

# Catfish Creek

Substantially Complete

Polk County

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	<i>1990</i>
<i>Project Acres</i>	<i>20,052</i>
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	<i>17,064</i>
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	<i>2,988</i>
<i>2025 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	<i>\$21,737,030</i>

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Catfish Creek project will conserve a significant portion of the Lake Wales Ridge and a segment of the Lake Pierce shoreline and protect rare Florida scrub that is habitat for many endemic plant and animal species found nowhere else in the world. The project will allow the public to enjoy recreational opportunities compatible with the special habitat and protect an important archaeological site on Lake Pierce.

## General Description

Catfish Creek is a diverse natural area extending over high scrub ridges that are interspersed with lakes and next to the pristine shore of Lake Pierce. Natural communities include sandhill, scrub, scrubby flatwoods, mesic flatwoods, xeric hammock, bottomland hardwood forest, basin swamp, sandhill upland lake, wet flatwoods, blackwater stream, seepage slopes and floodplain swamp. The project harbors at least 19 rare species that are state listed as endangered or threatened. Rare or endangered animal species include the wood stork (*Mycteria americana*), gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) and Florida scrub-jay (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*). Additionally, the 1993 addition on Snodgrass Island contains a potentially important archaeological site. Currently, the project is threatened by agriculture and residential development.

The Davis and Ingram Ranches addition to the project in 2025 contains two contiguous ownerships proposed for fee simple acquisition to be managed by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) as an addition to Allen Broussard Catfish Creek Preserve State Park. The property is located 10 miles northeast of Lake Wales, just north of Lake Pierce at an interface between extensive conservation lands associated with the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes and an agricultural landscape east of the Lake Wales Ridge under high development pressure. The project area is located within Priority 2 of the Florida





Ecological Greenways Network and the Avon Park Air Force Range Sentinel Landscape. A notable natural feature is the complex of wetlands associated with Lake Pierce. Documented species include the Florida panther (*Puma concolor coryi*) and species observed during the site visit include the federally endangered pygmy fringetree (*Chionanthus pygmaeus*) and state endangered scrub buckwheat (*Eriogonum floridanum*). The Ingram Ranch Site (PO10677) may be related to the nearby and significant Snodgrass Island Site (PO3866), an important precontact archaeological site spanning multiple culture periods.

Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) Element Occurrence Summary

<b><u>FNAI Elements</u></b>	<b><u>Score</u></b>
Florida scrub-jay	G2/S2
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
Blue calamintha bee	G1/S1
Morris' tiny sand-loving scarab	G1/S1
Archbold bess beetle	G1G2/S1S2
Archbold cebrionid beetle	G1G2/S1S2
Tough buckthorn bee	G1G2/S1S2
<i>Florida blazing star*</i>	G2/S2
<i>Lewton's polygala*</i>	G2/S2
<i>Pygmy fringe tree*</i>	G2/S2
<i>Scrub buckwheat*</i>	G4T2?/S2?

*\*Plant species are in italics*

**Public Use**

The project is designated for use as a state preserve, with such uses as hiking, camping, fishing and nature study. The Florida National Scenic Trail, a cross-Florida hiking and non-motorized trail, is also planned to cross the project. The Davis and Ingram Ranches addition is proposed for fee simple acquisition to be managed by the Division of Recreation and Parks as an addition to Allen Broussard Catfish Creek Preserve State Park.

**Acquisition Planning**

**Phases**

Phase I (essential): Rolling Meadows (acquired), The Nature Conservancy (TNC) (acquired) and Palo Alto (acquired); Phase II: Imagination Farms, Progress Homes (acquired) and K-Rocker; Phase III: Section two, which is subdivided (state has acquired all of section consolidated by Bowen).

**1992**

In 1992, TNC acquired 68 acres in the project.





### **1993**

On November 11, 1993, the Land Acquisition Advisory Council added 13 acres to the project boundary.

### **1999**

On October 21, 1999, the Land Acquisition and Management Advisory Council added 6,991 acres that were designated as essential to the project boundary.

### **2002**

On August 15, 2002, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) added the Rolling Meadows Ranch (2,045 acres) to the project boundary.

On December 5, 2002, ARC added the K-Rocker Tract (3,170 acres) to the project boundary.

### **2003**

On December 5, 2003, ARC moved the project to Group B of the Florida Forever Priority List.

