Water defines Florida’s ecosystems. Historically one-half the state was wetlands. The state’s abundant rainfall seeped into vast aquifers and filled floodplains. Springs and rivers released billions of gallons of freshwater into coastal areas nourishing productive seagrass beds and marshes.

Florida’s founders made water a public resource to be protected and managed for the benefit of natural systems and all people; yet, Florida’s aquatic and estuarine systems are suffering from decades of over-drainage, pollution, overuse and mismanagement.

The environment is the first user of water but has become the biggest loser as:

- Drainage of water from swamps and floodplains and reduction of aquifer recharge and surface water flows have depleted nature’s storage systems. Diversion and discharge to the coastal estuaries of seasonal stormwater rob those same estuaries of freshwater during droughts and the dry seasons.
- Pollution from farm and urban fertilizers and human and animal waste has impaired springs and rivers and has left a legacy of phosphorous in lakes and nitrogen in groundwater.
- Overuse of waters for farm and urban landscape irrigation and industrial and public supply has depleted aquifers and surface waters, and reduced the flow of springs and rivers.
- Legislators and the Governor have weakened Florida’s water laws, reduced citizen participation in permitting decisions, cut back on agency science, water conservation and alternative water supply funds, and proposed selling off water management lands that help recharge aquifers and protect floodplains.
- The combined effect of drainage, pollution and overuse of water harms ecosystems and wildlife throughout Florida resulting in permanent loss or expensive restoration.

Therefore be it resolved:

Audubon Florida, deploying professional staff and expertise and using information derived from sound science, will call on the volunteer leadership of local Audubon societies (chapters), members and grassroots networks, and will work with conservation allies, business and community leaders, public officials, and agencies to:

**Protect Water at the Source – Aquifers, Wetlands, Lakes, and Springs**

- Protect the availability of water for the benefit of natural systems before water is permitted for other uses. Set Minimum Flows and Levels (MFLs) at historic levels, and, if MFLs are not met, implement recovery strategies with clear deadlines to deliver tangible benefits for the environment;
- Improve standards for water use permits so that withdrawals will not harm natural systems and/or require applicants to mitigate for harmful impacts;
- Restore public participation in water use permitting decisions;
- Require independent science for water resource decisions and budget funds to study aquifers and other water resources;
- Fund water management districts to work with landowners to retain excess water on their land, plug drainage ditches and redirect water to seep into wetlands and recharge into the ground;
- Expand, accelerate and improve floodplain and water recharge area acquisition and management to prevent these areas from being lost to development; and
- Strengthen wetlands protection laws to achieve “no net loss” of functional values.

**Sustain Water Supply**

- Require mandatory water conservation programs with measurable savings as condition for issuance of consumptive use permits; and
- Reverse budget cuts made by the Legislature and Governor Scott to water management district budgets with an emphasis on renewing funding conservation, restoration, alternative water supply, water storage and land conservation projects.

**Improve Water Quality**

- Implement new regulatory controls on agricultural and urban nutrient pollution in order to give teeth to water quality cleanup programs;
- Convert septic tanks to central sewer systems in areas with impaired waters;
- Require permits and regulatory BMPs for agricultural discharges into public waters and canals, and
- Limit fertilizer use to amounts and times that can be shown to not harm water resources.
Audubon engages on water policy to protect habitats and wildlife. Recent efforts:

• Opposing Overuse of Rivers and Aquifers for Water Supply – The Central Florida Water Initiative (CFWI) is limiting traditional groundwater withdrawals to 850 million gallons per day to avoid further damage to springs, lake levels and wetlands that are dependent on groundwater. However, the draft plan proposes to tap up to 250 mgd of surface waters from the St. Johns, Ocklawaha, Kissimme and Withlacoochee Rivers, which will adversely impact floodplains, riverine wetlands, and wildlife habitat. Audubon volunteers serve on the CFWI and work with allies to urge aggressive water conservation instead of new water supply proposals that will reduce river flows.

• The North Florida Water Supply Partnership Stakeholder Advisory Committee was established by the Suwannee River and St. Johns River Water Management Districts. Audubon represents the environmental community in this committee by seeking solutions to massive pumping by the City of Jacksonville. Pumping is reducing spring flows and draining lake systems in the heart of North Central Florida’s spring region. The goal is to get the DEP and the Water Management Districts to adopt strong meaningful minimum flows and levels, and recovery plans for springs and lake systems that have been damaged.

• Opposing Adena Springs Ranch – Audubon’s position is that withdrawal of huge quantities of water will imperil Silver Springs. We have urged the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) to deny the permits and have asked DEP to intervene with the SJRWMD to prevent a harmful decision.

• Groundwater for landscape irrigation – Audubon is advocating for changes to DEP’s rule on augmentation of reclaimed water by permitting additional pumping water from rivers, lakes, and groundwater. Reclaimed water is typically exempt from lawn watering restrictions, and utilities want to sell more of it by diluting the treated sewage effluent with clean water from natural sources. This defeats the purpose of reclaimed water and is contrary to water conservation efforts.

• Challenging permits for the dirtiest sugarcane farms – Audubon is insisting that the South Florida Water Management District’s permits in the Everglades Agricultural area require sugar producers to improve on-farm water quality.

• Reserving water for the environment – Audubon is urging adoption of “Minimum Flows and Levels” and “Water Reservations” to secure enough water in the Kissimmee watershed to allow the $900 million Kissimmee Restoration Project to function once the river is restored to its old channel.

• Cleaning up Lake Okeechobee – Audubon is fighting for tighter rules on pollution in the Northern Everglades by insisting that the Basin Area Management Plan proposal has enforceable actions and targets.

• Solutions for the Indian River Lagoon – Many of Audubon’s proposals to the Senate Select Committee were adopted in committee’s recommendations. Now Audubon is lobbying the appropriations process to get funds approved.

• Statewide Water Policy Legislation – Audubon is lobbying to support passage of new statewide water policies to reduce pollution and restore freshwater flows. Leadership in both the House and the Senate are declaring that the 2014 Legislative session will address important water policy issues such as protection & restoration of our springs, water supply and funding alternative water supplies.

• Water and Land Legacy Amendment – Audubon chapters have been top performers in helping to collect the signatures required to place the amendment on the fall ballot. Audubon is helping to lead the campaign and has raised and contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars.