

Longleaf Pine Ecosystem

Critical Natural Lands

Gilchrist, Hamilton, Marion and Volusia Counties

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	<i>1993</i>
<i>Project Acres</i>	<i>22,994</i>
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	<i>15,084</i>
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	<i>7,910</i>
<i>2025 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	<i>\$127,189,322</i>

Purpose for State Acquisition

The purpose of the Longleaf Pine Ecosystem project is to conserve the largest and highest quality fragments of old-growth longleaf pine sandhills; one of Florida's most distinctive and endangered forest types. State acquisition will help to ensure the survival of numerous imperiled plant and animal species such as the red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) and provide the public an opportunity to experience the original and increasingly rare Florida sandhill community.

General Description

The original Longleaf Pine Ecosystem project sites (Ross Prairie Sandhill, Ross Prairie Addition, Bell Ridge, Blue Spring Longleaf and Deland Ridge) are some of the highest quality longleaf pine sandhills in Florida. The project will protect a multitude of imperiled species. Archaeological sites are known to occur in the Ross Prairie tract. These sites are vulnerable to logging and fire suppression as well as development.



Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Florida scrub-jay	G2/S2
Eastern indigo snake	G2G3/S2?
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Florida mouse	G3/S3
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
Orange Lake cave crayfish	G1/S1
<i>Longspurred mint*</i>	G2/S2
Short-tailed snake	G2/S2
Equal-clawed gopher tortoise hister beetle	G2/S2
<i>Sand butterfly pea*</i>	G2Q/S2
Gopher tortoise burrow fly	G2/S2S3
Red-cockaded woodpecker	G3/S2
<i>*Plant species are in italics</i>	

Public Use

The project is suitable for state parks, state forest and wildlife management areas, with opportunities for hunting, hiking, horseback riding, camping and nature appreciation. Acquisition would also help complete the Florida National Scenic Trail, a statewide non-motorized trail that crosses several Florida Forever project sites. The trail is a congressionally designated national scenic trail.

Acquisition Planning

1988

On December 15, 1988, Florida Audubon Society received Caraway Lake Sanctuary (15 acres) as a donation, all of which would be in the project boundary when it was created.

1990

On November 15, 1990, Florida Audubon Society received a donation of three parcels (49.3 acres) to expand Caraway Lake Sanctuary, all of which would be in the project boundary when it was created.

1993

On July 23, 1993, Blue Spring Longleaf was added to the project boundary. Deland Ridge (35 acres) was also added to the project boundary.

On November 19, 1993, the Land Acquisition Advisory Council approved the addition of 320 acres to the Ross Prairie Sandhill site.





1998

On December 3, 1998, the Land Acquisition and Management Advisory Council transferred the Deland Ridge and Chassahowitzka Sandhill sites to the Negotiation Impasse group.

In 1998, Florida Audubon Society acquired Clifton Sanctuary (41 acres), of which approximately 10.59 acres are within the project boundary.

1999

On July 29, 1999, the Land Acquisition and Management Advisory Council added the 3,040-acre Ross Prairie Addition project to the project boundary.

On December 9, 1999, the Land Acquisition and Management Advisory Council approved the Bell Ridge project to be added to the project boundary.

2003

On May 29, 2003, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission established the On Top of the World Development of Regional Impact Conservation Area (260.2 acres), of which approximately 207 acres are within the project boundary.

2010

On August 13, 2010, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) approved a 3,612-acre reduction to the project boundary due to residential/commercial/infrastructure disturbances.

2011

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

2012

On July 3, 2012, the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund acquired 5.16 acres in the Ross Prairie area for \$8,000.

2013

On April 19, 2013, ARC approved adding the 986-acre Ellaville Sandhill Tract to the project boundary, bringing the total project acreage to 22,299.

2021

On April 9, 2021, ARC members approved adding the 541-acre Big Pine Preserve project, located in Marion County, to the project boundary.

2023





The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) acquired, in fee, 470 acres in Marion County from Swan-Smilely Preserve, LLC.

2025

In February 2025, ARC removed approximately 1,093 acres from the project boundary that were deemed unsuitable for state acquisition.

Coordination

The Nature Conservancy, the Florida Department of Transportation, Trust for Public Land and Florida Audubon Society are acquisition partners on this project.

Management Policy Statement

The primary management goals of the Longleaf Pine Ecosystem project are to conserve and protect environmentally-unique lands that contain native, relatively-unaltered flora and fauna representing a natural area unique to a region of this state or a larger geographic area; conserve and protect significant habitat for native species or endangered and threatened species; conserve, protect, manage or restore important ecosystems, landscapes and forests; and enhance or protect significant surface water, coastal, recreational, timber, fish or wildlife resources which local or state regulator programs cannot adequately protect.