### **2007**

TNC donated 68 acres (which were acquired in 1992) to the state.

### **2008**

On November 25, 2008, TNC and Hatchineha Ranch, LLC acquired Hatchineha Ranch (2,057 acres).

### **2011**

On December 9, 2011, ARC moved the project to the Partnerships and Regional Incentives category.

### **2012**

On January 18, 2012, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area with a 10-acre donation of Hatchineha Ranch from TNC.

### **2015**

In February 2015, the United States of America purchased 1,097.2 acres in the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area from TNC.

### **2016**

On December 21, 2016, the United States of America acquired Hatchineha Ranch Conservation Bank (351.03 acres) conservation easement in the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife





Refuge and Conservation Area, to be managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

### **2023**

In October 2023, ARC removed approximately 44 acres from the project boundary that were deemed unsuitable for state acquisition.

### **2025**

On September 18, 2025, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection acquired, in fee, 74.44 acres in Polk County from the Florida Future Farmers of America (FFA) Foundation, Inc.

On October 10, 2025, ARC approved the addition of the Davis and Ingram Ranches project (603.6 acres) in Polk County to the project boundary.

The Catfish Creek Florida Forever project is more than 85 percent complete and was moved into the Substantially Complete Category in preparation for project ranking at the December 2025 ARC meeting.

### Coordination

TNC sponsored the project, assisted in the preparation of the project and held discussions with some of the major landowners. TNC and the South Florida Water Management District are considered acquisition partners for the project. Polk County could be a potential source of funding for the Davis and Ingram Ranches addition, should there be joint acquisition of the property.

### Management Policy Statement

The primary management goals of the Catfish Creek project are conserving and protecting environmentally unique and irreplaceable lands that contain native, relatively unaltered flora and fauna representing a natural area unique to, or scarce within, a region of the state or a larger geographic area. Also, the project can conserve and protect significant habitat for native or imperiled species, provide recreational opportunities and preserve significant archaeological or historical sites.

### Manager(s)

The DRP will manage the project (except the portion known as Snodgrass Island).

### Management Prospectus

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

The sensitive resources in the Catfish Creek project like sandhills, a large lake and high-quality scrub with its rare species qualify it as a state preserve. Florida state parks must represent aspects of Florida's natural landscape and cultural inheritance. Additionally, a broad goal of the





DRP is to achieve connectivity between existing parklands and other conservation lands across the state of Florida. Davis-Ingram Ranch lies wholly within the Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem, a globally imperiled ecoregion known for its exceptional biodiversity and high rates of endemism. Davis-Ingram Ranch connects multiple state and private conservation areas, including the Catfish Creek Florida Forever BOT Project, the Florida FFA Leadership Training Center (another acquisition currently under consideration) and the Creek Ranch Florida Forever acquisition. The site borders state managed land on Lake Pierce and lies near Snodgrass Island, providing valuable ecological continuity for aquatic and terrestrial systems.

Various ecological features of Davis-Ingram Ranch support a diversity of flora and fauna, also providing essential natural services such as wetland and aquifer recharge. Its position within multiple overlapping conservation priority zones — paired with its intact habitats, wetland systems and strategic location — make it uniquely well suited to support landscape-scale conservation in one of the most ecologically significant regions of Central Florida where tourism demand and high rate of urban/suburban growth support the proposed expansion of an existing state park.

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

The project is a low-need management area emphasizing resource protection while allowing compatible public recreational use and development. Davis-Ingram Ranch is partially in pasture-ranchland condition. Although wiregrass and longleaf pine occur sporadically throughout the uplands, native groundcover is lacking across portions where cattle grazing has occurred. Few invasives were observed at the time of the site visit, but the presence of various invasive grasses or vines is anticipated. Among the few invasives that were observed is bamboo, but the extent of bamboo growth is modest. Remnant agricultural/viticultural crops are present, which will be addressed with conversion to conservation.

Pasture grasses are widely present across the cleared landscapes. Over longer management periods — with strategic evaluation — cleared areas will be restored to native upland community types, particularly sandhill. Similar sandhill restoration projects have been undertaken by the DRP on Catfish Creek Preserve, such that the DRP is prepared for the groundcover analysis and implementation logistics. Specific restoration objectives would be outlined in a unit management plan, plausibly including actions such as mechanical treatment of forested areas, longleaf planting and reintroduction of fire.

