

# Little Orange Creek Corridor

Partnerships and Regional Incentives

Alachua and Putnam Counties

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2024
<i>Project Acres</i>	3,925
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	0
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	3,925
<i>2024 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$11,322,760

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Little Orange Creek Corridor project fills a gap between existing conservation lands in Alachua and Putnam counties. The project will help facilitate wildlife movement between existing protected areas and protect flatwoods and sandhill habitat critical to a variety of rare and imperiled species including the Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*). Acquisition of the Little Orange Creek Corridor project will also help protect the water resources of Little Orange Creek and expand resource-based recreational opportunities in the region.

## General Description

The Little Orange Creek Corridor project contains 42 parcels, totaling 3,925 acres, distributed among seven landowners in Alachua and Putnam counties. As indicated by its name, the project would establish a corridor of undeveloped land between Little Orange Creek Nature Park and Putnam Lakes Preserve, both of which are further connected to other conservation lands including Little Orange Creek Preserve and BJ Bar Ranch conservation easement. A portion of the project is located within the Florida Wildlife Corridor.

The property lies within the Hawthorne Lakes Geomorphological Province within the Lakes District, a region characterized by widespread lakes and wetlands resulting from sinkhole formation. Little Orange Creek, which originates northeast of Hawthorne, flows through the northwest edge of the property and into Little Orange Lake. East of Little Orange Lake, the creek re-emerges and feeds a series of marshes and swamps before leaving the south-central portion of the property feeding Redwater Lake.

Covering more than 1,300 acres, the most extensive and impressive landcover type is restoration sandhill. Formerly successional hardwood forest and severely hardwood-encroached sandhill, the landowner has begun to restore using a combination of mechanical removal and prescribed fire. The owner intends on making the property a gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) recipient site. A large proportion of the restoration area was burned the week of the agency site visit. Remnant longleaf pines of varying ages are sparsely distributed across the restoration area.





Restoration mesic flatwoods is present in areas peripheral to the restoration sandhill and covers approximately 230 acres. A couple of large basin marshes, totaling more than 800 acres are present. Successional hardwood forest is the most extensive and widespread altered landcover type on the project, covering 225 acres. Invasive species are present in isolated areas.

Listed species observed during the site visit included wood stork (*Mycteria americana*) foraging in a wetland and a Florida sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis*) vocalizing. A few gopher tortoise burrows were also observed. The imperiled southern tessellated darter (*Etheostoma olmstedii maculaticeps*) occurs in Orange Creek and there are historic records from Little Orange Creek.

This project contains five recorded archaeological sites. These sites collectively represent 4,000 years of Florida's history. Notably, there is a largely intact cattle pen likely originating from the early 20th century, unrecorded prior to the site visit.

#### FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
Florida sandhill crane	G5T2/S2
Bachman's sparrow	G3/S3
Osprey	G5/S3S4

#### Public Use

If acquired in fee, lands in Alachua County will be managed by the county for conservation, restoration and public recreation. Portions of the Little Orange Creek Corridor project are proposed for less-than-fee acquisition and do not provide for public access.

#### Acquisition Planning

##### **2024**

On November 1, 2024, the Acquisition and Restoration Council voted to add the Little Orange Creek Corridor to the 2025 Florida Forever Priority List.

#### Coordination

The project was proposed by Putnam Land Conservancy.

#### Management Policy Statement

The primary objectives of the Little Orange Creek Corridor project are to restore the ecology and function of onsite communities. Acquired lands will be managed to maintain or improve environmentally significant natural resources, and to protect water quality, wildlife habitats, and natural areas suitable for resource-based recreation.

#### Manager(s)

Alachua County will manage acreage acquired within its county.





## **Management Prospectus**

### **Qualifications for State Designation**

The Little Orange Creek Corridor project helps protect five recorded archaeological sites and enhances connectivity amongst conservation lands. This project also helps to protect flatwoods and restoration sandhill.

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

An in-depth assessment will need to be conducted to ground-truth existing natural communities and assess historic disturbance to determine appropriate future desired conditions. Past, present and predicted land use changes of onsite and surrounding landscapes will need to be taken into consideration to determine the feasibility or effectiveness of potential restoration and management objectives, as development patterns or hydrological changes in the vicinity may make some restoration goals impractical to achieve. Many areas are anticipated to require ecological restoration to achieve desired future conditions and may include groundcover restoration, reforestation and implementation of an appropriate prescribed fire regime. The treatment of invasive species will also affect management intensity. These considerations and others will be included in the site assessment and incorporated into the 10-year management plan.

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

Because the Alachua County portion of the Little Orange Creek Corridor project contains parcels under multiple separate ownerships, both acquisition and subsequent management will likely be done as the individual properties are acquired. As acquisition is completed, site assessments will be conducted to draft a management plan which will establish current site conditions, future goals, and any potential role cooperating agencies and stakeholders may play in future management.

During the planning process, site security measures will be implemented, and low impact accessibility improvements will be assessed. The site will be monitored for trespassing and illegal dumping, and appropriate boundary marking signs will be posted. Assessments will be made to determine the condition of existing infrastructure and ascertain what improvements will need to be made in the future. Essential roads will be maintained to provide management access, and public access where appropriate, and unnecessary roads, fence lines and firebreaks will be abandoned and restored as practical. If any new fencing is needed for site security purposes, fencing methods and materials will consider impacts to wildlife movement and ecological connectivity. Cultural sites will be managed in accordance with Division of Historical Resources policies. Long-term plans will focus on protection and management of the natural and cultural resources on-site as well as providing appropriate recreational opportunities. Any extensive site improvements for restoration or allowing for public access will not be initiated until the final management plan is accepted by the state and Alachua County, if the property is acquired.





