



Legislature approves \$310 million Babcock Ranch deal

ANDREA FANTA
Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. - In the last hours of session, lawmakers ticked the giant Babcock Ranch off Florida's shopping list.

The Legislature approved the \$310 million purchase for 74,000 acres in southwest Florida. The land, made up of forests and wetlands, is home to panthers, bobcats, deer, black bears, reptiles and numerous bird species. Officials envision keeping it undeveloped for wildlife habitat and recreation.

Bush and the Cabinet endorsed the deal in November and the governor will sign the legislation as long as concerns over land management issues were resolved, a spokesman said.

Officials hope to acquire the land in July, according to the Department of Environmental Protection. The buy now depends in part on Kitson and Partners, the company selling the land, to first obtain the property from the Babcock family. It also depends on Lee County, which agreed to pitch in nearly \$42 million for their share of 5,640 acres, a spokeswoman said.

The tract is actually 91,000 acres in all. Kitson will keep about 15,000 acres to develop a community with nearly 20,000 homes. They'll develop a whole new city there, with schools, stores, mixed-income housing and greenways, said spokeswoman April Herrle. The area will also include wireless access for everyone and hurricane-resistant homes.

"I'm just very, very thankful. I think it's just a great day for Florida," said Syd Kitson, chairman of the company. "We have the opportunity of a lifetime, we're going to be creating what we think is the most unique community in Florida."

The company still has to obtain a series of building permits and hopes to start construction in two years, he said.

The deal seemed shaky in past weeks as some - including Bush - worried that the House might be tinkering too much with their bill (HB 1347) to authorize the purchase. Some environmentalists said the legislation, sponsored by Rep. Trudi Williams, R-Fort Myers, went against an original agreement designed to conserve the property by allowing cypress harvesting and tenant farming.

They said cypress trees are needed to provide canopy for animals, and farming can ruin soils. In the end, the Legislature chose to go with the Senate version of the bill (SB 1226), which stripped cypress harvesting and called for farming to phase out in five years.

But some legislators grumbled about the change - especially Rep. Will Kendrick, D-Carrabelle, the only lawmaker to vote against the bill in the House.

"My, my, my, my, my," he said. "We are doing exactly what we said we wouldn't do."

He and others pointed out that ranchers have kept the land clean and manageable for decades by harvesting and farming Babcock and that these activities bring in nearly \$2 million yearly.