

# Blue Head Ranch

Critical Natural Lands

Highlands County

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2012
<i>Project Acres</i>	43,051
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	1,305
<i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i>	\$4,000,000
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	41,746
<i>2023 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$287,255,960

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Blue Head Ranch project will protect a large portion of the Fisheating Creek watershed, including Fisheating Creek and its important tributaries to naturally capture, store and slowly release water that migrates to the interconnected downstream ecosystems of Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades. The project expands land conservation efforts in a region of the state with renowned, high-quality natural resources. The project protects a diversity of high-quality natural communities, including large areas of endemic dry prairie and mesic flatwoods.

## General Description

The Blue Head Ranch project is in the heart of the native, endemic Florida grassland that stretches north and west of Lake Okeechobee. The entire Blue Head Ranch ownership straddles the northern and southern sides of State Road 70. Blue Head Ranch is a working ranch with approximately 4,000 head of cattle along with associated facilities and employee residences.

Pasture is interspersed among prairie, hammocks and depressional wetlands, with the largest pasture occurring in the southern quarter of the proposal. Fisheating Creek has been channelized for about 75% of its length through the property but retains a more natural flow at the southern end of the project. Other ditching, some substantial, is present throughout the ranch along roads and through wetlands. There are woods roads throughout most of the property and several regularly graded limerock roads.

A large block of improved pasture along the southern boundary was the site of the old Graham Dairy. Although highly disturbed, the pasture areas still support an abundance of wildlife, including several rare species.



FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<b><u>FNAI Elements</u></b>	<b><u>Score</u></b>
Florida scrub-jay	G1G2/S1S2
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
Florida Keys sweat bee	G2/S2
Florida sandhill crane	G5T2/S2
<i>Edison's ascyrum</i>	G2G3/S2S3
Short-tailed hawk	G4G5/S1
<i>cutthroatgrass</i>	G3/S3
Wood stork	G4/S2
Bachman's sparrow	G3/S3
Crested caracara	G5/S2
Bald eagle	G5/S3

**Public Use**

Public use would depend on the acquisition type (fee simple or less-than-fee). If acquired as less-than-fee, public access would be dependent on the landowner’s consent. The property could be used for hiking, geocaching, bird watching and primitive camping if it were publicly accessible.

**Acquisition Planning**

**1987**

Much of the area was submitted as a proposal and approved as a project in 1986. However, the landowner requested its removal from the list in 1987 because he was not interested in selling the land.

**2012**

On August 17, 2012, the current project was presented to the Acquisition and Restoration Council by The Nature Conservancy and Realtor Dean Saunders (representing the landowner). The proposal was approved by the Acquisition and Restoration Council as a Florida Forever project in the Critical Natural Lands category on December 14, 2012. The project had an estimated tax assessed value of \$5,559,153.

**2015**

On June 19, 2015, the Acquisition and Restoration Council approved evaluation of a new project proposal for A.P. Ranch consisting of 822 acres in Highlands County adjacent to the Blue Head Ranch Florida Forever project.

On October 16, 2015, the Acquisition and Restoration Council approved the A.P. Ranch project, which had a tax assessed value of \$255,910. Because of its compatibility, the Acquisition and Restoration Council added the acreage to the boundary of the Blue Head Ranch Florida Forever project. The proposal was three parcels south of Lake Placid, all bordering the Blue Head Ranch Florida Forever project, and is hydrologically connected to the Fisheating Creek area. The land is a mix of improved pasture that has been regularly burned (694 acres), scattered natural pines (467 acres) and wetland forests (448 acres).

**2023**

DEP acquired a 1,291-acre conservation easement in Highlands County from LTL Real Estate Holdings, LLC.





### Coordination

The project would help establish a wildlife corridor between the Lake Wales Ridge and the South Florida Water Management District's Bright Hour Watershed Conservation Easement. There are no acquisition partners currently.

### Management Policy Statement

The primary goals of managing Blue Head Ranch are to establish a connection with adjacent conservation properties, ensure the health of the Florida Everglades Ecosystem and protect and restore rare and imperiled species' habitat.

### Manager(s)

The project could be acquired through less-than-fee acquisition. If acquired fee simple, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission would be the designated manager.

### Management Prospectus

#### **Qualifications for State Designation**

The Blue Head Ranch project would conserve, manage and restore important ecosystems; protect and enhance significant hydrological resources; and conserve, manage and restore Fisheating Creek and other area watersheds. The project would also establish beneficial wildlife corridors.

#### **Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management**

The intensity of Blue Head Ranch's management would depend on the conditions of its acquisition or its monitoring. Much of the area used for cattle ranching is dry prairie that has been converted to improved pasture, having been ditched, cleared, tilled and reseeded with specific grasses.

#### **Management Implementation, Public Access, Site Security and Protection of Infrastructure**

If acquired and leased to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission for management, a management plan will be developed describing the management goals and objectives necessary to implement future resource management. The management plan will also establish the current and future roles of cooperating entities including governmental agencies, non-government organizations and other stakeholders.