Longleaf and wiregrass planting objectives are anticipated in conjunction with a prescribed fire regimen. Presently, remnant wiregrass has not been observed on Davis-Ingram Ranch, but the soil types will be favorable for reintroduction.





The scale of this potential acquisition, relative isolation from residential developments and the presence of natural water bodies (e.g., Lake Pierce and other small sandhill lakes) are anticipated to be conducive to restoring the fire regime. Conversely, if Davis-Ingram Ranch is not acquired for conservation, then the fire program on the existing acreage of Catfish Creek Preserve would be constrained.

More advanced resource management or restoration initiatives may be contingent upon additional acquisitions such as the adjacent Bowen Ranch that would enable hydrological restoration across a broader landscape (i.e., not distributing water to private lands).

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

Within the first year after acquisition, management activities will concentrate on site security, natural and cultural resource protection and the development of a plan for long-term public use and resource management. Specific short-term and long-term objectives would be the product of a resource management and land use planning process. Analogous experience and data from restoration sites on Catfish Creek Preserve would be applied.

Being integrated with a preserve unit, Davis-Ingram Ranch would not be planned for high or intensive visitor use. Sensitive floristic attributes and imperiled species habitat would be prioritized, such that visitor access would be facilitated by way of trailheads, moderate to long distance hiking (and potentially equestrianism) and passive interpretive experiences. Additionally, proximity to significant cultural sites warrants further minimization of direct visitor access in some portions of this potential acquisition to protect any vulnerable artifacts.

Given that under 4% of the Lake Wales Ridge remains in natural condition, preservation will be a priority, consistent with the preserve classification of Catfish Creek Preserve with which the acquisition will be integrated. A major ecological benefit of the project, consistent with the preserve classification, is aquifer recharge. Accordingly, native groundcover restoration supports maximum aquifer recharge and minimization of impervious surfaces. Accordingly, roads, parking areas and structures may not be compatible with much of the subject uplands.

Trails that may traverse Davis-Ingram Ranch would most likely be linked to existing trails on Catfish Creek Preserve where existing trailheads were serve as the point of access. Consistent with preservation and restoration priorities, new use areas are not anticipated.

Fencing, gates and park boundary signage would be placed to guide appropriate access and for general security. Based on current information, no structures exist on Davis-Ingram Ranch that require protection.





### **Revenue-generating Potential**

No significant revenue is expected to be generated initially. After acquisition, it will probably be several years before any significant public use facilities are developed. The amount of any revenue generated will depend on the nature and extent of public use and facilities. With emphasis on resource protection — and with minimal public use — future generated revenues are not expected to be high. During early phases of the Davis and Ingram Ranches addition, modest timber removal could generate revenue to fund further restoration activities; however, most of the acreage has been operated as pasture. Limited ongoing cattle grazing could be considered if it contributes to an invasive plant removal/maintenance regimen, which would yield modest revenue for further resource management.

Generating revenue from visitation would most likely be low as the acquisition would be part of a preserve unit where most of the revenue-generating potential is concentrated in other areas. Additional visitation to Catfish Creek Preserve would be anticipated as the new acreage would offer expanded hiking or riding opportunities. Indirectly, this acquisition would support revenue generation by ensuring that the core of the preserve remains unaffected by suburban growth (i.e., the preserve will continue to be an attractive destination for largescale natural scenery).

### **Potential Multiple-Use Activities**

If managed by DRP, multiple-use would not be applicable to the Davis-Ingram Ranch as DRP functions as a single-use land manager. Limited cattle grazing leases and/or removal of pine and hardwood may generate revenue only for the purposes of ongoing habitat restoration at this site.

### **Cooperators in Management Activities**

For the purposes of restoring a portion of the Lake Wales Ridge ecosystem, DRP may partner with certain state and federal agencies as well as environmental non-profit organizations such as Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (especially for imperiled species reintroductions) and TNC. Bok Tower Gardens is a standing partner in botanical research and plantings and would likely offer cooperation on natural community restoration and enhancement on Davis-Ingram Ranch.





