

# San Pedro Bay

Critical Natural Lands

Madison and Taylor Counties

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2003
<i>Project Acres</i>	46,345
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	0
<i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i>	\$0
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	46,345
<i>2023 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$39,933,063

## Propose for State Acquisition

The San Pedro Bay project will protect a large area between the Suwannee and Econfina rivers that contains pine plantations interspersed with basin swamps and baygalls, as well as the largest area of privately owned roadless area remaining in Florida. The project will provide important habitat connectivity for wide-ranging wildlife species such as the Florida back bear and provide water quality protection for the Econfina and Suwannee rivers. Acquisition would expand hunting access and other opportunities for public resource-based recreation.

## General Description

The project is about five miles south of Madison, seven miles northeast of Perry and 45 miles east of Tallahassee.

The project is part of San Pedro Bay, a distinct wetland system extending between the Suwannee and Econfina rivers. It is the largest area of privately owned roadless land remaining in Florida. The project includes two owners and is designed to protect the large wetland system and waters that receive its flow. Two parcels are proposed for fee simple acquisition: the first parcel has two owners, is 41,666 acres in Madison and Taylor counties and stretches 16 miles from east to west between County Road 14 and County Road 53; the second parcel has one owner, is 3,121 acres located in Taylor County two miles south of the first parcel. One part of the proposed project drains westward to the Gulf of Mexico via the Fenholloway and Econfina rivers; the other part of the project drains eastward via canals to the Suwannee River. Much of the central area of the proposed project has no clear drainage pattern.

The project consists primarily of wetlands resulting from a water table perched on top of a clay layer, which retains water on the surface and impedes movement of water into the underlying Floridan aquifer. Natural communities make up about half of the San Pedro Bay proposal; the remaining half is used for silviculture. Natural communities within the project include basin marsh, baygall, dome swamp and wet flatwoods. Most of the larger baygalls and dome swamps have been selectively logged in recent years. In the area where silviculture occurs, planted wet flatwoods includes an understory of native herbs and shrubs. Raised beds are used to improve growth of pine trees on poorly drained soils.



The Florida Natural Areas Inventory’s Florida Forever Measures Evaluation indicates that 20 percent of the project area is under-represented natural communities. Imperiled or rare animal species documented to occur on the project include the Florida black bear, great egret, little blue heron, snowy egret, white ibis and wood stork. Other imperiled or rare animal species that are expected to occur in the project include Bachman’s sparrow, eastern indigo snake, gopher tortoise and swallow-tailed kite. The American alligator has also been observed on the project.

Game species are present in relatively low densities among scattered habitat for white-tailed deer and wild turkey. Other game species having been observed in the area include the common snipe, eastern gray squirrel, mourning dove and rabbits.

The project provides habitat for larger, more widely ranging species such as the Florida black bear, and is significant as an ecological greenway, with the entire project area qualifying as either Priority 3 or 7 in potential importance according to the Florida Natural Areas Inventory. The project would improve feasibility of establishing a landscape linkage with coastal publicly owned bear habitat on the Aucilla and Big Bend wildlife management areas and the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. Other nearby conservation lands include the Hixtown Swamp Florida Forever project, Twin Rivers State Forest along the Suwannee River and Econfina Conservation Area along the Econfina River. Rare pitcher plants occur in smaller areas of herbaceous wetlands on-site.

FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4

Public Use

Consumptive recreational uses within the project include hunting with a limited amount of bank fishing. The game species hunted are primarily deer, hog and turkey. Deer populations are low but could increase with added protection and habitat improvement. Protection could be improved by securing boundaries, limiting access roads and installing entrance gates. Wading birds and aquatic animals that are present would benefit from management activities such as prescribed burning. State ownership would offer potential for wildlife viewing and nature study that could be improved with viewing towers or elevated walkways to offer vistas of the swamp habitat. Outdoor recreation opportunities on the property include hunting, camping, hiking, horseback riding, bicycling and picnicking. The project may help to complete the Florida National Scenic Trail, a statewide non-motorized trail that crosses several Florida Forever project sites.

Acquisition Planning

The Wachovia tract was acquired from the Gilman Trust in 1999 and was historically managed pine timber for chip and saw rotations. Currently, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has a lease over the project area for a wildlife management area.

**2003**

On December 5, 2003, the Acquisition and Restoration Council added the San Pedro Bay project to the Florida Forever Project List. The project had a 2003 estimated tax assessed value of \$7,898,471.





## **2011**

On December 9, 2011, the Acquisition and Restoration Council placed the project in the Critical Natural Lands category.

