Atlantic to Okefenokee Conservation Corridor

Partnerships and Regional Incentives

Nassau County

Year Added to Priority List	*2024*
Project Acres	*55,845*
Acquired Acres	*38*
Remaining Project Acres	*55,807*
2024 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres	*$234,975,956*

Purpose for State Acquisition

The Atlantic to Okefenokee Conservation Corridor project will create an ecological corridor between the Okefenokee Swamp and the Atlantic Ocean by connecting a variety of private and public conservation lands extending from Amelia Island and along the St. Marys River, to northwestern Nassau County. The project will contribute to the protection of water quality for the St. Marys and Nassau Rivers along with their tributaries and estuaries, important spawning habitat for the federally endangered Atlantic sturgeon (*Acipenser oxyrinchus oxyrinchus*).

General Description

The Atlantic to Okefenokee Conservation Corridor project represents a partially contiguous assemblage of privately-owned properties that span the northern edge of Nassau County, stretching from near the community of Boulogne to the mouth of the St. Marys River at the Atlantic Ocean. The proposal has an estimated 27 miles of frontage on the St. Marys River and provides multiple scenic vistas of Georgia at Roses Bluff and Reids Bluffs.

The properties are under multiple ownerships, with a large portion (38,844 acres or approximately 70% of the proposal) owned by either Rayonier Forest Resources or its real estate subsidiary Raydient LLC and are proposed for a combination of fee-simple and less-than-fee acquisition.

Pine plantations occupy most of the uplands and are the most abundant landcover type both on the Rayonier tracts and throughout the proposal overall. On the Rayonier tracts, these plantations consist of improved slash pine, longleaf pine or loblolly pine, and span many stages of the growth cycle from recently harvested stands to mature thinned stands. The extent and structure of vegetation within these plantations varies greatly with the stage in the timber rotation and management history. Rayonier tracts have historically been managed to Sustainable Forestry Initiative standards. Significant naturally vegetated areas persist along wetland drainages throughout the tracts, and more notably, on upland bluffs near the river.

Mature upland hardwood forest is found on the bluffs occurring above bottomlands, swamps and along the river including on the Tompkins Landing Tract, the Land Trust UAD tract, and at Roses Bluff. Sandhill is also present on the most well drained upland soils in some areas of the proposal. A stand of mature mesic hammock on the Philips tract is one of very few examples of this community in the proposal.

The Rayonier tract contains an extensive area (approximately 500 acres) of former pine plantation that appears to have been cleared and planted to a continuous stand of turf/pasture grass. As many of the properties within the proposal are working or former agricultural lands, substantial areas of improved pasture and semi-improved pasture are frequent throughout the proposal.

Interconnected complexes of floodplain swamp, bottomland forest, baygall, and basin swamp surround or form the headwaters of several blackwater streams that flow to the St. Marys River or to the Nassau River. Floodplain swamp occurs in broad areas adjacent to the St. Marys River, as well as along several smaller streams, including Wilder Swamp, McQueen Creek and the Little St. Marys River. Numerous isolated small swamps are common over much of the proposal but are most numerous on the Rayonier properties.

Baygall and bottomland forest communities both occur on lower slopes between uplands and swamps, and in slight rises within swampy areas. Close to the river and in western portions of the proposal, bottomland forests are more common than baygalls, although baygalls are common in eastern parts of the Rayonier properties and wherever soils at the base of slopes are saturated by groundwater seepage. Basin swamp is found within in the proposal and is common on the Rayonier tracts. This community predominates in the lowest-lying areas of poorly defined drainages inland from the river. Many of the forested wetland communities in the proposal have been logged.

Moving downstream along the St Marys, marshes become increasingly abundant in the river floodplain. Floodplain marshes dominated by sawgrass (*Cladium jamaicense*), eventually yield to salt marshes dominated by needle rush (*Juncus roemerianus*) and saltmarsh cordgrass (*Spartina alterniflora*) nearer to the river mouth. The Thornton tract adjacent to Fort Clinch State Park is predominately salt marsh, although areas of unconsolidated substrate—unvegetated sandy mud within the salt marsh—and a small fringe of maritime hammock is also present.
Invasive plants vary widely in their frequency on the site. In the communities bordering the river, they were observed to be largely absent; but were observed in interior areas of some tracts.

