

# Williamson Cattle Company

Less-Than-Fee

Okeechobee County

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2023
<i>Project Acres</i>	7,420
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	0
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	7,420
<i>2024 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$52,375,402

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Williamson Cattle Company project will protect the quality and quantity of water flowing to Lake Okeechobee. The project is located within a region of the state that is a high ecological priority for conservation, home to a variety of imperiled species such as the gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) and southern fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger niger*). Threatened by habitat fragmentation and encroaching development, acquisition of the Williamson Cattle Company project would help facilitate landscape connectivity in the northern Lake Okeechobee watershed and benefit numerous fish and wildlife species.

## General Description

The Williamson Cattle Company project contains 23 whole and partial parcels, totaling 7,419 acres in Okeechobee County. This project is about five miles north of Lake Okeechobee and about ten miles east of the Kissimmee River. Taylor Creek, a ditched waterway along the project's western border, separates the project from the Taylor Creek/Nubbin Slough Stormwater Treatment Area (South Florida Water Management District). The southwestern portion of the project is adjacent to the District's Lake Okeechobee Water Retention Phosphorus Removal Project. There are three existing U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service Wetland Reserve Easements over two large basin marshes excluded from the center and northeastern portion of the project. Proximity to these prominent water features makes acquisition critical for surface water protection and aquifer recharge.

The predominant natural communities within the project include mesic hammock, basin swamp, depression marsh, and mesic flatwoods. A variety of rare species have been documented on site including the pine pinweed (*Lechea divaricata*), common wild pine (*Tillandsia fasciculata*), crested caracara (*Caracara plancus*) and wood stork (*Mycteria americana*). The project's proximity to Taylor Creek also provides critical habitat for a variety of wading birds.

There are two documented historic features within the project: the Williamson Canal System (OB00290) and the Okeechobee Railroad Grade (OB00289). These features record the historic uses of the property and how it is important to the broader culture of Okeechobee County. There are possibly additional unrecorded historic sites on the Williamson Cattle Company project because only a portion of the property has been professionally surveyed.



The Williamson Cattle Company project is a working cattle ranch, horse farm and citrus grove. As such, much of the property is comprised of improved and semi-improved pasture.

#### FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<b><u>FNAI Elements</u></b>	<b><u>Score</u></b>
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
<i>pine pinweed</i>	G2/S2
Wood stork	G4/S2
Crested caracara	G5/S2
Bald eagle	G5/S3
Southeastern fox squirrel	G5T5/S3

#### Public Use

The Williamson Cattle Company project is proposed for less-than-fee acquisition and does not provide for public access. Due to the lack of public access, there will not be any public resource-based outdoor recreation potential for the project.

#### Acquisition Planning

##### **2023**

On April 14, 2023, the Acquisition and Restoration Council voted to add Williamson Cattle Company to the Less-Than-Fee category of the 2024 Florida Forever Priority List.

#### Coordination

This project was proposed by the Florida Conservation Group and Common Ground Ecology. The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan is a potential partner in acquisition.

#### Management Policy Statement

As a less-than-fee acquisition, the Williamson Cattle Company project would be managed for conservation purposes by the landowner as outlined in the conservation easement.

#### Manager

If acquired as less-than-fee, management of the property would remain with the landowner. Periodic monitoring of the site's management to confirm 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

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



