

# THE NEWS-PRESS

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## Florida saves Babcock Ranch

*State pays \$351 million to preserve 74,000 acres*

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**TALLAHASSEE** — After six years and more than a few false starts, the state has officially closed on a \$351 million deal to conserve nearly 74,000 acres of the Babcock Ranch in Southwest Florida.

Plans call for a new city to be developed on an additional 17,000 acres that was part of the original ranch on the Lee-Charlotte County line.

At a signing ceremony Monday in Tallahassee, developer Syd Kitson handed a decorative deed and cowboy hat with the Babcock seal to Eva Armstrong, director of Florida's Division of State Lands.

The purchase is the largest the state ever has made for conversation. It marks the end of a 92-year era during which magnate Fred Babcock's family mined, farmed and managed the 91,000 acres of prairie, wetlands and forests in Charlotte and Lee counties.

Environmentalists hope it serves as a model for future development deals in which public and private interests agree to set aside large tracts of undeveloped landscape.

"We have an opportunity to change the way Florida plans to grow," Kitson said.

His West Palm Beach development firm bought the entire ranch from the Babcock family and plans to develop its southwest corner after selling the bulk of the land to the state.

Florida has tried to acquire the ranch since 2000, when the Babcock family first offered to sell it to the state to create a natural corridor from Lake Okeechobee to Charlotte Harbor.

The rising land value scuttled early efforts to reach an agreement. Then Kitson came forward last July to negotiate a sales agreement with the family and, in turn, with the state.

"Today is a big deal," said Armstrong, who choked up during the ceremony and couldn't read her speech. "With this one, we get it all."

Kitson's proposed town east of North Fort Myers is expected to eventually house 45,000 people. The Sierra Club last month argued in a lawsuit that the project was urban sprawl but withdrew its suit after Kitson made modifications to his plan.

"This has been a remarkable example of the environmental community working together," said Eric Draper, policy director for Audubon of Florida.

Lee County is picking up a \$41.5 million piece of the Babcock tab for just more than 5,000 acres of the ranch within its borders. The money is the most the county has paid for such a purchase and comes out of a conservation trust fund.

"This is for my children. This is for your children. ... We are preserving for posterity one of the finest pieces of land and working ranches in the state," said Lee County attorney David Owen.

Kitson still has a lengthy regulatory process to navigate before he can start building his clusters of homes, stores, schools and offices. Kitson attorney Ernie Cox said construction probably is two years away.

Over that time, the developers, counties, state and federal government will hammer out traffic and water needs for the new community, how much public access to allow on the ranch, and what species and environmental protections to enact.

The project is expected to require around \$500 million in road- and bridge-building, part of which Kitson wants taxpayers to cover.

Charlotte County also wants to buy water from the ranch.

The public portion of the ranch eventually will be overseen by a nonprofit board.