In terms of results, the most exciting is that the state endangered lowland loosestrife that they planted showed good survival, 25 to 50% in a system that is either really dry or that is completely underwater, that was a big surprise and a pleasure to see that.

Zack showed pictures of the Volunteers working. They are pleased. Recently, he showed photos of another planting. The Friends of Myakka River were instrumental in making this happen. They planted 18 cabbage palms. The purpose of that was to close off the gap in the hydric hammock created by the construction equipment to remove the dam. There was another area on the access path that shows where the equipment was traversing to get in, some little erosion issues there. Because of concerns about the drought, they kept half of the palms provided in their new native plant nursery.

Zack highlighted some awesome volunteers. he credited Tracy Calla. She rebuilt the native plant nursery that was destroyed during Hurricane Ian. They have some Fakahatchee grass that they got as part of that project as well. As they get closer to the rainy season, they are going to plant the remainder of the cabbage palms and some grasses. Because there was such good natural recruitment this first year, they are going to monitor it in late 2026 and do follow up plantings with a few additions that we are able to raise in their native plant nursery supported by the Friends of Myakka River.

Chris Oliver-Myakka Wild & Scenic River (MWSR) Program

Chris gave an update the Unit Management Plan (UMP) update. He noted that the statutes that govern state park management require that every 10 years each UMP must be updated. There was a new process that reviews all of parks in a district and updates them one time instead of piecemeal. The district biology office is responsible for writing the Resource Management Component and working with Tallahassee to write the Land Use Component for 36 units all at one time. That time is now. Draft UMPs will be coming soon for MRSP and Oscar Scherer in Sarasota. There will be a public draft of the MRSP UMP, which covers the 12 miles of river for the Wild and Scenic in MRSP. The last plan did have consistent protections between both the river management plan and the state park UMP. Sometime this summer, there will be a draft version of that UMP for comments. It will come to the Council. Separately, there will be a public and an advisory group meeting, likely this summer, which is typical with the UMP process.

Chris introduced Chloe Lauer; She is a new district biologist. She is assisting with the MWSR Program as well as other district biology projects such as the Weeki Wachee restoration project.

Miri questioned if there should be a Council meeting so the management plan can be discussed once the draft plan is released.

Chris replied that we do not know exactly what that date is, the Council likely needs to have a tentative date in mind knowing that it might need to be adjusted. Chris continued American Rivers is a premier river protection organization. In addition to some of the press releases that they have been sending out regarding the bills, every year they do a list of American dam removals. They have certain goals and they

have lots of information and webinars where they try to get people involved. Some of the first materials Chris ever saw about dam removal was when he was looking at the Upper Lake at MRSP were American Rivers documents. American Rivers produced a report called the State of Dam Removals in the U.S. for 2025. Downs' Dam is the first of the four rivers they highlight for all that were removed in the Southeast. Downs' Dam was the only reported dam removal in Florida in 2025.

Jono questioned the statement from the book that the project created approximately 10 acres of wetlands from open water habitats.

Chris replied that this 10 acres of wetlands come from WSP looking at the hydrology, based on SWFWMD data, and calculating that if the dam was removed, in returning a more natural hydroperiod. WSP did it in the same way, they estimated the creation would be 70 acres of wetlands created from open water when the Upper Lake Weir was removed. Compared to the alternative.

Jono was skeptical it was 10 acres.

Chris clarified that there is a map from a plan that was presented to the Council at a past meeting. It is not one big block of wetlands just above the dam. It is a long skinny edge, especially going up to the Lower Lake. From the Harris Camp area up toward the southern area of the Lower Lake.

Jono stated that Downs' Dam was backing water up and creating aquatic habitat. When you take the weir out the water level drops.

Chris noted it was more complicated, with the dam breached all around the east side, which started around 2008 and expanded yearly. By 2015, 2016 you had a bankfull channel bypassing the dam. Of course, this resulted in the bank and hydric hammock eroding into the river. Once you have a full movement through there, then that wetland creation was already underway. The study was framing things. Option one was to take everything out. Option two was to make it a bit better so that there is a fish ladder, manatee passage. Option three was to put the dam back wholly and fix the breach. In that regard, that is how they calculate it.

