

Bluefield to Cow Creek

Less-than-Fee

Okeechobee and St. Lucie Counties

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	<i>2020</i>
<i>Project Acres</i>	<i>13,164</i>
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	<i>10,419</i>
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	<i>2,745</i>
<i>2024 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	<i>\$19,938,005</i>

Purpose for State Acquisition

The Bluefield to Cow Creek project will protect a significant portion of South Florida's rural landscape, high-quality natural wetlands, wildlife habitat and water resources of the region. The entire project is within the Cypress Creek/Trail Ridge Natural Storage and Water Quality Area as identified in the Indian River Lagoon- South Restoration Plan (a component of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan). The conservation of this expansive, undeveloped area will protect the water quality of the St. Lucie River Estuary and Indian River Lagoon.

General Description

Bluefield to Cow Creek is in eastern Okeechobee County and western St. Lucie County, approximately 12 miles northeast of the town of Okeechobee on State Road 70. Over two-thirds of the project is in St. Lucie County with the remaining one-third located in Okeechobee County. All lands within the project are working cattle ranches. As such, nearly half of the acreage in the project is improved pasture. Large blocks of improved pasture occur on the eastern side and in the northern portion of the western side of the topographic break that runs generally north/south through the project. Some portions of the improved pastures were previously in row crops and now contain extensive systems of ditches and dikes.

The dominant natural feature of the project is the large system of basin swamp and hydric hammock that generally extend along the entire western boundary continuing to the north and south of the proposal. Wetlands comprise approximately one-third of the project and include forested swamps and marshes scattered throughout improved pasture. Two notably large swamps occur within the project: one to the north associated with Cow Creek and another to the south associated with Cypress Creek. The core of the Cypress Creek swamp is in the southwest portion of the project just east of Bluefield Road, extending north of State Road 70. The swamp has seen little disturbance and is composed primarily of cypress with mixed hardwood (with some cypress reportedly up to 5 feet in diameter).

The Bluefield to Cow Creek project provides habitat for several rare species. Large populations of air plants are present, including at least three rare species. Numerous bald eagle (*Haliaeetus*



leucocephalus), wood stork (*Mycteria americana*) and other wading birds also utilize the project area. A known wading bird rookery is located less than 0.5 miles south of the project boundary. The project area also has a robust population of southern fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger niger*).

FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Eastern indigo snake	G3/S2?
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
<i>scrub bluestem</i>	G1G2/S1S2
<i>large-flowered rosemary</i>	G3/S3
<i>blunt-leaved peperomia</i>	G5TNR/S2
Crested caracara	G5/S2
Bald eagle	G5/S3

Public Use

Bluefield to Cow Creek is proposed for less-than-fee acquisition and does not provide for public access. The project will provide public benefit through water quality protection, rural landscape conservation and wildlife corridor creation.

Acquisition Planning

2020

In October 2020, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) placed this project in the Less-Than-Fee category of the 2021 Florida Forever Priority List.

2023

The Department of Environmental Protection acquired a 3,153-acre conservation easement in Saint Lucie County from Ru-Mar, Inc.

2024

On April 12, 2024, ARC approved the addition of Dark Hammock Ranch project proposal (2,166 acres) in Okeechobee County to the project boundary.

Management Policy Statement

As a less-than-fee acquisition, the Bluefield to Cow Creek project would be managed for conservation purposes by the landowner as outlined in the conservation easement.





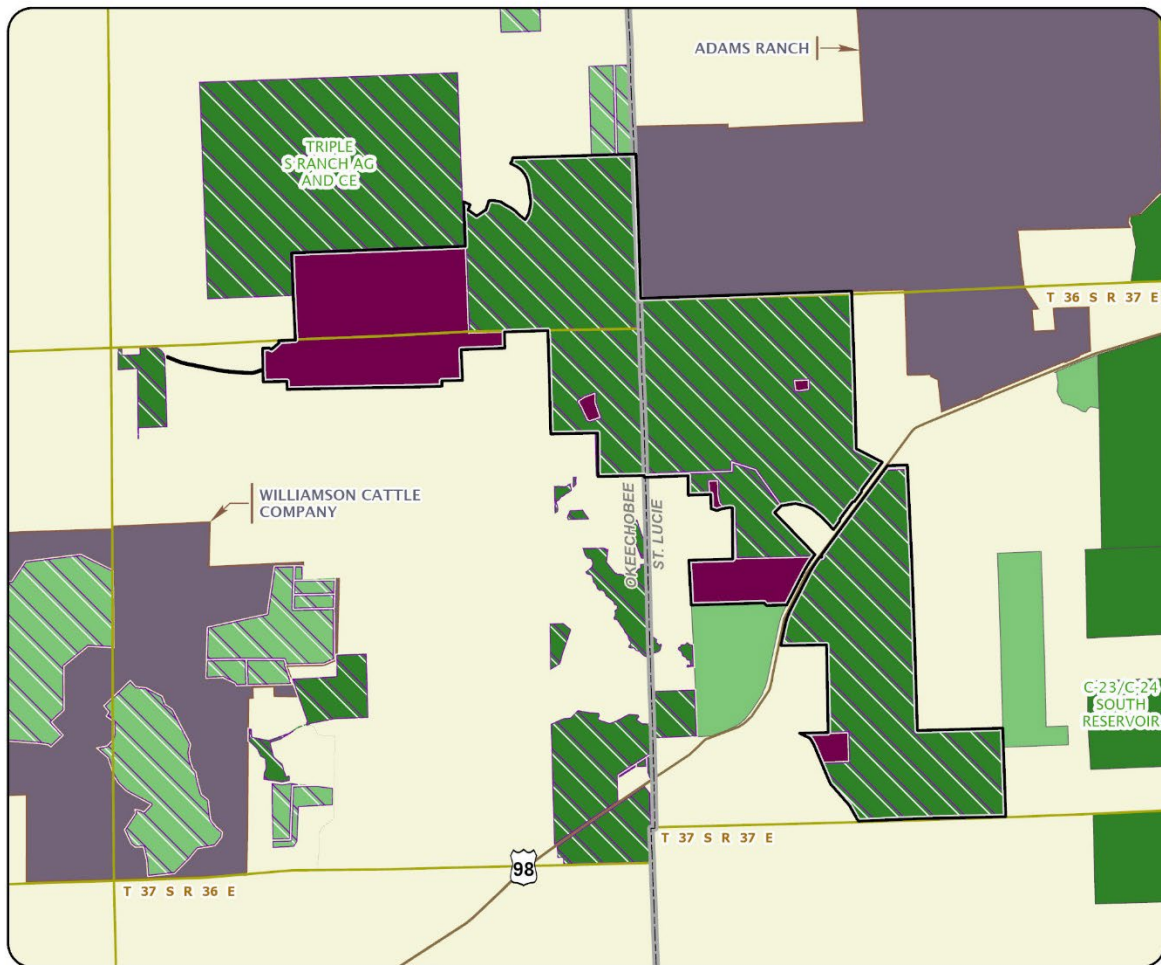
Manager(s)

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

Management Prospectus

DEP's Division of State Lands will periodically monitor the conservation easement, while the management will be conducted by the property owner.





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