



Union Sportsmen's Alliance, Partners secure funding for Suncoast Youth Conservation Center Project

by Dan Johnson

28 Jan 2019 12:37 PST



Construction of a new boardwalk and fishing pier at the Suncoast Youth Conservation Center will provide visitors of all ages and physical abilities with better access to the center's hands-on recreational and educational programs. © Union Sportsmen's Alliance

The Union Sportsmen's Alliance (USA) is proud to report that a multi-year, collaborative effort to give thousands of Florida youth and their families better firsthand access to the Gulf of Mexico's inshore ecosystem has cleared its last financial hurdle.

The final funds needed to construct a wheelchair-accessible boardwalk and fishing pier at the Suncoast Youth Conservation Center (SYCC) in Apollo Beach have been secured, pushing total cash donations and in-kind commitments to the project to \$600,000.

A wide range of partners have made contributions, including the Fish and Wildlife Foundation of Florida (\$240,000), Southern States Millwright Regional Council (\$50,000), The Saunders Foundation (\$28,000), USA (\$20,000) and Frank E. Duckwall Foundation (\$10,000).

In addition, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) is providing construction materials and Ben Hur Construction is contributing \$100,000 in in-kind construction costs. The project is being organized as part of Work Boots on the Ground – the USA's flagship conservation program. Through this program, union volunteers are expected to donate in excess of 1,000 hours of skilled labor valued at more than \$50,000 to complete the pier and boardwalk, pushing the total project value even higher.

Part of the FWC's Florida Youth Conservation Centers Network (FYCCN), the SYCC is a marine-focused conservation education center on the eastern shore of Tampa Bay. The campus, which includes a 6,000-square-foot education facility with an outdoor classroom, hiking and kayak trails, a wildlife observation tower, and a Sea Turtle Rehabilitation Center, was developed in partnership with TECO Energy and the Florida Aquarium. More than 11,000 youth and adults participate in SYCC programs annually.

The new boardwalk and fishing pier will flank a 2.5-acre saltwater pond and marsh adjacent to the educational complex. By design, the new structure will allow visitors to study coastal marine habitats and learn to fish with minimal impact to the environment.

"The Union Sportsmen's Alliance, their partners and union volunteers have demonstrated a deep commitment to inspiring people to care about conservation and the outdoors through their support of the Florida Youth Conservation Centers Network," said FYCCN Director Rae Waddell. "Their generosity and expertise is allowing the FWC to provide youth and families greater access to the pond for fishing, wildlife viewing and learning about conservation."

"Getting children out into nature has become a national priority, and the boardwalk and fishing pier add significantly to the educational and recreational programs at the Suncoast Youth Conservation Center," said Fish and Wildlife Foundation of Florida (FWFF) President and CEO Andrew Walker.

USA national partner Pure Fishing, the country's largest manufacturer of fishing gear, also participated in the process, donating time and product to the project's development. "We are thrilled that ground will be broken soon on the boardwalk and pier," said Pure Fishing Stewardship and Government Relations Director Connie Parker, who also serves on the Fish and Wildlife Foundation of Florida board of directors. "This addition to Suncoast's campus will ensure that outdoor activities and learning are accessible to all children."

"This is not your conventional conservation project with one or two partners," noted USA Director of Conservation and Community Outreach Forrest Parker. "This is a union-led, private-public partnership that involves multiple non-profits, labor unions, union volunteers, a state agency, state wildlife foundation and industry partners. We are thankful for everyone's persistence and support through two years of collaboration, strategic planning and old-fashioned hard work to make it all come together."

Wayne Jennings, Southern States Millwright Regional Council executive secretary treasurer, said the effort was all about serving the community. "Unions were created for the greater good—not just in the workplace but also the surrounding community," he explained. "The

SSMRC embraces this ideal. By partnering with the Union Sportsmen's Alliance and everyone involved with this project, we hope to demonstrate that through unity anything can become reality. When we all pull in the same direction, we can accomplish extraordinary things. We are investing in the community and hope everyone enjoys the opportunities that this project provides."

Construction is slated to begin in February, with completion in the summer of 2019.