



Friends of the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Inc.

1502 S.E. Kings Bay Drive, Crystal River, FL 34429

A Non-Profit Organization

Florida Department of Environmental Protection
3900 Commonwealth Blvd M.S. 49
Tallahassee, FL 32399
(850)-245-2118

To Whom It May Concern:

The purpose of this letter is to support the RESTORE Act application for the Three Sisters Springs Visitor's Center and Site Development project. The project will prepare the recently purchased Three Sisters Springs property for public access and create a visitor center along U.S. Highway 19, the main north-south corridor through Citrus County, Florida.

This project will benefit the public by providing an educational opportunity that is currently missing not only in Crystal River, but throughout the entire range of the Florida manatee. The visitor center will serve to educate the public about manatees and their habitats, as well as Florida's unique aquifer and spring system and the importance of fresh water to the health of the Gulf. This project will also help benefit an economy that has recently been stressed by the closure of a nuclear and two coal-fired power plants in Citrus County. These closures will result in the loss of over 600 jobs. As a result, eco-tourism has become even more important to the local economy.

In addition to the public education aspect of this visitor center, it will also support and enhance the environmental education program which the Friends of Crystal River, with support from the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge, have recently introduced into the Citrus County School System. It will allow for students to utilize the Three Sisters property for hands-on education, via school field trips, on the environment, wildlife and the importance of preserving these assets for future generations.

The swim-with-the-manatee program that occurs in Kings Bay is a unique opportunity for visitors to experience manatees in the wild, which results in hundreds of thousands of people traveling from all over the world to visit the area. It is estimated that the swim-with-the-manatee program contributes between \$10 and \$20 million yearly to the local economy of Crystal River and Citrus County. The visitor center proposed in this project will increase the general public's understanding and awareness about the unique environment of the Bay, its springs and the manatees they support, while boosting the local economy.

The development of this project will benefit the local economy, the aquatic health of Kings Bay and the Gulf, and support education programs for manatee conservation and awareness.

We support the application for the development of a visitor center on Highway 19 and the opening of the Three Sister Springs property.

Sincerely,

Ross C. Knudsen, President