The primary objective of management of the Bell Ridge Sandhills is to protect and restore the threatened sandhill natural community. A secondary objective is to provide resource-based recreation compatible with protection of the natural and cultural resource values of the project. The site will be managed under the multiple-use concept; management activities will be directed first toward conservation of resources and second toward integrating carefully controlled consumptive uses.

Managers will: control access to the site; thoroughly inventory the resources; restore hydrological disturbances; conduct prescribed burning of fire-dependent communities to mimic natural lightning-season fires, using existing fire lines, natural firebreaks, existing roads or foam lines for control; strictly limit timber harvesting in mature stands; and monitor management activities to ensure that they are conserving resources. Managers will limit the number and size of recreation facilities, ensure that they avoid the most sensitive resources and site them in already disturbed areas when possible. The project includes over 3,000 acres of relatively undisturbed land adjacent to an existing area of conservation lands. It consequently appears to have the size and location to achieve its primary and secondary objective.

The Florida Forest Service (FFS) proposes to manage the project under a multiple-use management regime consistent with the state forest system, and in a manner designed to





accomplish the acquisition goals and measures for this project as approved by ARC. These goals and measures are hereby incorporated by reference. The primary land management goal for FFS is to restore, maintain and protect all native ecosystems in perpetuity; to integrate compatible human use; and to ensure long-term viability of populations and species considered rare. This ecosystem approach will guide FFS management activities on this project.

Manager(s)

FFS will manage the Blue Spring Longleaf, Bell Ridge and Ross Prairie sites; this excludes the sites that are part of the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway and are under an approved management lease to DEP's Division of Recreation and Parks. FFS will manage Bell Ridge under a multiple-use management regime.

Management Prospectus

Qualifications for State Designation

The quality, size and diversity of the pine forests on the Blue Spring Longleaf and Ross Prairie sites make them suitable for state forests. The major community represented on the Bell Ridge site is sandhill. This site is also desirable for use and management as a state forest due to its size and diversity. Management by FFS as a state forest is contingent upon the state acquiring fee-simple title to the entire project and obtaining some level of legal public access to the site, which is likely since the eastern and northern property boundaries are county-maintained graded roads.

Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management

Blue Spring Longleaf Tract

There are no known major disturbances that will require significant attention, so management intensity is expected to be typical for a state forest. However, on Ross Prairie, the construction of an extension of the Florida Turnpike may hinder fire management activities and public access to the forest.

Bell Ridge

There are portions of the parcel that have been disturbed and will require restoration efforts. There is at least one linear facility that bisects the parcel, which will be an area of management concern for monitoring unauthorized uses and introduction of invasive exotic species. The sandhill community is considered imperiled and may be sensitive to certain uses and their intensity. As such, any additional facilities other than those that already exist on the project are considered incompatible with this project.





Residential Developments

Adjacent residential developments pose management concerns associated with prescribed burning, public use, unauthorized uses and other natural resource management activities. Areas that have refuse and debris should be removed prior to closing on the core parcel. There are no other known major disturbances that require attention. The initial level of management intensity and related management cost is expected to be moderately high to establish the project as a state forest. Some existing roads will be used as multi-use trails for hiking, horseback riding and off-road biking.

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

The Blue Spring Longleaf tract and part of the Ross Prairie Sandhills tract have been acquired. FFS is now providing public access to these tracts for low-intensity, non-facilities-related outdoor recreation. Management on the Blue Spring Longleaf tract will concentrate on maintaining the existing open conditions.

On all three tracts, FFS will provide public access. Long-range plans will address restoring disturbed areas, as well as protecting threatened and endangered species. An all-season burning program will use existing roads, black lines, foam lines and natural breaks to contain fires. Timber management will mostly involve improvement thinning and regeneration harvests. Plantations will be thinned and reforested where appropriate. Stands will not have a targeted rotation age. Infrastructure will primarily be in disturbed areas and will be the minimum required for management and public access. FFS will promote environmental education.

There are many roads throughout the property, and as such a road plan will need to be developed to determine those to be used for vehicular use by the public, those that are required for administrative use, and unnecessary access points and roads that should be closed. An inventory of the site's natural resources and threatened and endangered flora and fauna will eventually be conducted to provide a basis for formulation of a management plan. Prior to collection of necessary resource information, management proposals for this project can only be conceptual in nature. Long-range plans for this property will generally be directed toward the restoration of disturbed areas and maintenance of natural communities. To the greatest extent practical, disturbed sites will be restored to conditions that would be expected to occur in naturally functioning ecosystems. Any existing pine plantations will be thinned to achieve a more natural appearance. Off-site species will eventually be replaced with species that would be expected to occur naturally on those specific sites.