#### **Revenue-generating Potential**

Revenue from conservation lands (such as Blue Head Ranch) could include permits and recreational user fees and ecotourism activities. Area regulations would be developed to identify the necessary and required permits, fees and regulations. Timber sales from thinning operations or restoration of off-site plantations may also yield additional revenue. Apiary leases will be considered as a revenue source depending on the area meeting the criteria of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Apiary Policy. Additionally, cattle grazing leases may also be considered, contingent upon the suitability of the site within the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's cattle grazing criteria.

#### **Cooperators in Management Activities**

If the Blue Head Ranch project is acquired and leased to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission for management, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will cooperate with





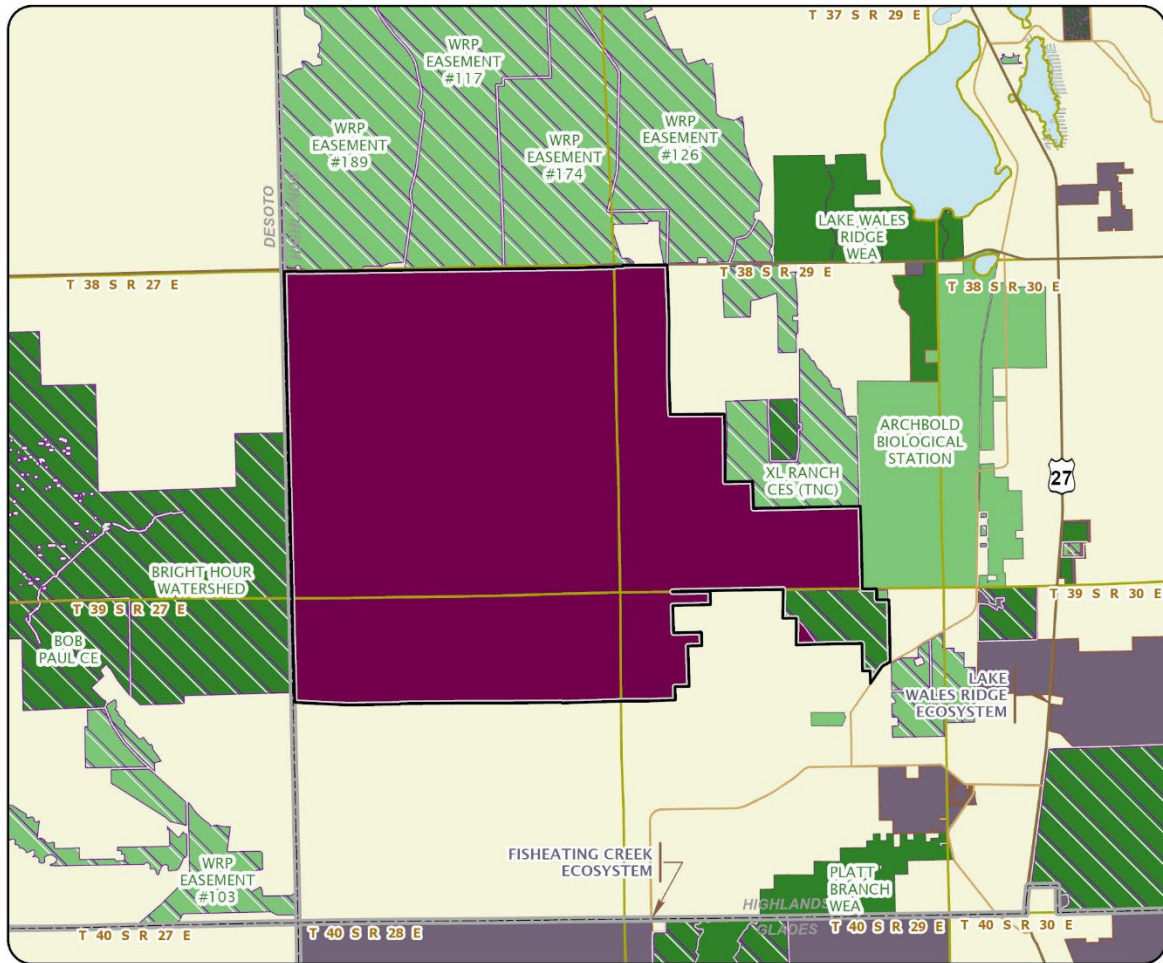
other federal, state and local governmental agencies. These agencies may include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Florida Forest Service, DEP, South Florida Water Management District and Highlands County (among others).

Management Cost Summary

<u>FWC</u>	<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Source of Funds	LATF	LATF
OCO	\$0	\$1,992,098
FCO	\$6,490,240	\$424,299
TOTAL	\$6,490,240	\$2,416,397

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted in 2012





### BLUE HEAD RANCH

#### HIGHLANDS COUNTY

