

Big Bend Forest

Less-Than-Fee

Dixie County

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	<i>2024</i>
<i>Project Acres</i>	<i>53,510</i>
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	<i>0</i>
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	<i>53,510</i>
<i>2024 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	<i>\$77,639,158</i>

Purpose for State Acquisition

The Big Bend Forest project will help protect the water quality and quantity of the Suwannee River, Steinhatchee River and Big Bend Seagrasses Aquatic Preserve. The project will also help enhance connectivity among a network of public and private conservation lands in the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Furthermore, the project will increase the amount of forestland available for continued management of habitats and natural resources for wide ranging species as well as prevent conversion to more intense agricultural uses.

General Description

The Big Bend Forest project is a single contiguous tract immediately west of Cross City extending to about 2.7 miles east of Steinhatchee. Almost all the southern edge of the tract borders various federal and state-managed conservation easements, through which the property further connects to the Lower Suwannee River National Wildlife Refuge and a network of conservation lands along the Suwannee River, including the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area.

Like much of the surrounding landscape, the property has been used predominantly for timber production for decades, and uplands have been almost entirely converted to pine plantation. Typically, the plantations are bedded slash pine in areas that were formerly mesic and wet flatwoods, and they vary from newly planted seedlings to mature stands. A few stands on the west side of the site, including within the approximately 5,000 acres of plantation leased for cattle grazing, have a significant complement of native sub-shrubs and grasses. Southern wiregrass (*Aristida beyrichiana*) was noted in one stand but was not common.

Of the areas that remain relatively natural, most consist of a network of forested wetlands spread evenly throughout the tract. These forests have been at least partially logged in the last half-century and are regenerating naturally, with the majority mapped as a mixture of bottomland forest and hydric hammock. Two depression marshes were visited during the site tour; these are in good to excellent condition and are densely vegetated with a wide variety of native herbaceous plants.





On the north side of the property, water from Pumpkin Swamp to the east drains through forested wetlands and west as Sand Hill Creek, which flows to the Steinhatchee River. Moving south, portions of the tract are part of three watersheds that drain directly to the Gulf of America north and south of Horseshoe Beach. Most of the eastern edge of the tract drains south to Fishbone Creek, which meets California Creek to form Sanders Creek, also draining to the Gulf of America. Water flowing through the tract's wetlands thus has the potential to influence a 20-mile stretch of coastal seagrass habitats in the Big Bend Seagrasses Aquatic Preserve.

Developed areas – mainly hunt camps associated with several hunting leases—make up a small portion (less than 1%) of the project. These typically have a scattering of small temporary and permanent housing and sheds. A small cemetery and a telecommunications tower are also present on-site. No invasive plants were found at the time of the site visits. Some damage by feral hogs (*Sus scrofa*) was seen at the edges of one of the depression marshes and in the adjacent pine plantation but does not appear to be widespread.

The property contains habitat for an abundance of wildlife. Several gopher tortoises (*Gopherus polyphemus*), eastern diamondback rattlesnake (*Crotalus adamanteus*) and eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon couperi*) were observed during the site visits.

There are three recorded archaeological sites within the Big Bend Forest project. These sites contain evidence of pre-Colombian and historic-period occupations, representing at least 3,000 years of Florida's history.

FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Florida olive hairstreak	G5T2/S2





Public Use

The Big Bend Forest project is proposed for less-than-fee acquisition and does not provide for public access.

Acquisition Planning

2024

On June 7, 2024, the Acquisition and Restoration Council voted to add Big Bend Forest as a Florida Forever project. The project had an estimated tax assessed value of \$77,941,854.

Coordination

This project is near several state-owned conservation lands, including the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area and the Lower Steinhatchee Conservation Area. As a less-than-fee acquisition, there would be no direct governmental management of the site.

Management Policy Statement

As a less-than-fee acquisition, the Big Bend Forest project would be managed for conservation purposes by the landowner as outlined in the conservation easement.

