

Heartland Wildlife Corridor

Less-Than-Fee

Hardee and Highlands Counties

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2022
<i>Project Acres</i>	10,735
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	6,471
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	4,264
<i>2025 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$32,622,782

Purpose for State Acquisition

The Heartland Wildlife Corridor project will create a contiguous landscape of working lands and conservation areas to provide a critical wildlife corridor along the western edge of Lake Wales Ridge. The project will protect a mix of open rangeland, wetlands, forests, hammocks, and prairie that provide valuable habitat for wildlife and important water quality protection for the Peace River, Charlotte Harbor, Fisheating Creek and Lake Okeechobee.

General Description

The Heartland Wildlife Corridor project is proposed as a less-than-fee acquisition containing over 60 parcels, owned by multiple landowners. The project is located along the Hardee-Highlands County border, south of State Road 66. Almost all the properties included in the project are working cattle ranches, except one property that is a wholesale plant nursery.

The project area contains mostly pasture and altered landcovers. The most abundant natural community in the project is mesic hammock. Depression marshes occur throughout the project area, often found in the pastures, and occasionally embedded within flatwoods. Mesic flatwoods within the project vary significantly in their condition and management. In several locations, active management through fire, mowing and/or chopping has allowed a relatively complete assemblage of native plants to persist, including dense wiregrass in some areas. Wetland communities include hydric hammock and occasional basin swamps. A small, ditched blackwater stream found on Dark Hammock Ranch forms the headwaters of Fisheating Creek.

This assemblage of properties along with existing conservation lands provides a vital ecological corridor along the western edge of Lake Wales Ridge to support several imperiled species. Most of the proposed project area falls within Priority 1 of the Florida Ecological Greenways Network.





Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Florida panther	G5T1/S1
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Swallow-tailed kite	G5/S2
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
Florida sandhill crane	G5T2/S2
<i>Cutthroatgrass*</i>	G3/S3
Crested caracara	G5/S2
Southeastern American kestrel	G5T4/S3
Southeastern fox squirrel	G5T5/S3
<i>*Plant species are in italics</i>	

Public Use

The Heartland Wildlife Corridor project is proposed for less-than-fee acquisition with no public access.

Acquisition Planning

2022

On October 14, 2022, the Acquisition and Restoration Council voted to add the Heartland Wildlife Corridor project to the 2023 Florida Forever Priority List.

2024

In April 2024, the Acquisition and Restoration Council approved the addition of two parcels totaling approximately 195.2 acres in Hardee County.

In September 2024, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) acquired a 226.95-acre conservation easement in Highlands County from Rocking Cross Ranch Inc., a 195.3-acre conservation easement in Hardee County from Rocking Cross Ranch, Inc, and a 467.16-acre conservation easement in Highlands County from Skipper Cattle Corp.

On October 30, 2024, DEP acquired a 1,987.09-acre conservation easement in Highlands County from Dark Hammock Legacy Ranch, LLC.

On November 1, 2024, the Acquisition and Restoration Council approved the addition of the Highlands Hammock Corridor project proposal (960 acres) in Highlands County to the project boundary.





2025

On January 8, 2025, DEP acquired a 593.26-acre conservation easement in Highlands County from Cracker Hammock LLC.

On February 19, 2025, DEP acquired a 192.73-acre conservation easement in Hardee County from Jane M. Stevens and Charles R. Stevens Jr.

On May 29, 2025, DEP acquired a 123.82-acre conservation easement in Highlands County from Circle 9 Ranch LLC.

Management Policy Statement

As a less-than-fee acquisition, the Heartland Wildlife Corridor project would be managed by the landowner as outlined in the conservation easement.