Chris showed photos of the Venice Myakka River Park. In August 2025, he showed a picture of the road being undercut. Here is a photo of some disturbed area from when they took the road out. Hopefully that will be revegetated, and it may need supplemental vegetation. They also planted all those cabbage palms, which was a good idea behind there. You can see the ones that clearly are from a nursery.

Jono noted that you have to specify naturally clean trunks.

Chris continued a lot of his time is taken up reviewing permits. Most of the time for the last couple of years has been the shoreline projects. Chris projected some slides. The Cope project was mentioned, and you notice the area in front of this house, it was all denuded, but the area to the left was similar to these banks where you have a karst understory, then a lightly vegetated soil level that is probably above mean high water. Then you have a big thick palmetto edge usually surrounded by cabbage palms and oak in the back. This is one example of what a natural bank might look like if the house was not there. The idea in the MWSR Program, is that they do want people to be able to protect their property, but they are trying to look for softer approaches, using natural materials. For example, not far from this property, Snook Haven tried to restore some of their shorelines. They had a pier they took out and to stabilize that area that was disturbed, they put in riprap, in a small area, but they were required to cover that with vegetation. But zero vegetation survived. The idea is how do they come up with better methods to make it look more natural? Realizing there is still going to be a house there, but what can they do to mitigate those things?

That is the goal of that part of 62D-15. Sometimes whether it is the private property owner or the public agency, many times they make some of those projects worse with their stormwater or landscape management. Sometimes we mow areas, allow car parking, or trampling the vegetation. Similar to BMPs for a standard stormwater pond, one should have a 10-foot buffer where activities are limited, trying to establish vegetation. Similarly, some minimum standards for the riverbank itself are needed.

The MWSR Program has been working for years with FWC AHRES and IPM group to try to improve the floodplain marsh. When they think about MRSP, it is Myakka River and while everybody loves the prairie, you have two different parks within Myakka River. Myakka River itself has resource management needs that are separate from the prairie. One that they have struggled with is an invasion of non-native grasses that occupy and take away from a mosaic of native species, and then that changes the plant and animal community. They also have that problem in the lakes, invasive fish. Chris showed a photo of one leaf of one native yellow water lily, which was all they could find last year. Chris showed a photo from summer of 2013, tons of aquatic vegetation in the Upper Lake, but they lost it and it has not come back since. There is a historic photo from 1978 showing the lake full of vegetation. It is believed by several managers that the primary driver of that decline is invasive fish. That is going to be a tough issue, there is no easy solution. They are talking about possible pilot projects where they grow vegetation in cages.

Andrew added that the frost helped out a bit on that too. Were there fishkills like elsewhere?

Chris replied yes there were. Chris and Chloe did to document to what degree there was a fish kill. He has seen much bigger fish kills in the past in the system and does not know if these fish are getting better at responding. Hundreds of thousands of tropical fish, like sailfin catfish and Tilapia did die but it is not enough. Will they see a response this summer that looks like 2013? This was a response to a cold period right before that. He talked to Dave Blewett, an FWC snook and bass expert. He asked Dave how much effort they should put in. Should they get crews out there now when water levels are low and try to round up any straggler fish? Dave said it probably was not worth the effort. Chris thought that was what he would say but was hoping he would tell them to do it. The problem is north or south of them. There might be pockets where they had some protection where it is not as open as the lakes. Chris noted the aerial herbicide work which was delayed until October. They treated 110 acres by helicopter, and then park staff treated 40 acres adjacent areas. They target the monoculture areas, 95 to 99% paragrass, with almost no-native species. Then they got the freeze event, and in areas where they had good treatment, those areas have almost no regrowth, less than 1%. In areas that did not have an herbicide stressor, they are now starting to get growth throughout the whole area. It shows that a frost event might do a top kill, but the plant will respond because it has a lot of storage underground.

Michelle added that the plan after that was to burn it, which they tried hard to do. They could not get authorization, due to drought, even though it was contained to the marsh area.

Chris continued. Dixie Resnick, the Director of the Crowley Museum, reached out and asked if they could find some way to treat the hyacinth that is along her property north of CR 780. Access is difficult at this location. Recreation is a resource value on the Wild and Scenic River, and whether you are in a motorboat or a kayak, they need to be actively managing it and they thank their partners, like FWC, for helping them do that. They do not have the resources to keep this river navigable. Ideally, they would have aquatic harvesters, or they would hand pull each one of those water hyacinth out. Hopefully, with current water levels, it has dispersed to make it easier. If it is not managed, it will be thick. Back in the 70s and 80s there were years when you could not paddle the river at all.

