**[As turkey hunting season begins at Big Cypress National Preserve, another battle looms](https://www.miamiherald.com/sports/outdoors/article301649654.html?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR2YXSadzDUV8RzvyZmaOucObCqoEbvzJ3dm6XJ2qdwFQ5exl0NY0sZlwRE_aem_IewH_ZNKqyn9oNWpaMYahA)**

By Steve Waters Special to the Miami Herald

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Mike Elfenbein loves to hunt turkeys, which is one of the reasons he is so committed to protecting the Big Cypress National Preserve. So the opening weekend of the spring turkey season in South Florida was a perfect combination for him. Friday night was The Green Heart Gala at Ron Bergeron’s Alligator Ron’s Saloon in Weston, where an auction for everything from a Kenyan safari to artwork to a python hunt with the Miccosukee tribe raised money for The Green Heart of the Everglades Project. TOP VIDEOS The video player is currently playing an ad. Elfenbein, who grew up in Miami and now lives in Englewood on Florida’s west coast, is the executive director of the Cypress chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America (www.iwla.org), a 102-year-old conservation organization. The IWLA is one of the supporters, along with the Bergeron Everglades Foundation, Family Lands Remembered, Wild Landscapes International and the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, behind the ambitious project. The goal is simple and monumental: Purchase the mineral rights beneath the 450,015 acres of the preserve and the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge to not only prevent drilling for oil, but also to continue to allow hiking, wildlife watching, camping, hunting and fishing in the vast expanse an hour west of Miami. The morning after the fundraiser, Elfenbein was in the woods with Matt Parrish at Bergeron’s Green Glades West ranch, which borders the northern boundary of the preserve. They had a male turkey gobbling behind them before sunrise, and when the gobbler finally came into view through the fog, he was intent on following a group of hen turkeys rather than coming into the yelps and clucks that Elfenbein made on his slate call. This is the mating season for turkeys. Male turkeys gobble and strut, puffing out their feathers, to impress hens, who yelp and cluck in response. This turkey gobbled for more than an hour and strutted continuously, but he didn’t appear to be making any headway with the gals. He looked toward Elfenbein, who had turkey decoys in front of his blind, from 250 yards away, but he decided to stick with the hens and disappeared behind them. That’s when Parrish suggested they walk to another part of the property. They snuck through a ditch and when Parrish scanned the field ahead, he spied two gobblers about 300 yards away. Moving quietly and using the trees to mask their approach, they set up on the edge of the field. Elfenbein called to get the gobblers’ attention, and he kept calling as the duo slowly walked his way. “They didn’t seem interested at first,” Elfenbein said. “They got a little bit closer, their heads turned, and they just kind of started coming. The first bird, he’d run 10 yards, and then go into strut, and the second bird would run up behind it, and the first bird would run ahead of him and go back into strut, and they kept doing that, and doing that, and doing that, and they got to like 80 yards. “Once they got to 80 yards, I made another call and they put their heads down and ran right to me on a straight line.” And once they were within shotgun range, Elfenbein dropped the strutter with one shot. The Big Cypress Preserve allows hunting for turkeys during the spring. The mineral rights to the land are owned by the Collier family, which sold much of the land for the preserve to the federal government 50 years ago, but retained the subsurface rights. Elfenbein said there are plans to drill for oil. By purchasing the mineral rights from the Colliers, no drilling would occur. About 20 years ago the federal government tried to buy the mineral rights, but the deal had issues and never happened. Elfenbein said that the groups involved now are “doing it the right way. We’ve been working on it methodically for three years, and we’re right at the end.” Instead of using taxpayer money, the purchase would be funded by Land and Water Conservation Fund money. Elfenbein said the LWCF generates $900 million annually in royalties collected from oil companies that are developing mineral rights in the Gulf. “So we’re going to use oil royalties to acquire oil rights,” he said, adding that LWCF money is appropriated to every state. But some western states don’t like the federal policies and regulations that go with the handouts, so they return the money. “And we’d like to tap into about $300 million.” The process is nearly complete, with one evaluation required by the feds remaining. The fundraiser will help pay for that evaluation. “We’ve had some amazing, amazing meetings in Washington with the congressional delegation, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Department of the Interior. And so far nobody has told us no,” Elfenbein said. A huge bonus of the plan is that it eliminates the need for a wilderness designation for the preserve. That designation would stop oil drilling, but also prohibit access with motorized vehicles such as airboats, swamp buggies and off-road vehicles used by the public, the Miccosukees, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the National Park Service. “So now that we’ve found a path forward to legally relieve the Colliers of their mineral rights, the idea that we need wilderness to stop oil development is out the window,” Elfenbein said. “Those people who hid behind using wilderness to stop oil drilling really just wanted to keep everybody out.” Instead, the Big Cypress will be preserved and open to everyone, including turkey hunters.

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