

Federal judge orders closure of Trump's 'Alligator Alcatraz' immigration jail

Judge's order finds jail, which has attracted waves of criticism, was causing severe harm to Florida Everglades

Richard Luscombe *in Miami*

Thu 21 Aug 2025 22.06 EDT

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A federal judge in Miami late on Thursday ordered the closure of the Trump administration's notorious "Alligator Alcatraz" immigration jail within 60 days, and ruled that no more detainees were to be brought to the facility while it was being wound down.

The shock ruling by district court judge Kathleen Williams builds on a temporary restraining order she issued two weeks ago halting further construction work at the remote tented camp, which has attracted waves of criticism for harsh conditions, abuse of detainees and denial of due process as they await deportation.

In her 82-page order, published in the US district court's southern district of Florida on Friday, Williams determined the facility was causing severe and irreparable damage to the fragile Florida Everglades.

She also noted that a plan to develop the site on which the jail was built into a huge tourist airport was rejected in the 1960s because of the harm it would have caused the the land and delicate ecosystem.

"Since that time, every Florida governor, every Florida senator, and countless local and national political figures, including presidents, have publicly pledged their unequivocal support for the restoration, conservation, and protection of the Everglades," she wrote.

"This order does nothing more than uphold the basic requirements of legislation designed to fulfill those promises."

No further construction at the site can take place, she ruled, and there must be no further increase in the number of detainees currently held there, estimated to be about 700. After the 60-day period, all construction materials, fencing, generators and fixtures that made the site a detention camp must be removed.

The ruling is a significant victory for a coalition of environmental groups and a native American tribe that sued the state of Florida and the federal government. Williams agreed that the hasty,

eight-day construction of the jail at a disused airfield in late June damaged the sensitive wetlands of a national preserve and further imperiled federally protected species.

“This is a landmark victory for the Everglades and countless Americans who believe this imperiled wilderness should be protected, not exploited,” said Eve Samples, executive director of Friends of the Everglades, one of the groups that filed the lawsuit.

“It sends a clear message that environmental laws must be respected by leaders at the highest levels of our government, and there are consequences for ignoring them.”

The alliance plans to hold a press conference on Friday morning to discuss the ruling in detail.

Conversely, the ruling is a blow to the detention and deportation agenda of the Trump administration. The president touted the camp, which recently held as many as 1,400 detainees, as a jail for “some of the most vicious people on the planet”, although hundreds of those held there have **no criminal record or active criminal proceedings** against them.

There was no immediate reaction to Williams’s ruling from the Florida department of emergency management, which operates the jail on behalf of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (Ice), or from the Department of Homeland Security.

But lawyers for the state told Williams in court last week that they would appeal any adversarial ruling, the **Miami Herald reported**.

In addition, hundreds of detainees were moved from “Alligator Alcatraz” to other immigration facilities at the weekend in anticipation that Williams would order its closure, the outlet said.

Ron DeSantis, Florida’s Republican governor, announced earlier this month that the state will soon open a **second immigration jail** at a disused prison near Gainesville to increase capacity.