Jono confirmed that this was true. The state was creating a state canoe trail, and they ended up with the Wild and Scenic River not included in it because it was not controllable.

Jono Miller-Chair's Report

Jono projected a map showing the development that is going in all around Hawkins Ranch. He showed a video of Carol Hawkins.

“My name is Carol Hawkins, and this is Hawkins Ranch. We have a cow calf operation that's been in effect since the late 1800s. We're around 3,200 acres and around a thousand head of cattle. We are located about five miles east of I-75 in Sarasota County. We're the last remaining ranch bordering Myakka State Park. As far as development goes, we are the last buffer for Myakka State Park, and we'd like to protect the park as much as we'd like to be protected. This ranch is so unique because it is very well balanced and it's diverse. It's got equal amounts of improved pasture and natural grasslands and rough woods and woodlands, and it's a perfectly balanced ecosystem. There's development across the street. There's going to be 12,000 acres and I think 35,000 homes or 20,000 homes. I'm not sure how many homes are going in over there, but yes, the water... Where are people going to get their water? Where is it going to come from? They don't preserve. I just don't know. Conservation easements have been on my mind for a long time. I've spent a lot of time riding these pastures and these woodlands, and I do not, I do not want to see them destroyed, and I do not want to see the property ruined. It is beautiful and balanced and perfect.”

Jono continued. There is an effort to have the state and Sarasota County involved in securing a conservation easement, which would mean it would continue to be a cattle operation. If Hawkins ever decide they do not want to do a cattle operation, their options would either be to sell it to someone else who wanted to do a cattle operation or sell it for protection and parts of it could be added to MRSP. Jono highlight areas adjacent properties on a map.

Chris added that portions of the ranch are hydrologically connected to the area between Deep Hole and the Harris Camp.

Jono continued by projecting a map with the national cemetery and Skye Ranch. If you look at the aerials, some of Skye Ranch is in the floodplain of Cow Pen Slough.

Chris stated that the Office of Park Planning in Tallahassee is concerned as they look at the next 10 years, the next 20 years of MRSP. There are a handful of wilderness preserves in the state system. Heading below 72, towards Deep Hole, and to the southern boundary, that is the wilderness preserve area within MRSP. The western boundary is Hawkins Ranch. Based on the definition of a preserve, it has to be remote. If there was a property there, it would impact whether they had a wilderness preserve in MRSP.

Miri noted that on Tuesday, April 21, 2026, there is a discussion item for the county commissioners to discuss adding the parcel to the Environmentally Sensitive Lands Oversight Committee (ESLOC) priority list. Would it be appropriate for the Council to make motion to recommend or make any sort of statement to the county commissioners about the Council's position on this? Assuming there is one.

Motion: Glenn Compton motioned that the chair write a letter in support of adding the Hawkins Ranch to a protection priority site so that Sarasota County could participate in the process of getting this conservation easement. Kara Koenig seconded.

Motion discussion.

Kara added that Manatee County is going through the process now with the [Rural and Family Lands Protection Program](#). Florida Conservation Group is helping these rural ag owners. They are going through appraisals now in the state, but Mossy Island Ranch, immediately adjacent to MRSP, is undergoing the

appraisals. Manatee County went through the execution memorandums of agreement with FDACs to move forward with it. This is a great option for acquisition outside of fee simple.

Miri's understanding is that this particular motion would have to do with the county commissioners discussing whether to add this parcel to the ESLOC priority list. It is a large, substantial parcel that is going to require funding from a number of different programs to be able to protect.

Jono added that buying development rights on 3000 acres in this climate is expensive.

Glen asked about how the owners feel about this.

Jono confirmed that they are supportive. And that if it is clear that Sarasota County supports this, it makes it easier in Tallahassee.

Jon Robinson stated that the first step is to put it into a protection priority site. Prior to this, the Hawkins have never been willing sellers, so it cannot go into a protection priority site. They cannot talk about acquiring or acquiring a conservation easement until this first step. That is the step that is going in front of the board now.