Whenever possible, existing roads, black lines, foam lines and natural breaks will be utilized to contain and control prescribed and natural fires. Timber management activities will primarily consist of improvement of thinning and regeneration harvests aimed at maintaining and perpetuating forest ecosystems. Stands will not have a targeted rotation age but will be managed to maintain a broad diversity of age classes ranging from young stands to areas with old growth characteristics. This will provide habitat for the full spectrum of species that would be found in the natural environment and enhance and maintain biodiversity. The resource inventory will be used to identify sensitive areas that need special attention, protection or management, and to locate areas that are appropriate for any recreational or administrative facilities. Recreation and administrative infrastructure development will primarily in already-disturbed areas and will be the absolute minimum required to allow public access for the uses mentioned above, to provide facilities to accommodate public use, and to administer and manage the property. It is anticipated that interpretative and user services recreational facilities will be developed and the use of low impact, rustic facilities will be stressed. High impact, organized recreation areas are not planned because of possible adverse effects on the natural environment. Unnecessary roads, fire lines and hydrological disturbances will be abandoned and/or restored to the greatest extent practical.

Revenue-generating Potential

FFS will sell timber as needed to improve or maintain desirable ecosystem conditions. These sales will provide a variable source of revenue, but the revenue-generating potential for these tracts is expected to be low. It is anticipated that management funding will come from the Conservation and Recreational Lands Trust Fund or its successor.

Cooperators in Management Activities

FFS will cooperate with other state agencies, local government entities and other appropriate groups.

Management Cost Summary

<u>FFS (Bell Ridge)</u>	<u>1995/96</u>	<u>1996/97</u>
Source of Funds	CARL	CARL
Salary	\$31,080	\$41,013
OPS	\$0	\$0
Expense	\$25,505	\$11,302
OCO	\$40,626	\$0
TOTAL	\$97,211	\$52,315

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted



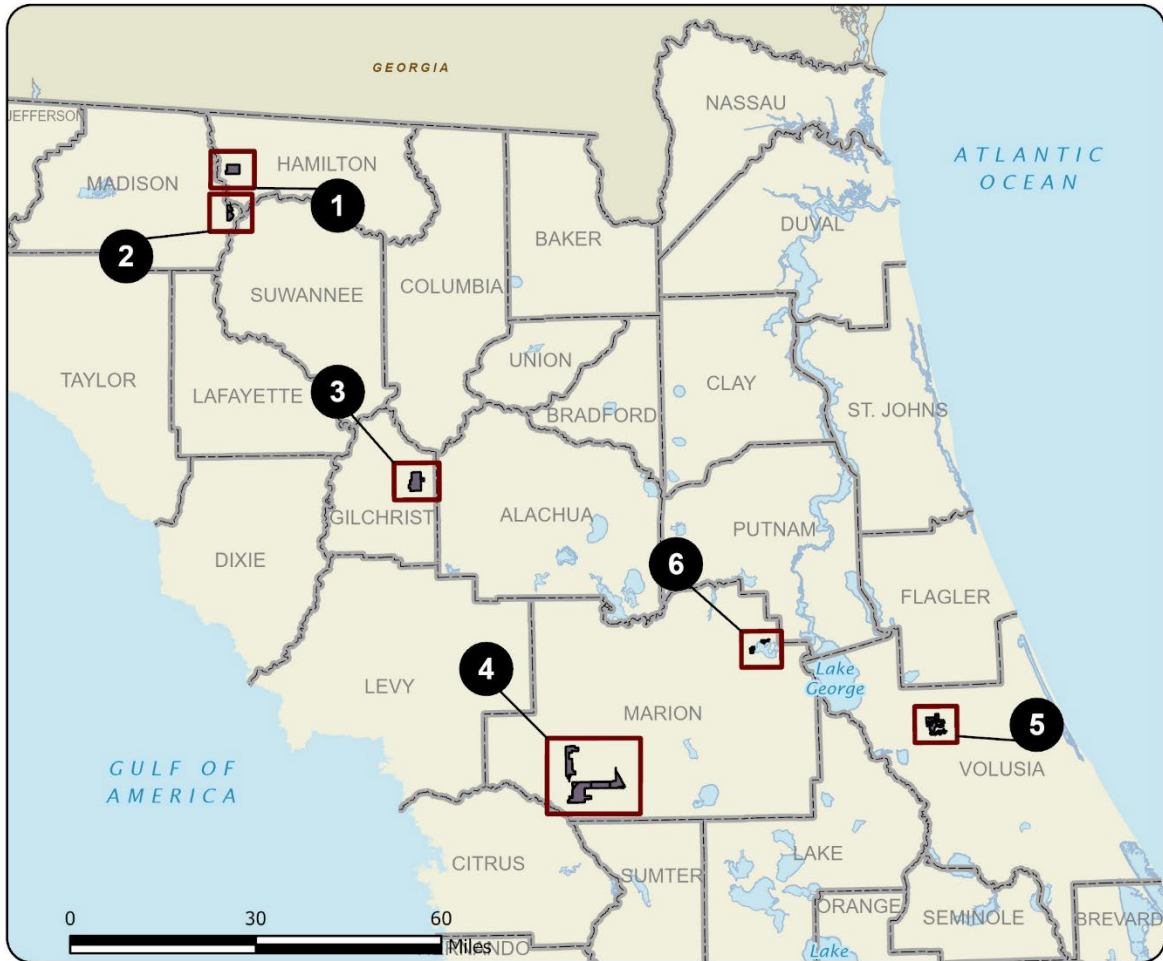


Management Cost Summary

<u>FFS (Deland Ridge)</u>	<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Source of Funds	CARL	CARL
Salary	\$0	\$0
OPS	\$0	\$0
Expense	\$7,000	\$5,000
OCO	\$0	\$0
TOTAL	\$7,000	\$5,000

