

Bay County Audubon Society

P.O. Box 1182
Panama City, Florida 32402

August 4, 2011

Jim Farr (Via email to jim.farr@dep.state.fl.us)
Florida Dept. of Environmental Protection
3900 Commonwealth Blvd., M.S. 140
Tallahassee, FL 32399-3000

Dear Mr. Farr:

Bay County Audubon Society and its 450 members ask you to acquire this part of the West Bay Preservation Area under the Florida Forever Program to fulfill the long-term vision and planning for this extensive area of the St. Andrew Bay watershed. We have been a key player in this vision for the West Bay Sector Plan and sincerely urge you to purchase the 4519 acres under Florida Forever auspices. Florida Forever should embrace and promote the concept to protect the shoreline and coastal lands around West Bay, while directing development and human exploitation to other areas that are less fragile. This is a "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunity – please do not miss it!

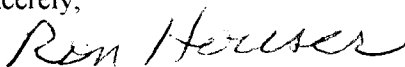
We have helped document that the greater St. Andrew Bay estuary, including West Bay, has one of the greatest biodiversities and species richness of any bay system in North America. The area is critical for migratory and resident birds, butterflies, and unique coastal plants. Not only does this area provide cover and food for migratory birds prior to beginning the long journey across the Gulf of Mexico every fall, but it also serves as their important first stop after the long Gulf of Mexico journey in the spring. Numerous redhead ducks, lesser scaup ducks, buffleheads, common loons, and horned grebes overwinter in West Bay. The shallow, productive waters of West Bay are absolutely essential to the future health of these species that overwinter here and fly to the far north for breeding. Please take note of how important it is to preserve the West Bay shoreline and the freshwater feeder creeks to this estuary.

West Bay was nearly devastated by an ill-advised and environmentally disjunctive endeavor of shrimp farming in the 1970's. The use of public funds at this time to protect this estuary will also mitigate a terrible wrong that was permitted at that time. West Bay is about 20,000 acres and 30 miles of shoreline and 40 miles of creek and tributary frontage/buffer lands that are undeveloped. Important sea grass beds and oyster beds are directly off the shoreline from the property proposed for acquisition. Protection of the buffer lands is a primary aspect of protection for the estuarine habitat that defines this region. West Bay sea grasses and the associated saltmarsh lands are the primary nurseries for this entire St. Andrew Bay. Protection of this land through this purchase will protect threatened birds, shrimp, fish, and more.

We respectfully request that you provide copies of this letter to the ARC members and staff to insure that they are aware of the unique opportunity offered by this proposed purchase.

Thank you. If you require more information, please contact Dr. Neil Lamb, our Conservation Chair, at njlamb@digitalexpress.net or me at rdhouser@knology.net.

Sincerely,



Ron Houser, President

Cc: Jim Muller (via email mullerjw@mullerassoc.com)