

Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge Accomplishments at Three Sisters Springs

- Crystal River NWR, the Friends of CRNWR Complex, and the National Wildlife Refuge Association worked to raise funds to purchase the property from 2005 to 2010.
- The property was purchased through a public/private partnership involving multiple agencies and support from the community to make Three Sisters Springs part of the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge. The Service contributed \$3.225 million along with \$1.775 million in private donations raised by the Friends of Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge Complex, the Felburn Foundation, and the National Wildlife Refuge Association towards the purchase of the \$5 million water rights as part of the \$10.5 million deal to purchase the property and the springs. The FCT contributed \$3.5 million and the Southwest Florida Water Management District contributed \$2 million towards the land purchase.
- The Refuge does not receive any funding from the entrance and trolley fees charged by the City and supports staff, volunteers, and maintenance needs on the property solely from their annual budget.
- Refuge staff manage almost 32,000 acres across 5 counties but collectively spend 32 % of their time on the management and maintenance of the 57.1-acre Three Sisters Springs property.
- The Refuge spends more than 27% (i.e., \$297,000) of their total annual budget on management of the Property.
- Since 2010, the Refuge has conducted regular law enforcement patrols; facilities, roads and grounds maintenance; biological surveys and exotic and invasive plant and animal control.
- The Refuge manages a well-developed and extremely dedicated volunteer force (>130 volunteers) that donated more than 10,000 to 14,000 hours annually to the management of Three Sisters Springs interacting with the public on the boardwalk, educating swimmers about passive manatee observation, educating the public on manatees, springs, native plants and wildlife during interpretive tours, and maintaining the facilities and grounds for an estimated value up to \$345,733 (i.e., \$24.14 per hour according to independentsector.org) per year.
- The Refuge has spent approximately \$1,465,130 on site development and capital improvements including construction of a fee booth and entrance gate, boardwalk, entrance road, installation of water and sewer, invasive and exotic plant control, etc.) since Fiscal Year 2012 for an average of \$366,282 per year over the last 4 years.
- A master site plan identifying capital improvements and habitat restoration for the property was completed in 2012 and funding (\$700,000) to construct two buildings, one containing interpretive exhibits, reception area and an office/gift shop, and the other containing a multi-purpose/environmental education classroom, storage and public restrooms was received in 2014.
- Design and construction of these buildings was initiated in August 2014 but was put on hold in May of 2015 due to lack of support from the community for these facilities and lack of support and direction from City Council.
- Since at least February 2015, City Council members have publicly expressed that they want sole control of public access to the land portion of Three Sisters Springs.
- City Council convened a tourism workshop in April 2015 to determine how to harness the economic benefits for the City as “City Council decided to take a different direction with Three Sisters Springs, in that the City will try to take over the land portion....”

- The Service informed the City that progress on capital improvement projects might “be slowed or stopped because of City actions to remove USFWS from the Property” during a May 26, 2015 Council meeting, and that the Service would “request return of its capital investment if a mutually beneficial resolution [was] not reached.” This was reiterated to City Officials in writing in April 2017.
- The Service is restricted in using appropriated funds to make permanent improvements to property not owned by the federal government unless authorized by statute or the following specific conditions are met: 1) improvements must be for the principal benefit of the United States Government, and 2) that the interests of the United States Government in the improvements must be protected (GAO-01-179SP Appropriations Law-Vol. IV, pages 16-206 to 16-210).
- Those conditions can only be met for the Property if the Service will continue to have management authority for the estimated reasonable life of the structures and improvements made. If the Service’s management authority ends prematurely, the City and/or SWFWMD would be required to reimburse the Service for the pro-rated value or fair market appraisal of the structures and improvements made to the Property from this point forward.
- City officials voted to terminate the Refuge’s management agreement with the City and the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) to manage the Three Sisters Springs property (Property) as part of the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) on May 8, 2017.
- With termination, 100% of the costs would fall on the City - and therefore the citizens of Crystal River.