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted



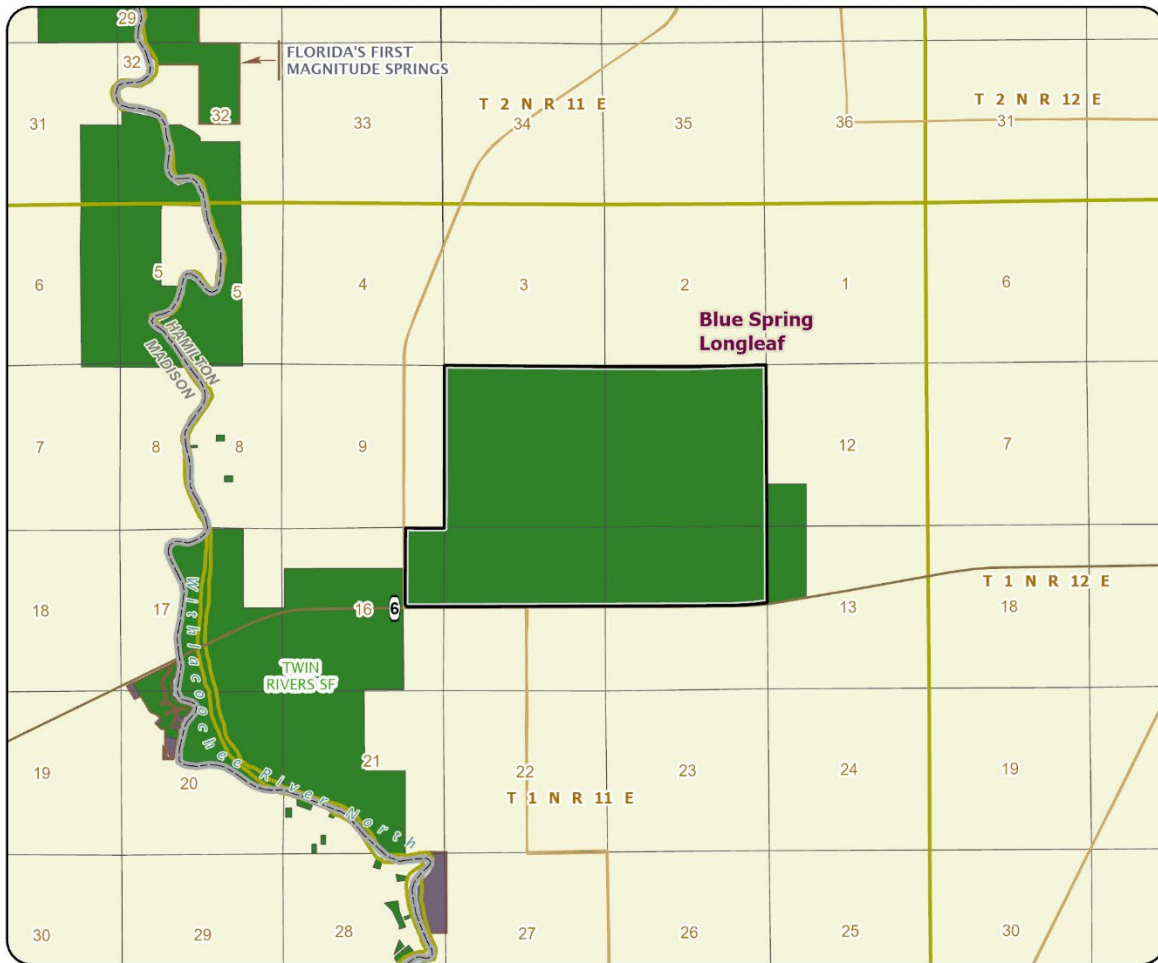


LONGLEAF PINE ECOSYSTEM: OVERVIEW

GILCHRIST, HAMILTON, MADISON, MARION AND VOLUSIA COUNTIES

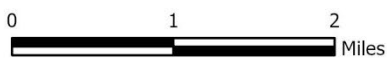
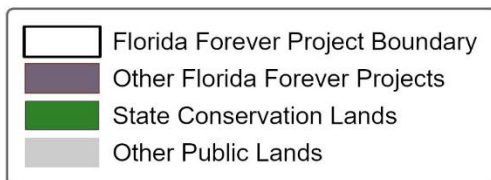
- Map 1 Blue Spring Longleaf Site
- Map 2 Ellaville Sandhill Site
- Map 3 Bell Ridge Sandhills Site
- Map 3 Ross Prairie Sandhills Site
- Map 5 DeLand Ridge Sandhill Site
- Map 6 Big Pine Preserve Site