## **2022**

On April 8, 2022, the Acquisition and Restoration Council approved the addition of the Lake Sampala Timber and Land project (1345.96 acres) to the project.

## **2024**

In April 2024, the Acquisition and Restoration Council approved the addition of two parcels totaling approximately 498.6 acres in Taylor County to the project boundary.

### Coordination

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Florida Forest Service are acquisition partners on the project.

### Management Policy Statement

As part of the larger San Pedro Bay wetland system, the San Pedro Bay project is of sufficient size for large-scale ecosystem management and restoration. Successful restoration of important ecological and hydrological functions might require additional project design. Hydrological restoration would improve fish and wildlife resources, as well as opportunities for outdoor recreation. However, hydrological restoration could diminish certain types of public access due to increased water levels and wetland function. It is expected that additional rare and imperiled biota, yet to be documented, will occur in the project area.

### Manager(s)

The Florida Forest Service and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission are recommended as unified managers of the fee simple portions of the project.

### Management Prospectus

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

The landscape ecology of the project provides connectivity among existing and proposed conservation lands, large areas of forest, functional wetlands (71 percent), protection of surface water (57 percent) and natural floodplain function (11 percent). Due to the project's goals, programs would be developed that serve to manage ecosystems for multiple use. Management programs would conserve, protect, manage and/or restore important ecosystems, landscapes, wildlife populations, forests and water resources. Stands of timber would be managed using even age and/or uneven aged methods to maintain a broad diversity of age classes and canopy conditions that promote groundcover development and enhancement of wildlife. This would provide habitat for the full spectrum of species found in the natural environment and enhance and maintain biodiversity. The project area will be managed to provide recreation opportunities best suited to the characteristics of the site, as well as the needs of user groups. Currently, recreational use of the site consists of bicycling, canoeing, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, hunting and wildlife viewing. Trails may be used as multi-use trails. The managing agencies would promote recreation and environmental education in the natural environment.





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

Most of the project area is a high-need tract, requiring significant up-front design and engineering analysis to restore natural hydrologic functions. Under unified management, the Florida Forest Service and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will utilize in-house expertise in plant community restoration to develop long-term hydrologic goals and objectives in the conceptual management plan. Areas where pine has been harvested but not replanted will require reforestation of native pine species best suited for the site. Managing agencies would conduct historic vegetation analysis to determine desired future conditions and restoration methods. This is especially important for conserving habitats and populations of imperiled or rare species. The primary methods and tools for perpetuating less disturbed natural communities might include introducing prescribed fire, controlling human uses and removing invasive exotic species. Because many imperiled or rare species are expected to occur in the project, biotic surveys would be conducted as part of early unified management activities. Facilities for public use and administration would feature rustic facilities and be kept to the minimum necessary to assure a high-quality recreational experience. Such development would be confined to areas of previous disturbance.

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

It is anticipated that during the first year after acquisition, both agencies under the unified management approach will emphasize site security, posting boundaries, public access for low-intensity outdoor recreation, fire management, resource inventory and removing refuse. Both managing agencies will meet frequently to coordinate task assignments and will cooperate with other state agencies, local governments and other entities as appropriate.

Goals for the long-term would emphasize multiple use management and conserving the site's natural resources including timber, fish and wildlife and water. These goals would include restoring habitat and hydrology and conserving and protecting imperiled or rare species. Because of past drainage and dewatering activities for silviculture, an extensive hydrologic analysis will be performed to guide long-term restoration strategies. Other concurrent assessments will include completing a plant community inventory and historic vegetation analysis. Where practical, disturbed sites would be restored to conditions expected to occur naturally. Essential roads would be stabilized to provide all-weather public access and management operations. Programs providing recreational uses would also be implemented. An all-season prescribed burning management plan would be developed and implemented. Timber resources will be managed using acceptable silviculture practices. Thinning of timber and sustainable forestry management practices could provide silvicultural products and ecological and recreational benefits. Archaeological and historic sites would be managed in coordination with the Division of Historical Resources. Infrastructure development would be the minimum to serve the needs of the public and would include facilities for the security and management of the project area.

