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Buy the ranch

Our position: Orange County needs to seal the deal today on the precious Holland Ranch.

The swampy headwaters of the Econlockhatchee River in east Orange County could forever be spared the threat of development-induced destruction if county commissioners do the right thing today and approve a long-overdue agreement to buy the land.

The sprawling 5,200-acre Holland Ranch property is a natural resource that the county can't afford to squander. Under the terms of a reasonable deal worked out by Orange County Chairman Rich Crotty, the county and the St. Johns River Water Management District would buy half the property for \$7.5 million. The owner would convert the rest of the land into a wetlands mitigation bank, which would preclude future development and preserve the land's environmental heritage.

The deal is a must-do. The

ranch, a target for development in fast-growing east Orange County, not only serves as the headwaters of the Econ, it also is a major habitat for endangered species such as the red-cockaded woodpecker.

Best of all, the deal frees up about \$2 million that the county previously earmarked to buy the entire tract. That money now can be used to preserve other critically important pieces of land, such as a 12-acre parcel that would guarantee continued public access to the Butler Chain of Lakes and the six-acre Nehrling Gardens site.

Those two deals have stalled for lack of money. With the Holland Ranch purchase, however, negotiations should resume posthaste. In very different ways, all three properties could uniquely improve the quality of life that all Central Floridians now enjoy.