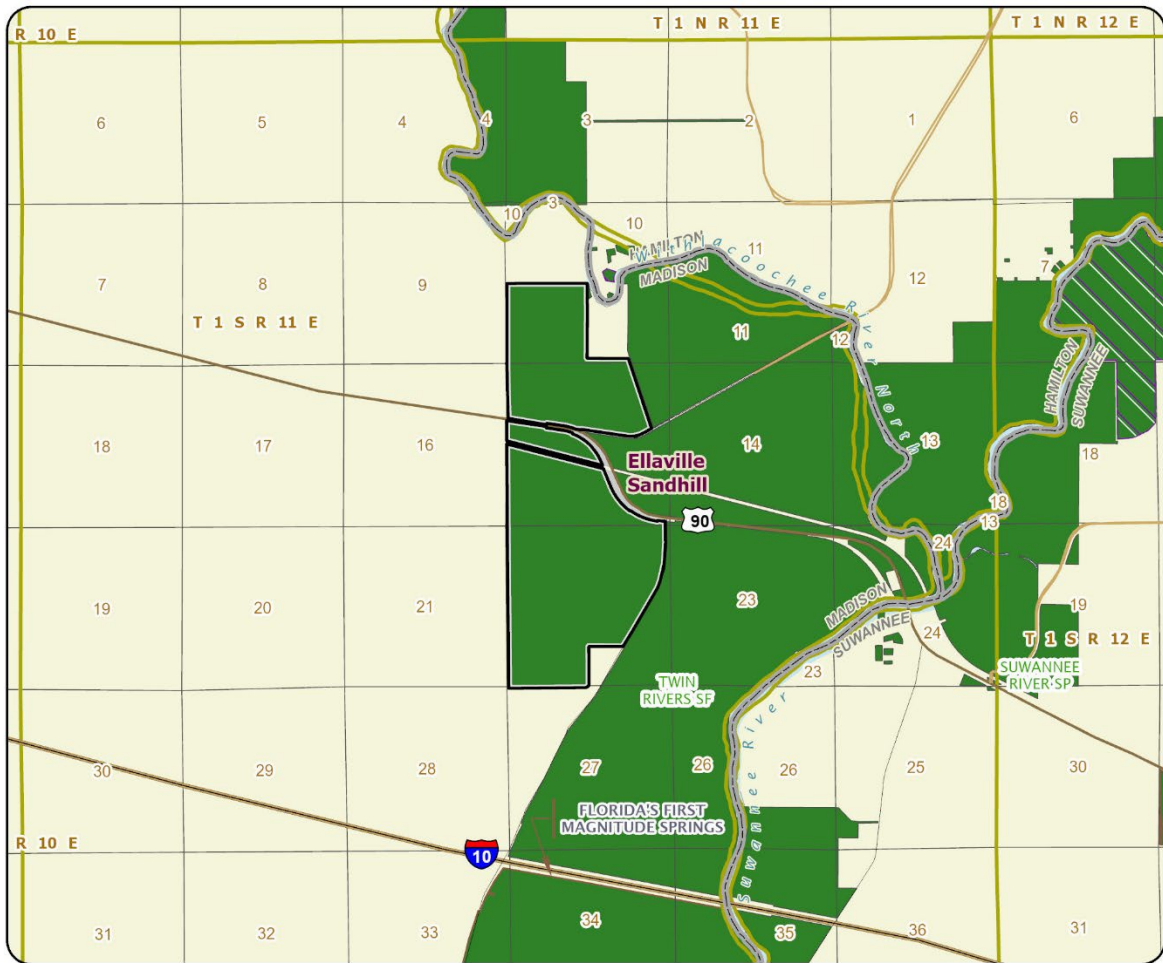




LONGLEAF PINE ECOSYSTEM: MAP 1

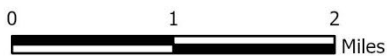
HAMILTON COUNTY