Several rare or imperiled species have been documented on the project site including eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon couperi*) and gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*).

The project includes 15 archaeological sites and six historical cemeteries. Standing on the bank of the St. Marys looking north, one can see the former historic landing at Crandall, Port Henry, a post-Civil War lumber and turpentine river port and the site of a Gullah Geechee African American cemetery. Sites within the project vary in age but are from the pre-Columbian and historic period.

FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

FNAI Elements	Score
Eastern indigo snake	G3/S2?
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
pineland scurfpea	G1/S1
ciliate-leaf tickseed	G2/S2
Florida toothache grass	G2/S2
Painted bunting, eastern population	G5T3Q/S1S2
Bachman's sparrow	G3/S3
little brown jug	G5/S3
Southeastern fox squirrel	G5T5/S3
White ibis	G5/S4

Public Use

This project includes inholdings in Fort Clinch State Park and Ralph E. Simmons State Forest. As such, these parcels will expand opportunities such as paddling, wildlife viewing and hiking.

Acquisition Planning

2024

On June 7, 2024, the Acquisition and Restoration Council voted to add the Atlantic to Okefenokee Conservation Corridor to the 2025 Florida Forever Priority List.

Coordination

Nassau County's Conservation Land Acquisition and Management program is an acquisition partner.

Management Policy Statement

The primary goals of management of the Atlantic to Okefenokee Conservation Corridor are: to restore the health and vigor of the project's natural communities; to mitigate the previous impacts to the saltmarsh; to provide resource-based outdoor recreation opportunities for multiple interests; to restore and manage healthy forests and native ecosystems ensuring the long-term viability of populations and species listed as endangered, threatened or rare, and other components of biological diversity including game and nongame wildlife and plants; and to restore, maintain, and protect hydrological functions related to water resources and the health of associated wetland and aquatic ecosystems.

Manager(s)

The Florida Forest Service (FFS) will manage acreage acquired within the optimum boundary of the Ralph E. Simmons State Forest. The Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) will manage lands acquired in the optimum boundary of the Fort Clinch State Park. Nassau County will manage any properties acquired that are not added to a state-managed area.

Management Prospectus

Qualifications for State Designation

The project includes inholdings in Ralph E. Simmons State Forest and Fort Clinch State Park. Acquisition of these inholdings will enhance management of the state forest and state park.

Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management

Florida Forest Service

FFS notes that there is no known history of fire on the property. Ideally, prescribed fire will be one of the primary tools utilized for resource management on the forest. The level of management intensity is expected to be typical for a state forest. All silvicultural activities may be conducted in compliance with the most recent edition of the Silviculture Best Management Practices Manual.

Division of Recreation and Parks

DRP expects that the protection of saltmarsh wetlands from disturbance is sufficient for management of the systems. A hydrological assessment would be needed to identify past impacts and to develop any necessary restoration plans.

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

Florida Forest Service

The primary land management goals for FFS are to practice sustainable forest management, provide for resource-based outdoor recreation, restore and manage healthy forests and native ecosystems, protect known archaeological and historical sites, and restore and maintain hydrological functions related to water resources.

The short-term goals of FFS are to focus on site security and control of vehicle access to the site. Acquisition of areas within the Ralph E. Simmons State Forest optimum boundary would provide additional opportunities for nature-based recreation. Potential recreational activities may include fishing, kayaking/canoeing, boating, hiking, camping or Operation Outdoor Freedom event(s). FFS also mentions the potential for scientific study on the site.

Division of Recreation and Parks

During the first year after acquisition, DRP‘s emphasis will be placed on restoring saltmarsh on the property and expanding passive recreational opportunities namely, paddling access. Acquisition of this inholding would expand access directly to Egan’s Creek. A ramp could be developed in the future to avoid motorized vessels on the Amelia River. This development would need to be sensitive to preserving the nature and quality of the Fort Clinch State Park shoreline.

DRP plans to inventory the resources on the property and identify areas that may need additional security or protection. Further long-term plans will be addressed in the park's management plan.

Revenue-generating Potential

Florida Forest Service

FFS will sell timber as needed to improve or maintain desirable ecosystem conditions. Revenue from these sales will vary, but FFS expects the revenue-generating potential of this project to be low to moderate. Additionally, collection of recreation-based fees may be collected where applicable.

