

Miami-Dade County's Environmentally Endangered Lands - Tax Covenant
Department of Regulatory and Economic Resources
Environmental Resources Management
Natural Resources Planning Section

**PROTECTING DADE COUNTY'S PINE
AND HAMMOCK FOREST LANDS**

A RAPID DECLINE OF A NATURAL RESOURCE

Much of South Florida was once covered by a vast expanse of forestland. Early settlers encountered magnificent stands of towering pinelands that stretched along the coastal ridge to the edge of the Everglades. Early naturalists described mysterious jungle-like hardwood hammocks that gave South Florida a tropical accent found nowhere else in the continental United States. These pine and hammock forestlands were biologically unique plant communities because they included an intermingling of temperate plant species, which were at the southern limits of their range, and tropical plants, which were at the northern extent of their range. This diverse association of plants provided habitat for a large variety of animal species such as the Florida panther, Eastern indigo snake and Liguus tree snail, which are rare or approaching extinction.



The rapid urbanization of Miami-Dade County has resulted in the virtual elimination of our once extensive pine and hammock forestlands. A 1975 inventory of the forestland outside of Everglades National Park revealed that only 6,000 of the original 151,800 acres remained. A recent survey indicates that less than 4000 acres remain, of which only 1500 acres are considered to be relatively undisturbed. This represents only 2% of the original forest. At the present rate of decline, it is possible that all of our pine and hammock forestland outside of Everglades National Park could disappear before the year 2020.

**AN INCENTIVE FOR PRESERVING DADE COUNTY'S
REMAINING FOREST RESOURCES**

Rapid urbanization and population growth in Miami-Dade County have resulted in a corresponding rapid increase in property values. As a result, many valuable pinelands and hardwood hammocks have been cleared for residential and agricultural uses in recent years. In an attempt to preserve remaining forestlands in Miami-Dade County outside of Everglades National Park, and to provide property owners with an economic incentive to preserve forestland, the Miami-Dade County Commission adopted the Environmentally Endangered Lands Tax Covenant Ordinance in December 1979. The ordinance established significantly lower property tax assessments for outstanding forested sites, which are zoned for agriculture or residential usage.

**HOW DADE COUNTY'S ENVIRONMENTALLY ENDANGERED
LANDS TAX EXEMPTION PROGRAM WORKS**

The Miami-Dade County Department of Regulatory and Economic Resources (RER) Environmental Resources Management is responsible for administering the Environmentally Endangered Lands Tax Exemption Program. Upon receipt of an application for an endangered lands tax exemption, Department biologists conduct a field assessment of the specific property to determine if the property qualifies for the program. The Department's review criteria include the following parameters: species diversity, presence of rare and endangered plant species, impact by exotic plant species, tree size, manageability, and the size of the site. Other factors, which may also be taken into account, include unusual geological formations and the presence of rare and endangered wildlife, and whether the property can be subdivided and developed.

After it has been determined that a site has qualified for the program, a management plan is developed to ensure that the site remains in a natural state and to maintain or improve existing environmental conditions. This usually entails

requiring the owner to maintain a program to remove and control exotic plant species from the site and possible replanting of native species. In the case of pinelands, periodic controlled burns may be required.

The management plan, as well as other conservation restrictions, are detailed in a covenant, which must be signed and adhered to by the applicant. All covenants are granted for a period of ten years. Any term or condition not adhered to by the property owner constitutes a breach of covenant may require the owner to pay all back taxes plus an annual interest penalty. Yearly inspections may be made of approved sites to ensure that the conditions stipulated in the management plan are being followed. Any act or use detrimental to the preservation of qualified sites such as dumping, excavation, destruction of trees, shrubs or other vegetation is prohibited.

Since only natural portions of a site may be considered for endangered lands, all existing structures, roads, driveways, clearings and disturbed areas, which may be a part of the site, are deducted from the total acreage figure of the site. In addition, future home sites may be deducted from the total acreage figure.