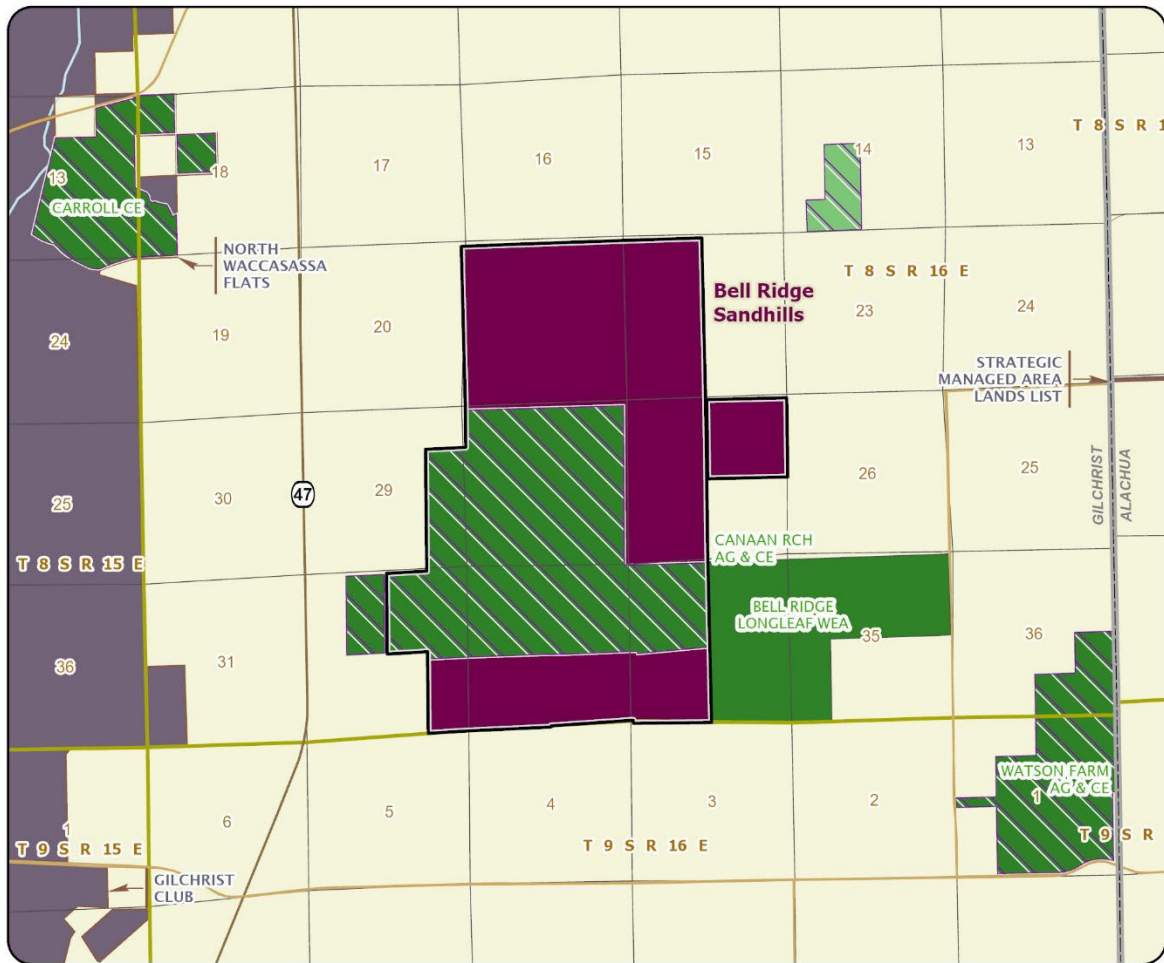




LONGLEAF PINE ECOSYSTEM: MAP 2

MADISON COUNTY

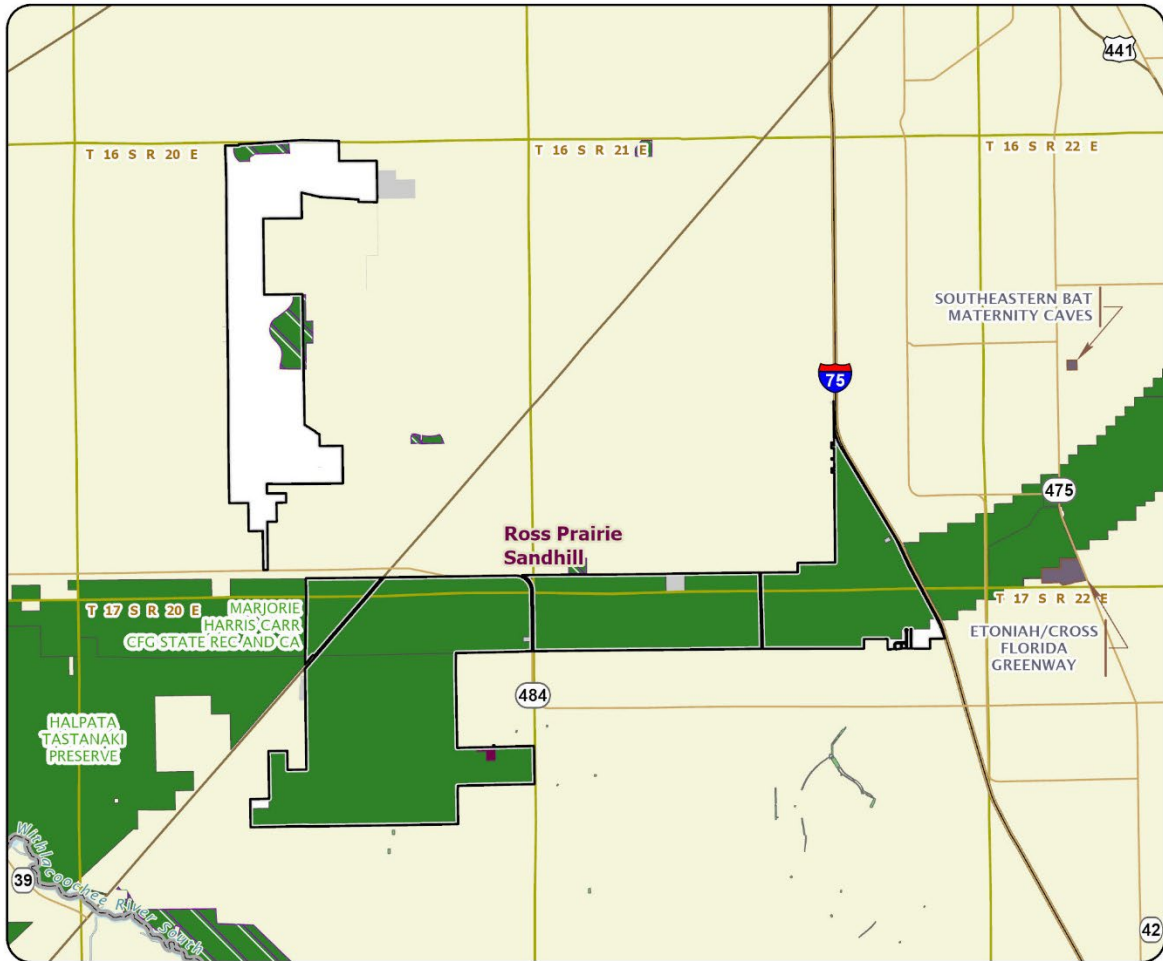




LONGLEAF PINE ECOSYSTEM: MAP 3

