

Gone “Forever Wild” with Your Money

Alabama’s sacred cow, the environmentalist land acquisition program called “Forever Wild,” is on the move again.

It seems that to many of our state politicians, Forever Wild is a subject that can not even be discussed except in glowing terms of adulation and to say anything against this program is akin to political heresy. Every discussion about this feel good program is couched in emotion, and the facts seem to be irrelevant. Such blind disregard for the economic realities of Alabama’s financial situation is staggering.

This could only be attributed to “Sacred Cow Disease.”

We have all read the stories about human beings starving to death in India, while because of the religious beliefs of the local human population, cows, rats and other animals blissfully devoured the crops that these same humans had planted to feed their families in times of need. Even though the little children cried for food, these sacred cows could not be touched.

This sacred cow mentality seems to be prevalent among the supporters of Forever Wild and the other (some would say) radical environmental organizations such as the Nature Conservancy, and the Audubon Society with which Forever Wild has affiliated themselves in the past, and that, according to their own materials, they still rely upon today to help them acquire and set aside property.

In Gov. Robert Bentley’s State-of-the-State address, he proposed cutting funds to historical sites and other tourist attractions, noting that “they are not as important as providing health care to low income children and the elderly or as to keeping State Troopers on the road.” The Governor seems to understand the financial situation that Alabama faces. The Legislature certainly should understand the financial distress that Alabama faces and yet they, and the Governor, are apparently going to blissfully stand by (basking no doubt in that warm and fuzzy aura that surrounds the “a minnow is more important than a man,” crowd) and allow Forever Wild to devour 300 million dollars of Alabama Trust Fund monies that could be used to pay for real necessities.

What part of “ALABAMA IS BROKE” do these Legislators not understand? The rainy day for which this fund was established is here. As the old joke goes, “the last time it rained like this, Noah built hisself a boat.” Has our new Legislature already forgotten why we elected them? They need to be much more concerned about keeping the wolf from the door than establishing habitat for predators.

No doubt about it, such fuzzy thinking could only come from “Sacred Cow Disease.”

And before you start weeping for the little abandoned critters, you need to know that they, at least, are well provided for in these difficult economic times. This sacred cow is already one FAT little heifer!

As examples:

- Forever Wild is already funded through October 2012. (So, what is the rush?)
- None of the over 220,000 acres purchased by Forever Wild is in jeopardy of being lost.
- As of Sept. 30, the program had \$24 million in its stewardship fund for the perpetual care of Forever Wild properties.
- Forever Wild has on hand over \$15 million for the purchase of even more land.
- These funds would ensure the continuation of Forever Wild, regardless of whether additional funding is authorized. Even if the Legislature does not act this year, it could still reauthorize Forever Wild next year without interrupting the flow of new money into the program.
- If the Legislature does nothing, Forever Wild will still get nearly four million dollars a year, two and a half percent of all future incoming trust fund money) for so-called maintenance expenses. Or if they choose to use that money to purchase additional land instead - that much money will buy 1875 acres of new land, (at an average cost of two thousand dollars per acre), every single year thereafter. That amounts to a tract three miles wide by one mile deep purchased every year.
- Forever Wild has already spent a little over 160 million dollars of taxpayer money to acquire over 220 thousand acres.
- Forever Wild, in conjunction with several other conservation groups, has accumulated one tract encompassing over 100,000 acres north of Mobile . They brag that, “a bear can run in a straight line for over 40 miles without ever leaving protected property.”
- Just how much land do these folks want to take? When is enough - enough?

We must also consider the impact of Forever Wild purchases on our local and our state government's tax bases and its negative effects on the taxpayers. Remember none of these Forever Wild properties pay taxes. Therefore, every acre placed under their control is removed from the tax rolls. This means that the remaining property owners must pay higher taxes to make up the short fall or local services and needed government functions such as police and fire protection must be curtailed.

And what about the income presently being produced by these properties and the jobs lost when they and their products are removed from the economy?

Before reauthorizing Forever Wild, the Legislature should, at the very least, follow the intent of the original law and use this year to re-evaluate the program and its funding. “At a time when the state is cutting funding for state parks, forest protection and other public property, it makes sense to develop a long-term preservation plan before earmarking as much as \$300 million to buy land.”... Steve Guy | Director, Forestry and Wildlife Divisions Alabama Farmers Federation

In 1992 when Alabama voters approved this program, they did so with the understanding that Forever Wild would be re-evaluated before authorization of any future funding.

The historic change in the make up of the Alabama Legislature came about primarily because voters wanted a change. The voters wanted less government and less government control, not more. Our new Republican leadership assured us that they understood the crisis and that the state budget was the single most important item on the agenda and that they would tackle the budget first, before even considering other legislation. Why then, one must ask:

- Is an attempt being made to ram this legislation through a year early, before most of the public even knows about it, and BEFORE addressing the budget?
- What special interest is behind this trickery and why are they pushing so hard?
- Who wanted this off the table before the real budget crisis was addressed?
- Why are the facts not being presented about public access?

By the way, you don't need to worry about hunters being endangered either. There are thousands (I have seen estimates of between five and six thousand) private hunting clubs who lease hunting rights on private property in Alabama, plus untold thousands of farmers and ranchers who actually hunt on their own land. These folks don't depend on the taxpayers to furnish them with a place to hunt. Imagine that!

As Winston Churchill once said , “the trouble with socialistic programs is that sooner or later you run out of other people's money.” I fear that for both Alabama and America that day is upon us.

Not one single Legislator I have questioned has been able to present a legitimate reason to rush a reauthorization bill through the Legislature this session. There does not appear to be a reason, unless of course, powerful political interests have something to hide, or by some strange turn of events, the entire Legislature is afflicted with blindness to reality as a result of Sacred Cow Disease!

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