SOME COMMON QUESTIONS REGARDING DADE COUNTY'S ENVIRONMENTALLY ENDANGERED LANDS TAX EXEMPTION PROGRAM

Q. What type of land can qualify for the tax exemption program?

A. *Any relatively undisturbed natural forest site, such as pinelands and hardwood hammocks, especially those in danger of being developed, can qualify for an environmentally endangered lands tax exemption.*

Q. What are the requirements, which must be met in order for my property to qualify for the tax exemption?

A. *Consideration is given to the general condition of the site, the presence of rare plants or animals, the extent of impact by exotic plants, and the future manageability of the site as a natural area.*

Q. How do I apply?

A. *Applications may be obtained from RER's Natural Resources Planning Section, 701 NW 1st Court, 5th Floor, Miami, Florida 33136. Phone:(305)372-6645 or (305)372-6548. A Sketch or Survey of the property and an application fee are also required. **Original applications must be signed and mailed with applicable fees.***

Q. What restrictions will be placed on my property if it qualifies?

A. *The property owner is required to sign a ten-year covenant with Miami-Dade County. The covenant stipulates that the property will be maintained and managed in its natural condition for the duration of the covenant.*

Q. Do I have to allow for public access if my site qualifies?

A. *No. Qualified sites shall remain private. The County (RER) shall have the right to inspect the premises to determine if the land is being maintained as agreed to in the covenant.*

Q. What tax break can I expect if my land qualifies?

A. *It is the lowest tax assessment given for any land.*

Q. I have five acres of pineland with a house and barn. Can my property be considered?

A. *Yes. Existing structures and other disturbed areas can be deducted from the total acreage, if the forested portion of the property qualifies.*

Q. Can I build a house in the future on an undeveloped site, which has received the tax exemption?

A. *Yes. You may apply for the tax exemption on any portion of a site or all of a site. Future homesites may be excluded from the application.*

Q. What does the management plan involve?

A. *The goal of the management plan is to keep the site in a natural condition. This usually requires removal of undesirable exotic plant species, and keeping the site clear of trash and litter.*

Q. What plant species are considered non-native pests and how can they be controlled and eliminated?

A. *Melaleuca, Brazilian pepper and Australian pine are the most notable pest species in Miami-Dade County. Other exotics also have the potential of becoming a problem. The most common control method used to control plant pests in pinelands is periodic controlled burning, every 3-4 years. Hand removal and/or spraying with an approved herbicide, especially in hammocks or sites where fire cannot be used, is another management technique.*

Q. How do I know which trees are undesirable?

A. *Department biologists will assist landowners with management problems.*

Q. How do I burn my land if required to do so?

A. *The Florida Division of Forestry plans and executes controlled burning in Miami-Dade County at the request of property owners. The Department will assist in the coordination of a burn.*

Q. Won't burning destroy the site?

A. *A controlled burn (also known as "prescribed burn") is conducted under special seasonal and climatic conditions to reduce understory hardwoods and exotic plant species, to minimize fuel build-up, and to promote pine reproduction. Controlled burning is conducted in pinelands only (not hardwood hammocks) and actually improves the biological and aesthetic qualities of a pineland. Some trees may be killed as a result of the burn, depending on conditions on the site.*

For further information on Dade County's Environmentally Endangered Lands Covenant, please contact:

Department of Regulatory and Economic Resources

Environmental Resources Management

Natural Resources Planning Section

701 NW 1 Court, Suite 500

Miami, Florida 33136

Phone: (305) 372-6645 or (305) 372-6548

dermecore Restoration@miamidadegov

Miami-Dade

Board of County Commissioners

Text by

J. C. Eggert/J. D. Klein

The Department can also use your help in stopping pollution. If you see or know of any environmental hazard, please call our 24-hour Complaint Desk at (305) 372-6955. Environmental Resources Management needs your help in protecting our resources.

Please submit the enclosed application (and application fee) by **April 30th** in order to have the tax covenant in place for the following tax year.

ENVIRONMENTALLY ENDANGERED LANDS COVENANT APPLICATION

OWNERS' NAMES	MAILING ADDRESS	PHONE NO.	% OWNERSHIP
1. _____	_____	_____	_____
2. _____	_____	_____	_____
3. _____	_____	_____	_____
4. _____	_____	_____	_____

Signature(s) of Owner(s) (*all owners must sign*):

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Address of property: _____

Legal description of property: _____

Tax folio number of property: _____

Mortgages, encumbrances, liens, easements, restrictions, leases, etc. on property: _____

Date application filed: _____

Name of person filing application: _____

Mailing address: _____

Phone number: _____

Signature of person filing application: _____

Please include the following additional items:

1. A ninety-five dollar (\$95.00) application fee. Make check payable to Miami-Dade County. **Please note that there will be additional processing fees if your property qualifies for the EEL program. These processing fees vary based on qualifying acreage.**
2. A survey sketch or drawing for the subject property, showing existing dwellings or improvements including driveways and utilities.