Recreational activities on the site may include hiking, biking, canoeing, kayaking, fishing, wildlife viewing and environmental education. Recreational activities will be evaluated to minimize degradation or alteration of natural resources and habitats on-site. Trailheads and observation areas may include educational signage describing the ecological significance of the site, its ecological value to the Little Orange Creek Watershed, and its importance in landscape-wide connectivity efforts across multiple counties. Potential initial improvements and possible future amenities include parking area(s), hiking and multi-use trails, paddling access points, fencing and other site security measures and invasive species removal.

### Revenue-generating Potential

Alachua County anticipates that there will likely be no plans to generate revenue from this site other than potential revenue generated from timber harvests should such activities be a part of restoration plans for the site. Any revenue generated from such activities would be utilized for continued future maintenance of the site, in accordance with the County's Board-adopted Timber Management Business Plan. However, since this area is close to the city of Hawthorne, and it is also within an area the County identified as a priority need area for a rural Community Park in the Alachua County Parks and Open Space Master Plan (adopted in 2023), consideration may be given to joint management strategies which might generate revenue to enhance tourism and provide recreational amenities to local residents. Such activities could include a kayaking or paddle boarding concession to allow recreational access to Little Orange Lake. Any plans to generate revenue on the property will be addressed as a part of the ten-year management plan once appropriate acquisition is complete.

### Cooperators in Management Activities

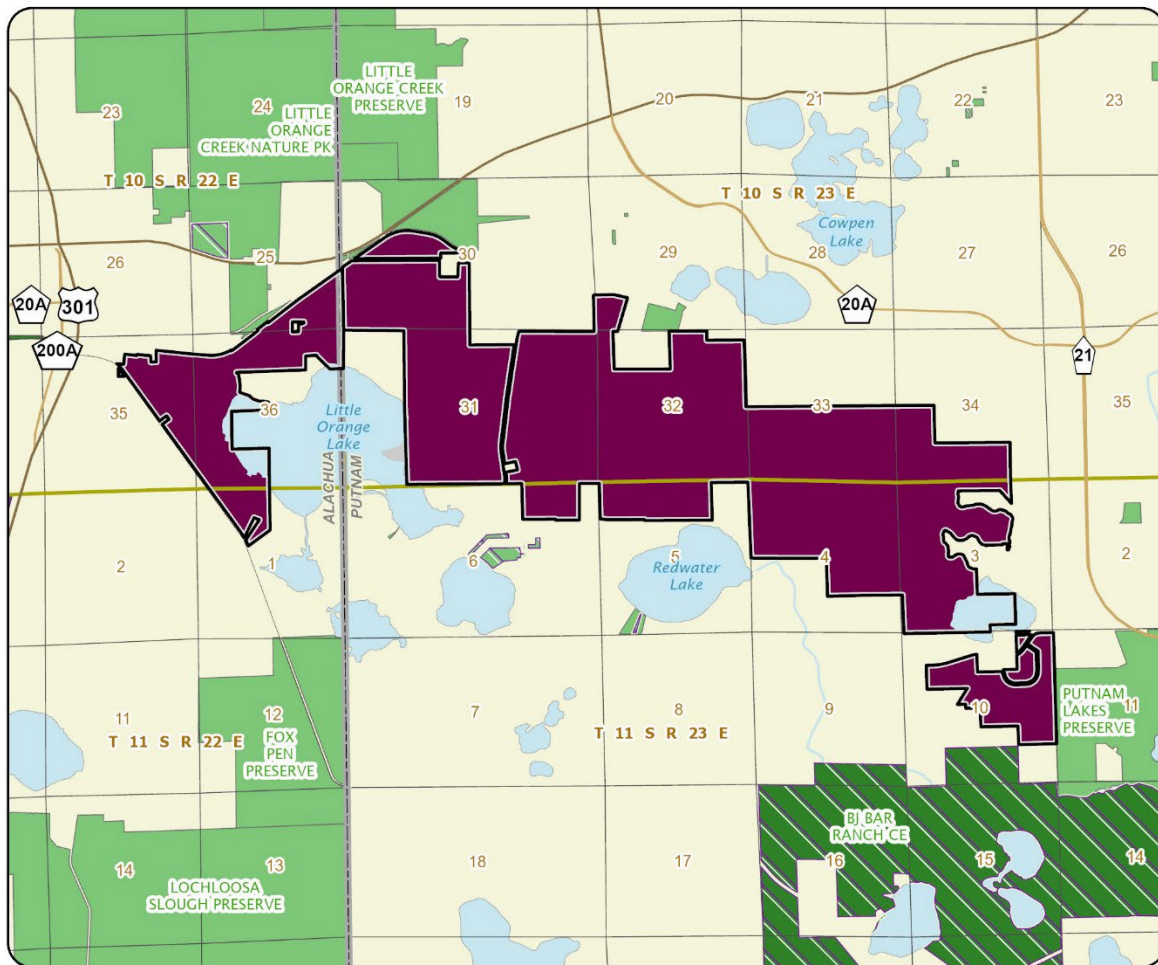
Alachua County will be primarily responsible for managing the property along with writing and implementing the management plan. Portions of the site may be managed or co-managed with other agencies such as the city of Hawthorne or the Alachua County Parks and Open Spaces department.

#### Management Cost Summary

<u>Alachua County</u>	<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Source of Funds	not provided	not provided
Salary	not provided	not provided
OPS	not provided	not provided
Expense	\$178,900	not provided
OCO	\$56,198	not provided
TOTAL	\$235,098	not provided

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted





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