Division of Recreation and Parks

DRP will continue to collect entrance fees for the Fort Clinch State Park.

Management Cost Summary

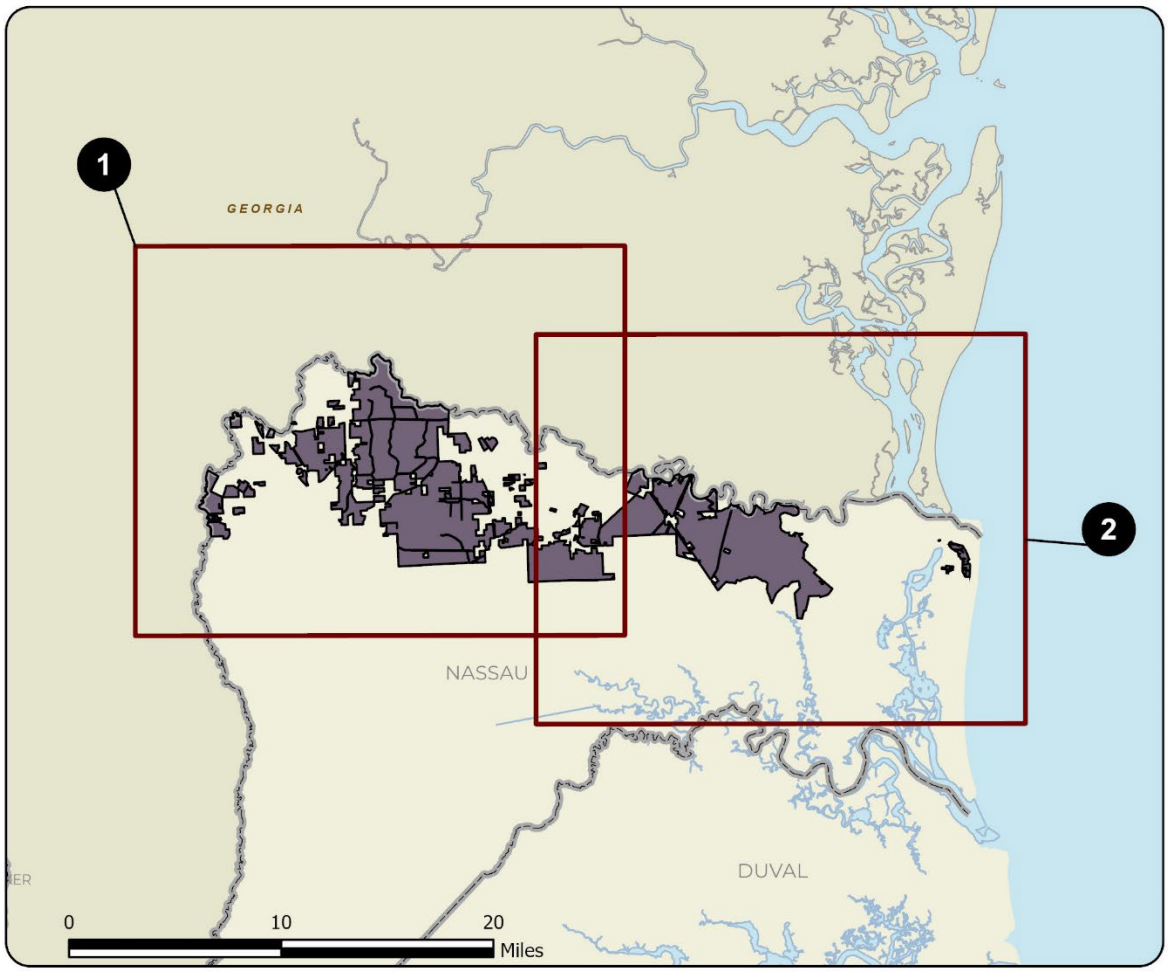
FFS	Startup	Recurring
Source	LATF	LATF
Salary	not provided	$49,000
OPS	not provided	not provided
Expense	$18,000	not provided
OCO	$6,000	not provided
FCO	not provided	not provided
TOTAL	$24,000	$49,000

