

Fisheating Creek Ecosystem

Less-Than-Fee

Glades and Highlands Counties

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	<i>1999</i>
<i>Project Acres</i>	<i>191,974</i>
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	<i>92,798</i>
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	<i>99,176</i>
<i>2024 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	<i>\$798,087,927</i>

Purpose for State Acquisition

The Fisheating Creek Ecosystem project contains Fisheating Creek, the only undammed tributary to Lake Okeechobee. The creeks flow through vast prairies and flatwoods, linking the Okaloacoochee Slough, Big Cypress Swamp, Babcock/Webb Wildlife Management Area and Lake Okeechobee. The project will help to ensure the survival of the Florida panther (*Puma concolor coryi*), crested caracara (*Caracara plancus*) and other native plant and animal species that depend on these critical lands.

General Description

Natural communities in the project area include dry prairies and flatwoods interrupted by numerous freshwater marshes, including seepage slopes, wet prairies and depression marshes. Diverse prairie hammocks occur east of U.S. Highway 27. Hydric hammocks, bottomland forests and floodplain swamp along Fisheating Creek comprise the remaining natural communities. Large areas of the project include improved pasture, former and current eucalyptus plantations, and current pine plantations. Invasive exotic plants are largely confined to the Hoover Dike system around Lake Okeechobee. While the water quality of Fisheating Creek and Gator Slough is good, agricultural runoff has impaired some of the site's canals.

As one of the largest natural areas in the Florida peninsula, the project area is important for the protection of rare plants and animals through habitat connectivity. The project includes large populations of plants endemic to central Florida including Edison's ascyrum (*Hypericum edisonianum*), cutthroat grass (*Panicum abscissum*) and nodding pinweed (*Lechea cernua*). The project also provides habitat for the Florida panther, swallow-tailed kite (*Elanoides forficatus*), crested caracara, snail kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*), Florida grasshopper sparrow (*Aimophila aestivalis*), Florida sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis*), mottled duck (*Anas fulvigula*), red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*), short-tailed hawk (*Buteo brachyurus*) and bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*).

The project area includes at least 31 archaeological sites, many associated with the important Fort Center Site Complex of the Belle Glades culture (500 B.C. to A.D. 1700). More recent sites are also known, and there is potential for many more to be discovered in the project. The Fort Center Complex also offers an opportunity for an interpretive center.

FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Florida panther	G5T1/S1
Swallow-tailed kite	G5/S2
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
Florida scrub-jay	G1G2/S1S2
Eastern indigo snake	G3/S2?
Red-cockaded woodpecker	G3/S2
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
wedge-leaved button-snakeroot	G1/S1
Carter's warea	G1/S1
Florida blazing star	G2/S2
Highlands Scrub hypericum	G2/S2
Round-tailed muskrat	G2/S2

Public Use

This project is proposed as a wildlife management area with uses such as hunting, hiking and wildlife observation. A portion of the Fisheating Creek Ecosystem project is proposed for less-than-fee acquisition and does not provide for public access. However, the fee-simple portion of the project could support activities such as hiking, horseback riding, hunting, fishing and canoeing. It may also help complete the Florida National Scenic Trail, a statewide non-motorized trail that crosses several Florida Forever project sites.

Acquisition Planning**1999**

On May 6, 1999, the Land Acquisition and Management Advisory Council added the Fisheating Creek Ecosystem project to the Conservation and Recreational Lands Priority List. This project was sponsored by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and consisted of approximately 168,360 acres with a single owner (Lykes Bros. Inc.). The property had a taxable value of \$22,297,408.

On May 25, 1999, the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund (BOT) approved a settlement agreement with Lykes Bros. Inc. in the case of the BOT v. Lykes Bros. Inc. The settlement agreement was partly contingent upon a multiple-phase and combined less-than-fee acquisition.

2000

On December 12, 2000, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) approved a less-than-fee addition to the project boundary. This 8,400-acre addition, also known as the Venus Ranch, is in Glades County and sponsored by TNC. It had a single owner and a taxable value of \$667,863. The Fisheating Creek Ecosystem project was also moved to Group A of the Florida Forever Priority List.

2002

On August 15, 2002, ARC approved a 0.46-acre addition to the project boundary. The parcel, referred to as Lucky Whidden, is in Glades County. It was sponsored by the Department of Environmental





Protection's (DEP) Division of State Lands and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and had a taxable value of \$4,000.

2003

In 2003, the Venus Ranch tract was acquired by the BOT.

2004

On June 16, 2004, ARC approved a 115.4-acre fee-simple addition to the project boundary in Glades County. The addition, known as Journigan Place, was sponsored by the two owners and had a taxable value of \$207,692.

2011

On December 9, 2011, ARC placed this project in Florida Forever's Less-than-Fee category.

2015

On June 19, 2015, ARC voted to add a new project proposal, Chaparral Slough (6,859 acres), to the Florida Forever Priority List. Chaparral Slough is an 11-mile long and 1-mile wide tributary to Cypress Branch. ARC then immediately added this new project boundary to the boundary of the existing Fisheating Creek Ecosystem project. Chaparral Slough was originally proposed by Lykes Bros. Inc. as a standalone less-than-fee project to provide habitat preservation, an ecological greenway and preserve lands for aquifer recharge. The land has been used for cattle ranching, silviculture and hunting. It includes 1,919 acres of pine plantation and a 669-acre eucalyptus plantation that is harvested and replanted several times a year.

2020

On June 12, 2020, ARC approved adding 6,560 acres to the project boundary. This addition, referred to as Buck Island Ranch, is in Highlands County.