### **Revenue-generating Potential**

Timber sales would be conducted as needed to improve or maintain desirable conditions, under a multiple-use management concept. The Florida Natural Areas Inventory indicates that almost half (44 percent) of the project area is available as Priority 1, 2, 3 and 5 for sustainable forestry. However, management would seek to improve the other revenue-generating potential of areas currently serving for forest products production by improving wildlife diversity and resource-based recreation. Additional





revenue would be generated from sales of hunting licenses, fishing licenses, wildlife management area permits and other special hunting permits. Some revenues might be realized in the future from recreational user fees and ecotourism activities. Fifteen percent of all gross revenues will be returned to the county from which funds were generated. Both agencies have agreed to a unified management framework whereby all management funds, site generated revenues, and management expenditures are to be evenly divided between the Florida Forest Service and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

**Cooperators in Management Activities**

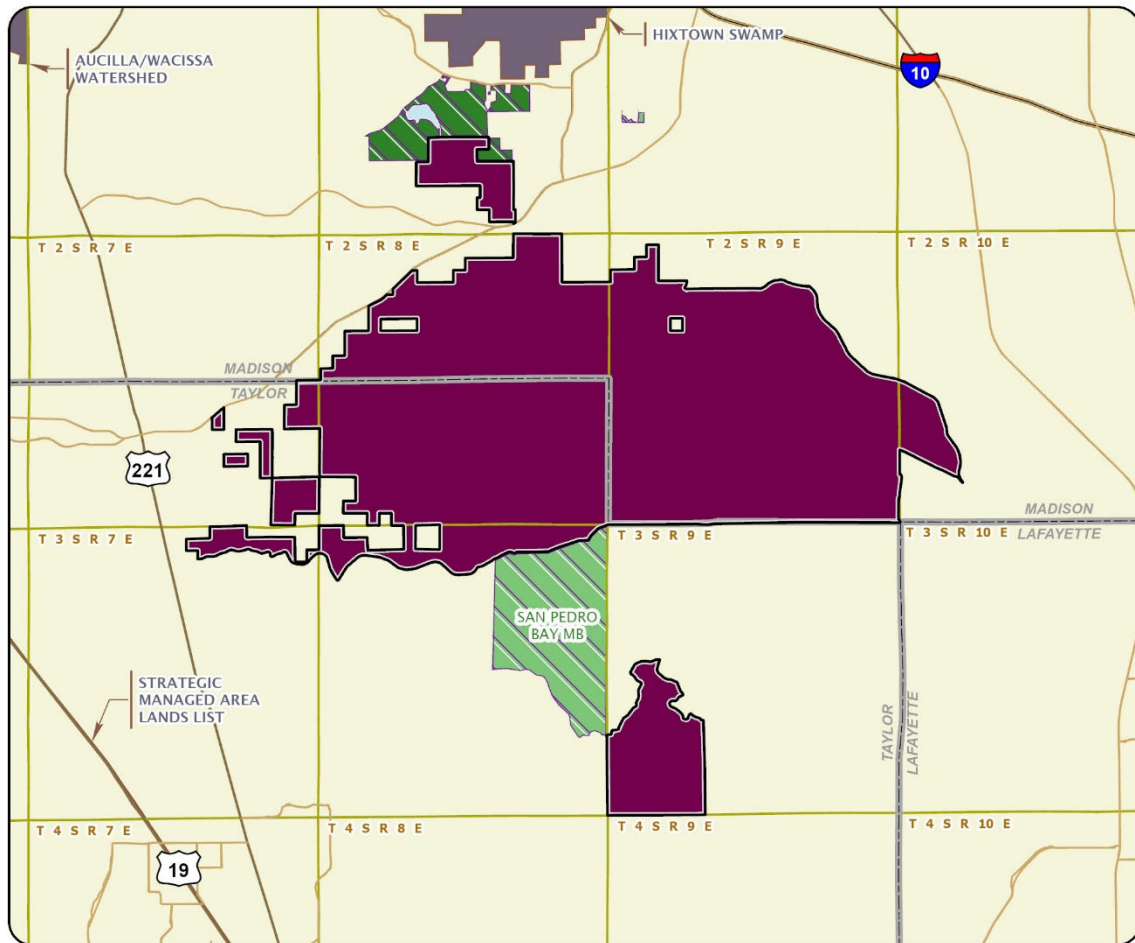
The unified managers (Florida Forest Service and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission) should cooperate with other state and local governmental agencies, including the Suwannee River Water Management District, in managing the project area. The project should be designated as a state forest and wildlife management area.

Management Cost Summary

<u>FWC and FFS</u>	<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Source of Funds	CARL	CARL
Resource Management	\$548,732	\$719,677
Administration	\$75,494	\$25,133
Support	\$149,080	\$31,566
Capital Improvements	\$2,187,189	\$316,190
Visitor Services/Recreation	\$3,756	\$141
Law Enforcement	\$31,351	\$31,351
TOTAL	\$2,995,602	\$1,124,058

*Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted*





### SAN PEDRO BAY

#### MADISON AND TAYLOR COUNTIES