Jono replied that the owners want to do a conservation easement. He does not think they could afford a 3000-acre fee simple acquisition.

Motion: Glenn Compton motioned that the chair write a letter in support of adding the Hawkins Ranch to a protection priority site so that Sarasota County could participate in the process of getting this conservation easement. Kara Koenig seconded. Emily Barnett and Frank Gargano abstained. Motion Passed.

Jono projected map and pointed out the location of the former Downs' Dam, noting a dramatic hairpin turn on the river. When there are high flows, the river cannot make a tight turn, and it keeps going in the same direction. Then it hits this fence line and comes down. With each high flow event, there is more erosion in that area. In high water, you cannot make this turn. Because water is flowing through the hammock here and so you have to paddle. It is one of two places where you must paddle against the current to go downstream.

Chris added that after Hurricane Ian and Irma, it was not possible.

Ray added that it was like that at Snook Haven as well.

New Member Nominations:

Chris gave an update about the process of becoming a member of the Council. Last year the Council made recommendations about new membership. Those were approved by the district office and then went up to Tallahassee for further review and potential approval. This is the first meeting of the year, and the Council can make nominations for potential membership.

Jono asked if anyone is aware of some individual or entity that would be a good addition to the Council.

Meghan Davis indicated that Chuck Johnston will no longer be the O Bar O representative.

Chris requested that as the owner, she can discuss future representation for the O Bar O after the meeting.

Chris continued, noting that the bylaws call out four different sections, but the idea is they should be living generally in the river area and ideally in an area where there is no representation. Victor Dobrin, the current Vice Chair, lives in West Villages. They have a member, Deborah Musallam, in the Brentwood area. They need members where they have the biggest gaps, specifically the Venice Golf and River Club area, which is below the park and the Ramblers Rest area.

Jono also suggested the east side of the river, south of 41 in the Lazy River area.

Christina offered to reach out to the residents at VGRC.

Chris confirmed this would be helpful.

Ryan noted that there are people he knows in the Venice area that were interested in various topics from previous minutes.

Jono added that it is good for potential members to come and participate in the meetings to see what their tolerance is for the meetings and whether they are interested.

Esmeralda asked if it could be anywhere on the Myakka River or only the Wild and Scenic portion of it?

Chris replied that the way the bylaws are written, approved by DEP and based on language in the statute, it says that they are looking for at least four residents, and it names the four locations that were talked about. However, there are two things that say that is the minimum of what they are looking for. Number one, it says in the statute and in the bylaws, DEP can appoint anyone DEP feels would be a good fit on the Council. It also says the Council can make any recommendations to the DEP on anyone it feels would be a good fit.

Jono mentioned Carol Hawkins.

Chris replied that she is not on the river, but hydrologically she is connected.

Bob suggesting approaching Carol Hawkins.

Miri can talk with her next week.

Jono suggested inviting the ranch and then they can decide who would represent.

Bob Clark motioned to nominate Hawkins Ranch as a potential Council member. Esmeralda Figueras seconded. Nomination passed.

Jono clarified that the Council is voting to contact the Hawkins Ranch and see if they would be interested in serving.

Elections

Chris mentioned that the bylaws are on the website. At the business meeting every year, they have elections for the chair of the Council and the vice chair. Victor is the current Vice Chair. He gave an overview of these roles.

Bob Clark nominated Jono Miller for the Chair of the Council. Stacey Mazza-Gilkison seconded. Nomination passed.

Jono is willing to serve. He is working with a bunch of people on the referendum on November 3, 2026, to protect more land in the county. When it passes, it is a 20-year program.

Chris stated that if the chair cannot make it to the meeting, the vice chair steps in.

Bob Clark nominated Victor Dobrin for the Vice Chair of the Council. Glenn Compton seconded. Nomination passed.

Chris will check with Victor to see if he is willing to serve.

Chris reminded the Council of the DEP draft UMP, which is ideally ready around June, for the purpose of scheduling a tentative meeting date for the next meeting. The Draft UMP will include many pages of text and maps. There will be a chapter for the entire district and there will be a chapter about what we are calling Western Central Rivers, which includes Myakka with several other blackwater streams.

Next Meeting: Tentatively for June 12, 2026, pending the availability of the draft UMP.

Next Meeting Topics: Myakka River State Park Draft UMP.