2022

DEP acquired a conservation easement over Chaparral Slough totaling 6,864 acres that provides a protected corridor from the Caloosahatchee River to the Fisheating Creek/Lykes conservation easement and Fisheating Creek Wildlife Management Area (FCWMA).

2023

On October 13, 2023, ARC approved the addition of the Venus Project proposal (1,110 acres) in Highlands County to the project boundary.

2024

On February 9, 2024, DEP acquired a 10,461.43-acre conservation easement in Glades County from Lykes Bros., Inc.

In December 2024, ARC approved the removal of FWC-15 (McLaughlin Property) from the Strategic Managed Area Lands List project and its subsequent addition to the Fisheating Creek Ecosystem project.





Coordination

TNC is considered an acquisition partner and there may be potential for joint acquisition with the South Florida Water Management District.

Management Policy Statement

The primary objectives of the Fisheating Creek Ecosystem project are to conserve and protect natural communities along Fisheating Creek, thereby maintaining and improving the status of several rare species. For less-than-fee portions of the project, the project would be managed by the landowner as outlined in the conservation easement.

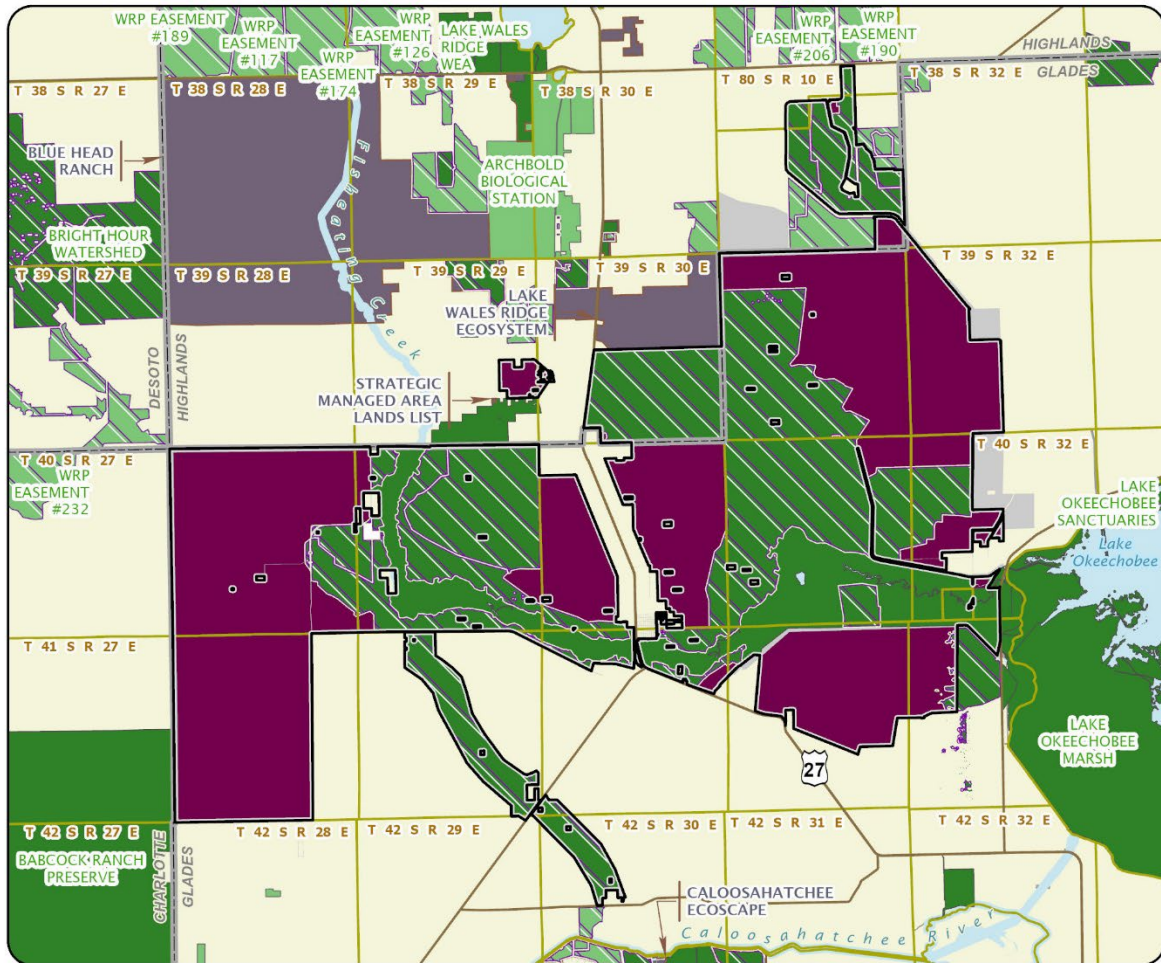
Manager(s)

If acquired as less-than-fee, management responsibility of the Fisheating Creek Ecosystem project would remain with the landowner. Periodic monitoring of the site's management to confirm continued conservation easement compliance will be coordinated by DEP's Division of State Lands. FWC will manage the fee-simple acquisitions unless otherwise noted.

Management Prospectus

Pursuant to the Settlement Agreement, the BOT will lease the sovereign submerged lands and the fee lands to FWC, as the designated managing agency and as the easement monitor for the conservation easement. The sovereignty submerged lands and the fee lands will be managed as FCWMA. The Settlement Agreement outlining specific management guidelines is on file with DEP's Division of State Lands.





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