

# Caloosahatchee Ecoscape

Critical Natural Lands

Glades and Hendry Counties

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	<i>1998</i>
<i>Project Acres</i>	<i>19,775</i>
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	<i>12,531</i>
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	<i>7,244</i>
<i>2025 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	<i>\$54,559,572</i>

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Caloosahatchee Ecoscape project will provide a large landscape link within the citrus groves and cattle ranches of rural Hendry County. The project includes critical habitat within the primary dispersal zone for the Florida panther (*Puma concolor coryi*) and will preserve a connection of natural land between the Okaloacoochee Slough to the south and additional private and public conservation land to the north that is under increasing threat of development.

## General Description

The project area contains wet prairies, cypress basin, dome swamp, mesic flatwoods, wet flatwoods, depressional marshes and scrub. Most of the properties' natural communities have been impacted by clearing and drainage from improved pasture development or farming. However, the project still provides important habitat for a variety of listed wildlife species. Most of the land is within the Barron Water Control District, and canals within the project area have altered the natural hydrology to the point where no significant natural water resources remain. Eleven archaeological sites are known from the project area, some with material dating back to the Archaic period.

---



Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) Element Occurrence Summary

<b><u>FNAI Elements</u></b>	<b><u>Score</u></b>
Florida panther	G5T1/S1
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
Florida scrub-jay	G2/S2
Swallow-tailed kite	G5/S2
Big cypress fox squirrel	G5T2/S2
Florida sandhill crane	G5T2/S2
Crested caracara	G5/S2
Bald eagle	G5/S3
Little blue heron	G5/S4
Tricolored heron	G5/S4

**Public Use**

This project qualifies as a wildlife management area with uses such as hunting, hiking, camping, picnicking and other resource-based recreation activities.

**Acquisition Planning**

**1998**

The initial proposal is 16,055 acres. The three largest ownerships, IMC Agrico, Floriland Dairy (Milicevic) and Atlantic Gulf Communities, are designated essential. The owners of the Floriland Dairy tract (Milicevic) have indicated they would consider negotiating a less-than-fee sale.

**1999**

On March 26, 1999, the Land Acquisition Advisory Council added 2,400 acres to the project.

**2002**

In 2002, a 2,994-acre conservation easement was placed on the LaBelle Ranch for \$2,320,700.

**2003**

In 2003, 161 acres of land were acquired fee simple by the state for \$290,000.

**2006**

On May 30, 2006, the South Florida Water Management District established the Verandah West conservation easement (304.78 acres).

**2008**

On June 13, 2008, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) moved the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape project to the A List of Florida Forever projects to expedite acquisition.





## **2009**

On November 4, 2009, the 1,292-acre Panther Passage Conservation Bank conservation easement was purchased and managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC).

## **2010**

On April 28, 2010, Florida Panther Conservation Bank Endowment Fund Trust established the Florida Panther Conservation Bank II conservation easement (472.44 acres).

## **2011**

On December 9, 2011, ARC placed this project in the Critical Natural Lands category.

## **2012**

On May 16, 2012, the U.S. Department of Agriculture established a 718-acre conservation easement as part of its Natural Resources Conservation Service Wetlands Reserve Program.

On May 17, 2012, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) established two Lone Ranger Ranch conservation easements totaling 538.46 acres.

## **2013**

On June 28, 2013, TNC established an additional Lone Ranger Ranch conservation easement (20.16 acres).

## **2015**

On May 21, 2015, TNC established the Black Boar Ranch conservation easement (1,527.83 acres).

## **2020**

On June 12, 2020, ARC approved the Amtel Farms addition of 2,207 acres in Glades and Hendry counties to the project boundary.

On December 11, 2020, ARC approved the removal of 2,213 acres in Glades and Hendry counties from the project boundary at the request of the owner (Amtel Farms).

## **2022**

On October 14, 2022, ARC approved the Goodno Ranch (1,185 acres) project proposal and added it to the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape project boundary.





## 2024

In May 2024, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) acquired a 1,130.59-acre conservation easement in Glades County from Dwayne A. House Revocable Trust, an 836.31-acre conservation easement in Glades County from Dwayne A. House Revocable Trust and a 1,428.3-acre conservation easement in Hendry County from Ferguson-House Farms Inc.

## 2025

In June 2025, ARC approved the addition of two parcels totaling approximately 151 acres in Hendry County to the project boundary.

### Coordination

TNC is considered an acquisition partner.

### Management Policy Statement

The project area has been highly impacted by timbering and other clearing for farming and grazing. Management goals include the restoration and maintenance of native plant and animal communities to the extent feasible and the provision of compatible, nature-based recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, camping, hiking and nature study.

For less-than-fee acquisitions, the property would be managed by the landowner as outlined in the conservation easement.

### Manager(s)

FWC is the managing agency for this project.

If the property is acquired less-than-fee, management responsibility 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 DEP's Division of State Lands.

### Management Prospectus

#### **Qualifications for State Designation**

The project will provide refuge for imperiled species like the Florida panther, Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*), sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis*), wood stork (*Mycteria americana*) and crested caracara (*Caracara plancus*). The project is also within an area where the FWC has conducted significant panther and bear research. Additionally, it will protect habitat for game species and provide natural recreation opportunities for the public.





**Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management**

Hydrologic manipulation and conversion of native range to improved pastures will require habitat restoration. Urbanization within and adjacent to the proposed project boundary will require that any large-scale controlled burning efforts be coordinated between appropriate state and federal agencies and the local affected residents.

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

During the first year after acquisition, posting the boundary, erecting entrance signs and resource inventory will be a priority. A conceptual management plan will also be written. Location and control of exotic plant species will be ongoing. The long-term management goals shall be to restore and maintain native plant and animal communities to the extent feasible, with a secondary goal of providing compatible nature-based recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, camping, hiking and nature study. Establishment of access and other facilities necessary for approved nature-based recreational activities will be developed as funding permits.

**Revenue-generating Potential**

This property has historically provided timber and cattle production. Potential revenue sources may include hunting, fishing, ecotourism, cattle grazing and sustainable timber production.

**Cooperators in Management Activities**

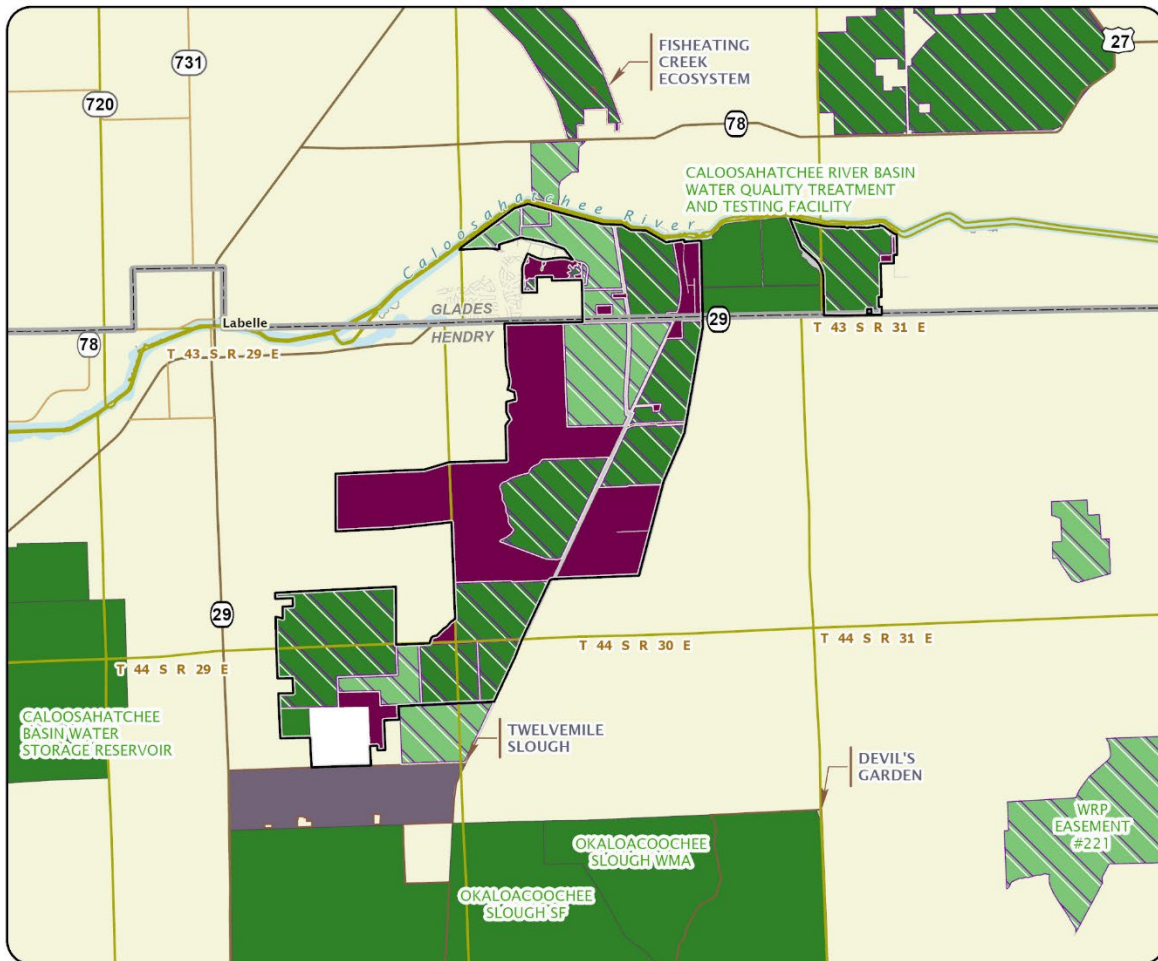
FWC will cooperate with other federal, state and local governmental agencies and non-profit organizations in managing the area. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers presently maintains a campground and the locks at Ortona, along the northeastern corner of the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape project boundary.

Management Cost Summary

FWC	Startup	Recurring
Source of Funds and State Game Trust Fund	Land Acquisition Trust Fund	
Salary	\$136,392	\$140,483
OPS Expense	\$7,912	\$8,149
OCO	\$49,730	\$49,730
FCO	\$81,527	\$1,000
TOTAL	\$0	\$0
	\$275,561	\$199,362

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted





### CALOOSAHATCHEE ECOSCAPE

#### GLADES AND HENDRY COUNTIES

-  Florida Forever Project Boundary
-  Essential Parcels Remaining
-  Other Florida Forever Projects
-  State Conservation Lands
-  Other Conservation Lands
-  Other Public Lands
-  Less-Than-Fee Acquisition