GILCHRIST COUNTY

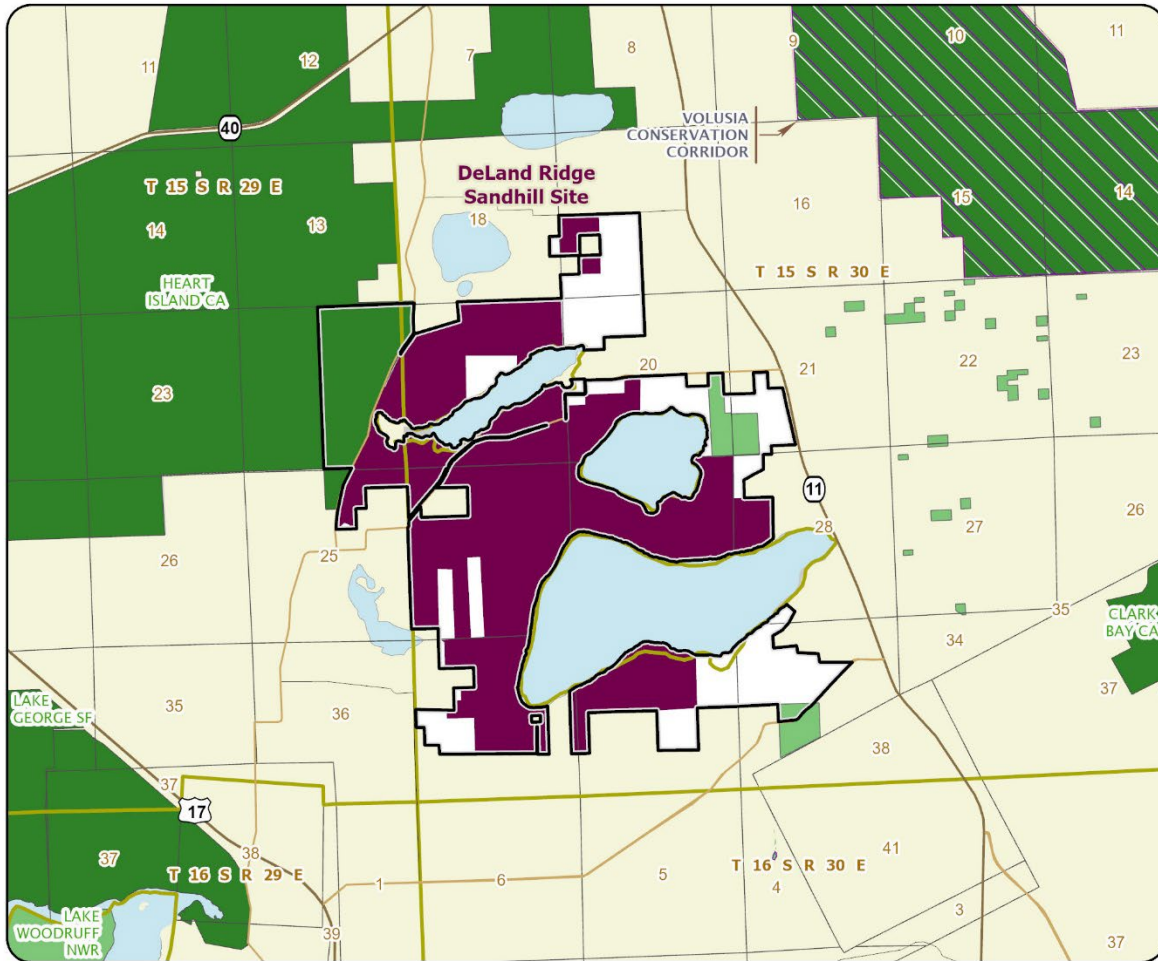




LONGLEAF PINE ECOSYSTEM: MAP 4

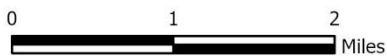
MARION COUNTY