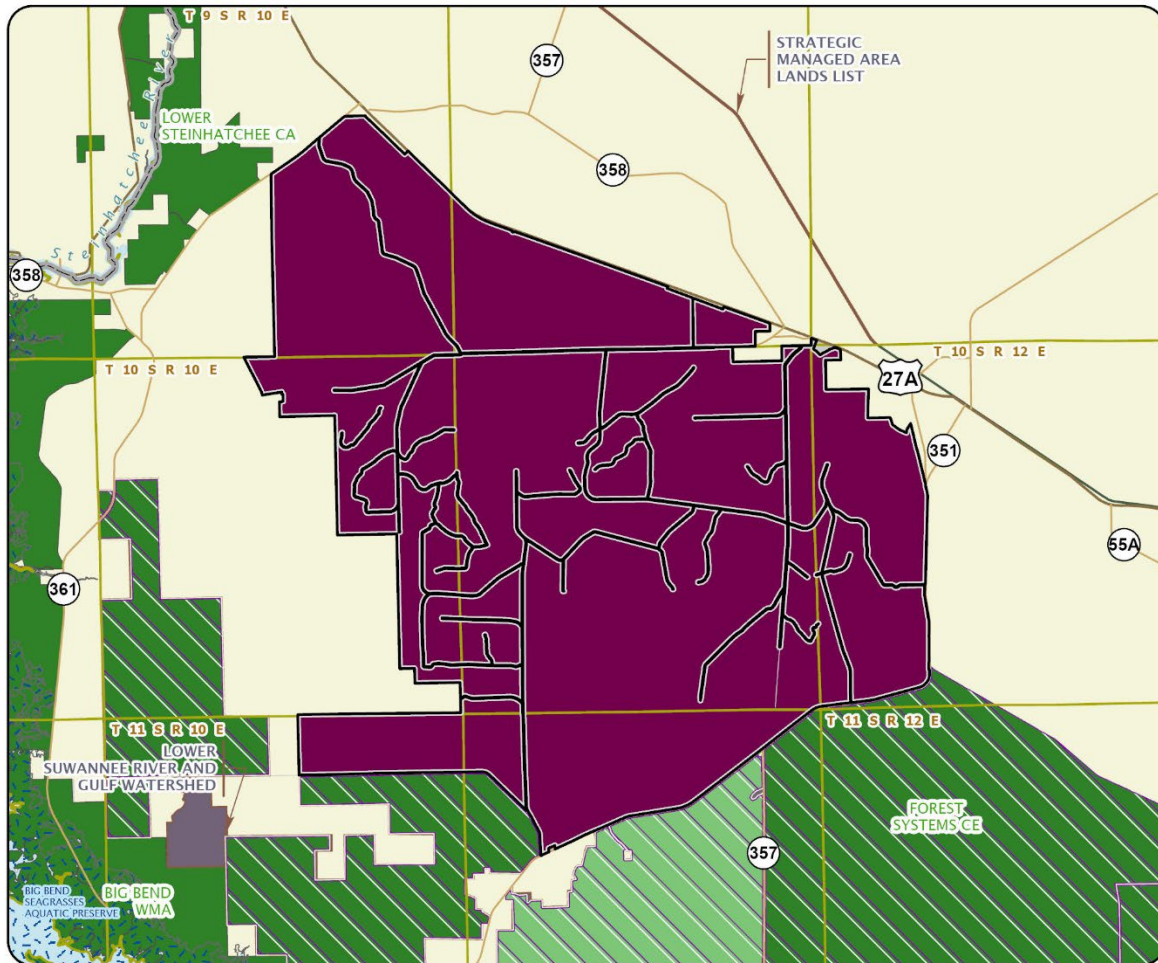
Manager(s)

If acquired as less-than-fee, management responsibility of Big Bend Forest would remain with the landowner. Periodic monitoring of the site's management to confirm continued compliance with the conditions of the conservation easement would be coordinated by the Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Division of State Lands.

Management Prospectus

If acquired as less-than-fee, management responsibility of the Big Bend Forest project would remain with the landowner. Periodic monitoring to confirm continued conservation easement compliance would be coordinated by DEP's Division of State Lands.





BIG BEND FOREST

DIXIE COUNTY