### Management Cost Summary

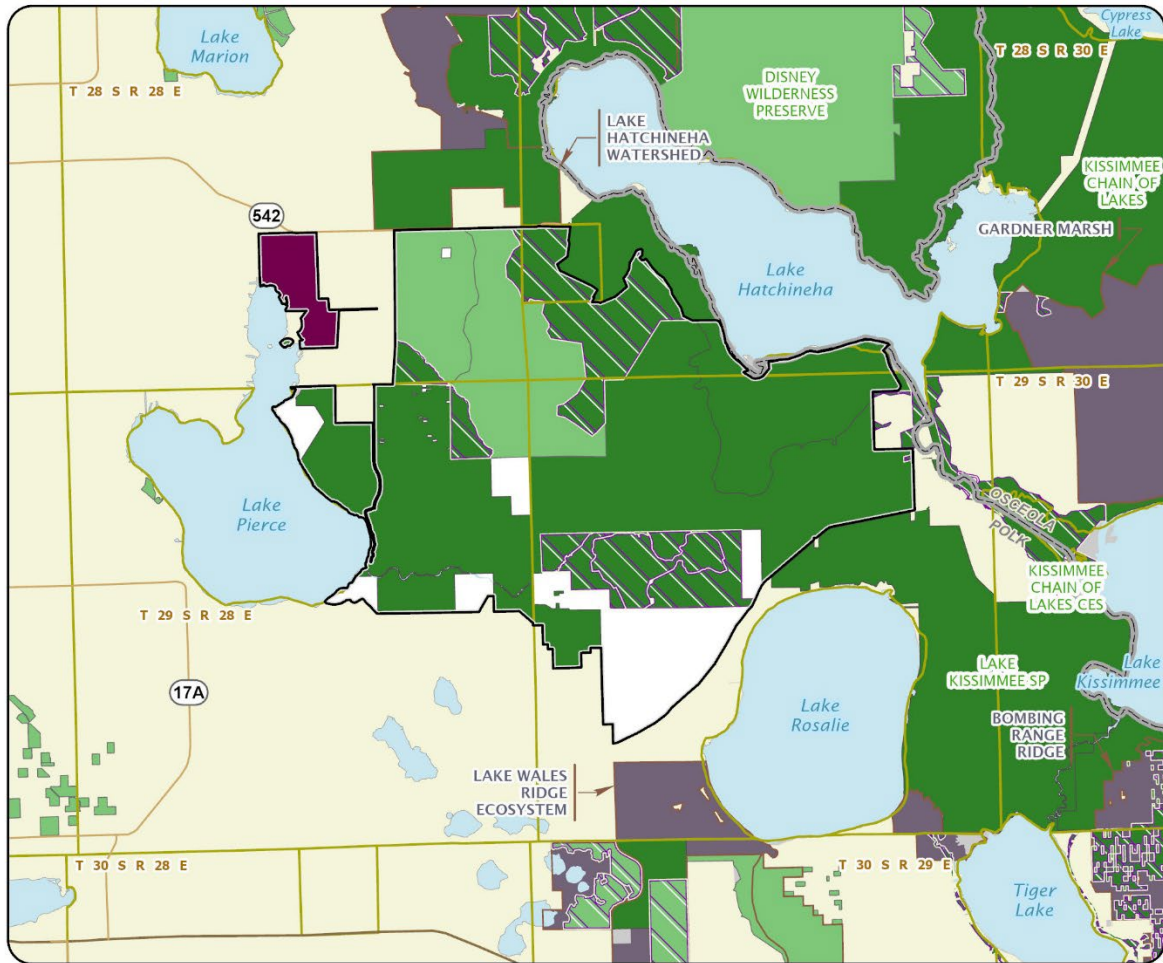
<u>DRP — Overall project</u>		<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Source of Funds	Conservation and Recreational Lands (CARL) Program		Not Provided
Salary		\$22,167	Not Provided
OPS		\$0	Not Provided
Expense		\$5,712	Not Provided
OCO		\$6,978	Not Provided
FCO		\$8,640	Not Provided
TOTAL		\$43,497	Not Provided

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted

<u>DRP — Davis and Ingram Ranches Addition</u>		<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Source of Funds	Florida Forever, legislative appropriation, etc.		""
Salary		Not Provided	Not Provided
OPS (1)		\$35,000	\$35,000
Resource Management		\$400,000	\$50,000
TOTAL		\$435,000	\$85,000

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted





### CATFISH CREEK

#### POLK COUNTY