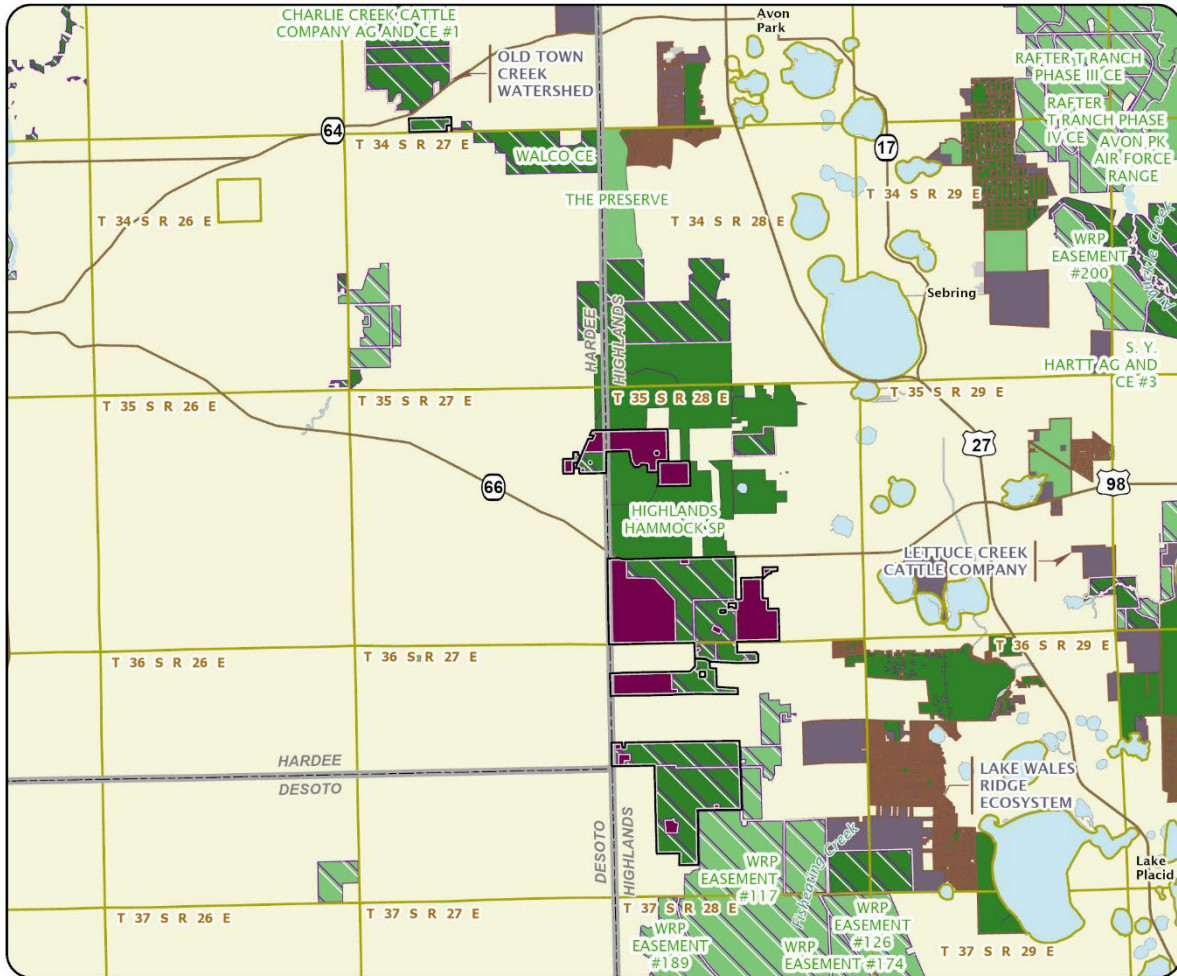
Manager(s)

If acquired as less-than-fee, management responsibility of the Heartland Wildlife Corridor project would remain with the landowner. Periodic monitoring to confirm continued conservation easement compliance would be coordinated by DEP's 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.





HEARTLAND WILDLIFE CORRIDOR

HARDEE AND HIGHLANDS COUNTIES