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted

Management Cost Summary

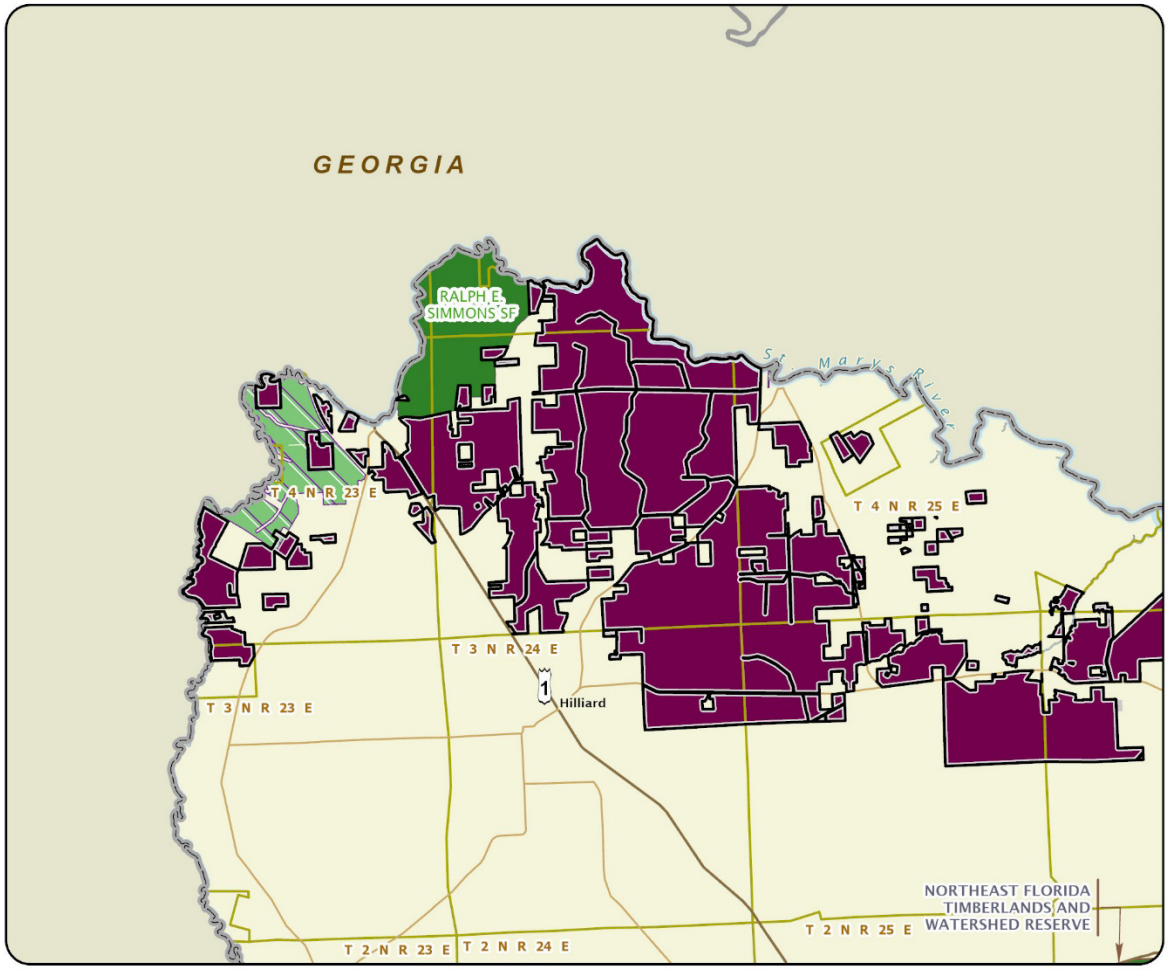
DRP	Startup	Recurring
Source	LATF	LATF
Salary	not provided	$41,000
OPS	not provided	$30,000
Expense	$15,000	not provided
OCO	not provided	not provided
FCO	not provided	not provided
TOTAL	$15,000	$71,000

