



The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor, State of Florida
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32199

March 11, 2020

RE: HB 1061 to Create the Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve

Dear Governor DeSantis:

On behalf of The Pew Charitable Trusts, I urge you to sign House Bill 1061, sponsored by Rep. Massullo, to create the Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve in the coastal waters off Citrus, Hernando and Pasco counties.

Florida boasts the nation's most diverse seagrasses and two of its largest contiguous seagrass beds, which all together contribute more than \$20 billion a year to the state's economy. The approximately 400,000 acres of meadow along the Nature Coast is one of the healthiest seagrass habitats in the state thanks to the clear waters for which the region is known. Here, seagrass mingles with mangrove islands, salt marsh, sponges and corals to provide habitat for world-class fishing and recreational opportunities that draw tourists from around the world, support 10,000 jobs and generate \$600 million annually.

H.B. 1061 would designate the first new Aquatic Preserve in 32 years, and the 42nd in a state system designed to maintain these areas in an essentially natural condition, while fostering public access for activities like boating, fishing, scalloping and eco-tourism. Benefits of an Aquatic Preserve can include facilitating the purchase of nearby conservation lands to filter out contaminants in surface water runoff; a prohibition on gas and oil drilling to protect from harmful spills; limits on dredging and the size and location of dock construction to protect seagrasses; and provision for sewage pump-out facilities open to the public to keep the waters free of harmful bacteria. As you recognized in Executive Order 19-12, "Achieving More Now for Florida's Environment," the need for water quality protections in Florida is growing more urgent in the face of red tides and other harmful algae blooms that have taken a severe toll on fishing and tourism businesses. A new preserve on the state's west coast would add a layer of protection by designating it as an Outstanding Florida Water, which is the state's highest level of water quality protection and is assigned to areas worthy of special safeguards.

More than 100 Nature Coast businesses, nine state and national recreational fishing and marine industry organizations and the Citrus and Hernando county commissions support creation of the Nature Coast Aquatic Preserve. We appreciate your commitment to protecting Florida's natural resources and look forward to working with you to protect our state's coastal and marine habitats.

Sincerely,

Holly Binns
Project Director, Conserving Marine Life, Gulf of Mexico and U.S. Caribbean
The Pew Charitable Trusts