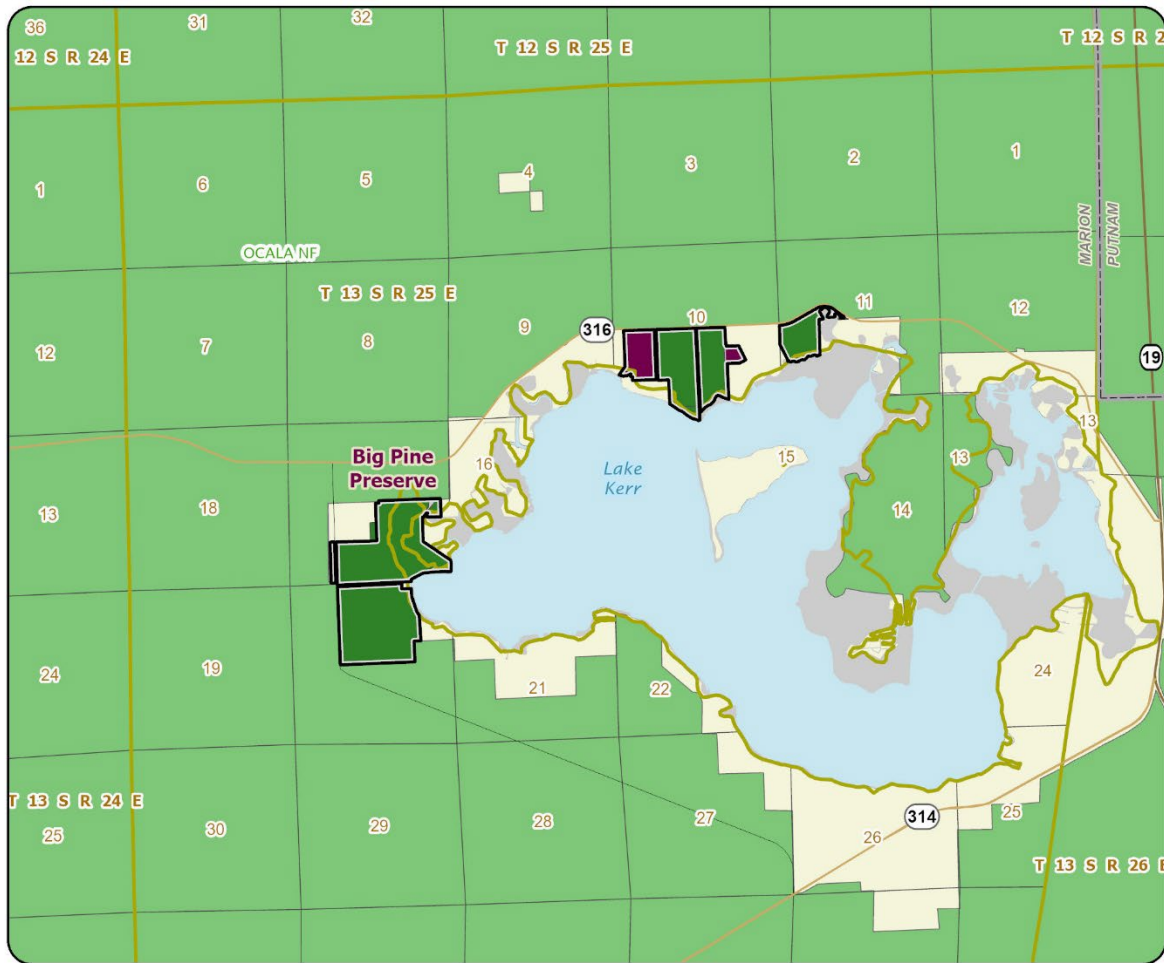




LONGLEAF PINE ECOSYSTEM: MAP 5

VOLUSIA COUNTY





LONGLEAF PINE ECOSYSTEM: MAP 6

MARION COUNTY