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted



ATLANTIC TO OKEFENOKEE CONSERVATION CORRIDOR: OVERVIEW

NASSAU COUNTY



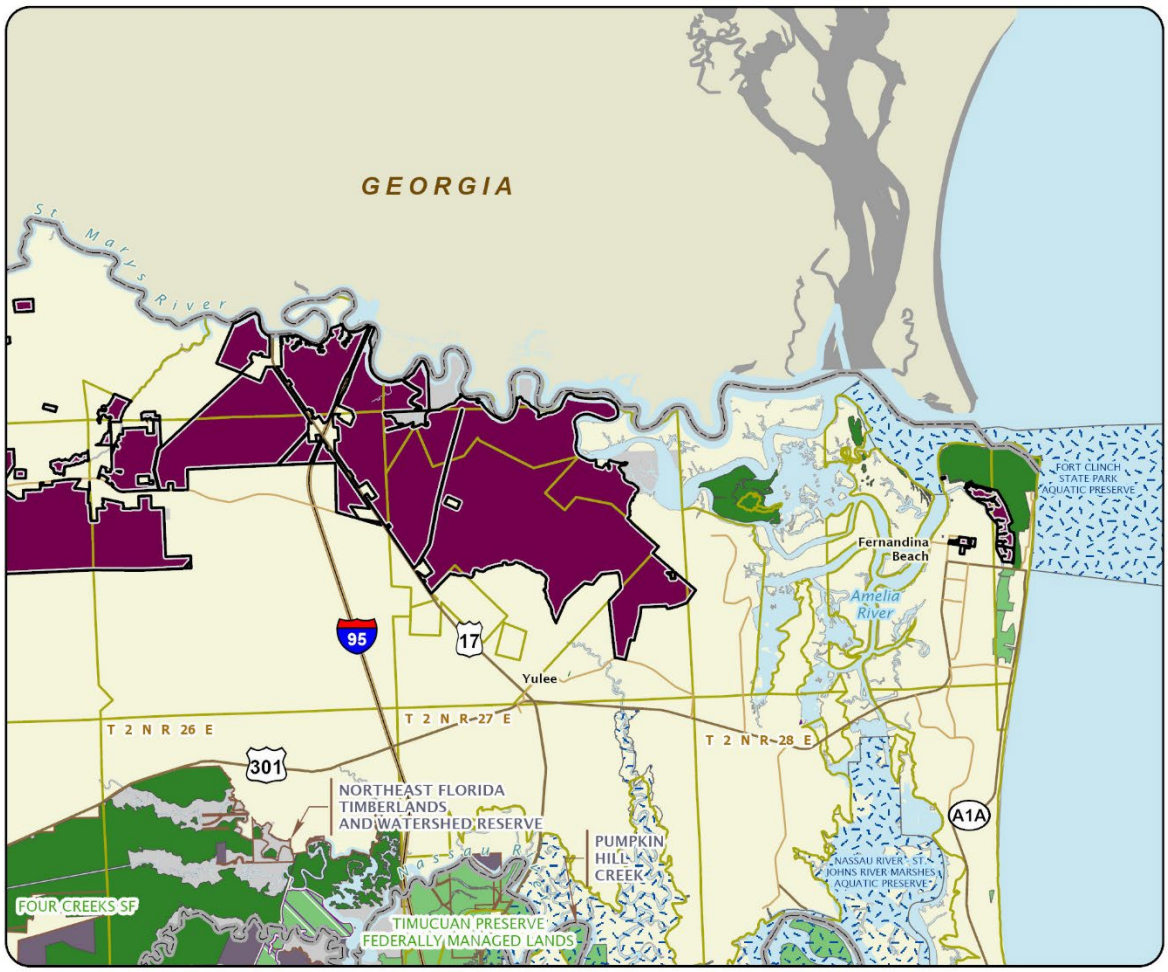
ATLANTIC TO OKEFENOKEE CONSERVATION CORRIDOR: MAP 1

NASSAU COUNTY

- Florida Forever Project Boundary
- Essential Parcels Remaining
- Other Florida Forever Projects
- State Conservation Lands
- Other Conservation Lands
- Other Public Lands
- Less-Than-Fee Acquisition

0 4.5 9 Miles

N



ATLANTIC TO OKEFENOKEE CONSERVATION CORRIDOR: MAP 2

NASSAU COUNTY

- Florida Forever Project Boundary
- Essential Parcels Remaining
- Other Florida Forever Projects
- State Conservation Lands
- Other Conservation Lands
- Other Public Lands
- Less-Than-Fee Acquisition
- State Aquatic Preserve

0 4.5 9 Miles

N