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**Miami Wilds Stalls as Commissioners Withdraw Proposal in Victory for Endangered Wildlife**

*Mayor Committed to Rescinding Development Lease Agreement*

MIAMI — Miami-Dade County commissioners voted today to withdraw a proposal that would have amended the development lease agreement with Miami Wilds, LLC. Today’s decision stymies plans for a controversial themed water park and retail development that threatens endangered species near Zoo Miami.

During the commission meeting, the county attorney and Mayor Daniella Levine Cava confirmed that the administration intends to proceed with rescinding the development lease agreement.

The commission decision follows a recommendation by Mayor Levine Cava to rescind the lease and abandon the project to best safeguard the county’s interests and the community’s needs and objectives. It also follows a legal victory for conservation groups who challenged the National Park Service’s decision to release land-use restrictions in connection with the project. A Dec. 11 federal court order reinstated those restrictions, which prohibit leasing and commercial development on lands within the project footprint.

“Today was a good day for wildlife,” said Mike Daulton, executive director at Bat Conservation International. “We’re encouraged that commissioners spoke out against Miami Wilds and voiced their support for the mayor to start the process of rescinding the ill-fated lease.”

“This is a step in the right direction, but the county can’t keep kicking this can down the road,” said Lauren Jonaitis, senior conservation director of Tropical Audubon Society. “Our elected officials need to take meaningful action to protect endangered species and ensure the preservation of the largest and most biodiverse fragment of critically endangered pine rocklands outside of Everglades National Park.”

During the meeting commissioner Raquel Regalado moved to “take all actions necessary to rescind the lease and concession agreement with Miami Wilds,” in consultation with the county attorney’s office. Although she withdrew her motion on technical grounds, she indicated her plan to reintroduce the item at the January meeting. A majority of the commissioners present opposed moving forward with the development in the environmentally sensitive area near Zoo Miami.

“I’m relieved that commissioners didn’t recommit to this ill-conceived plan in the meeting today, but the threat isn’t gone,” said attorney Elise Bennett, Florida and Caribbean director at the Center for Biological Diversity. “The county needs to take additional steps to ensure the future of this incredibly rare and biodiverse ecosystem. We’re counting on the commission to banish this specter looming over the pine rocklands so we can focus on a new vision that supports Miamians who love this place and the endangered animals and plants who live here.”

On Monday, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sent a letter to the county advising that lands within the project area for Miami Wilds are environmentally sensitive and have high ecological value for rare species, including at least 12 species that are federally protected or proposed for federal protection. Specifically, the Service noted that the lands were likely to be considered essential for the conservation of the Florida bonneted bat. The Service encouraged the county to maintain the ecological function of those lands to support species conservation.

“The county needs to formulate a comprehensive plan for long-term protection of the entire Richmond Pine Rockland area,” said Dennis Olle, president of the Miami Blue Chapter of the North American Butterfly Association. “Now’s the time to affirmatively protect this habitat so we don’t have to worry about the risk of future development.”

**Background**

In 2022 Miami-Dade County and Miami Wilds, LLC, agreed to build a theme park, retail area, hotel and acres of associated parking lots in an area that hosts critical habitat for endangered [Florida bonneted bats](https://www.batcon.org/our-work/endangered-species-interventions/florida-bonneted-bat/), Rim Rock crowned snakes, [Miami tiger beetles](https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/species/invertebrates/Miami_tiger_beetle/index.html?_gl=1*1796855*_gcl_au*MTE0MDA5Nzc3MC4xNjg2MzI4Mzky#:~:text=The%20Miami%20tiger%20beetle%20%E2%80%94%20a,Heights%20area%20of%20Miami%2C%20Florida.), [Bartram’s scrub-hairstreak](https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/species/invertebrates/Bartrams_scrub-hairstreak_butterfly/index.html?_gl=1*67zae3*_gcl_au*MTE0MDA5Nzc3MC4xNjg2MzI4Mzky), [Florida leafwing](https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/species/invertebrates/Florida_leafwing_butterfly/index.html?_gl=1*1796855*_gcl_au*MTE0MDA5Nzc3MC4xNjg2MzI4Mzky) butterflies and several endangered plants.

The development threatens to cause cascading effects on imperiled species and surrounding ecosystems, destroying dark, open foraging habitat for bats and hampering natural fire needed to support ecosystem health of the critically endangered [pine rocklands](https://tropicalaudubon.org/pine-rocklands), which are home to dozens of rare and endangered animals, plants and insects found nowhere else on Earth.

On Sept. 6 and Sept. 19, the Board of County Commissioners deferred a vote to amend and extend the development lease agreement with Miami Wilds, LLC (Item #231692).

On Nov. 15 the Miami-Dade mayor’s office released a memorandum recommending that the county commissioners rescind the development lease agreement with Miami Wilds, LLC, for the proposed water park development in an environmentally sensitive area at Zoo Miami. The memo also requested withdrawal of the amended lease agreement under consideration (item #231692) that was deferred to the Dec. 12 Miami-Dade County Board of County Commissioners meeting.

On Dec. 11, in a victory for conservation groups, a federal judge found that the National Park Service had violated the Endangered Species Act and National Environmental Policy Act when it released land-use restrictions on the environmentally sensitive site. Based on these violations, Judge Patricia A. Seitz invalidated the Park Service’s actions, restoring land-use restrictions on the property that prevent leasing and commercial development.

Also on Dec. 11, the Fish and Wildlife Service sent a letter to Miami-Dade County describing the ecological significance of lands in the Miami Wilds project area for endangered species and encouraging the county to maintain the ecological function of those lands to support species conservation.

*Founded in 1982, Bat Conservation International is a global conservation organization dedicated to ending bat extinctions. Bat Conservation International works worldwide to conserve caves, restore critical habitats in danger, and ensure the survival of the world’s bat species. For more information, visit*[*batcon.org*](https://www.batcon.org/)*.*

*Tropical Audubon Society is a science- and solutions-based nonprofit conservation organization driven by its grassroots community and principles of equity, diversity and inclusion. Tropical Audubon’s Legacy is to* *protect, conserve and restore South Florida ecosystems by working closely with local governments and other stakeholders, and by fostering wise stewardship of native habitats, birds and other indigenous wildlife.*

*The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.7 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.*

*The Miami Blue Chapter serves southeastern Florida, specifically Miami-Dade and Monroe Counties. We are a membership-based, not-for-profit organization working to increase the public enjoyment and conservation of butterflies. The Chapter is named after one of the rarest butterflies in North America, which used to (and one day will again) call Miami home.*