

Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed

Substantially Complete

Dixie and Levy Counties

| | |
|---|--------------|
| <i>Year Added to Priority List</i> | 2010 |
| <i>Project Acres</i> | 60,554 |
| <i>Acquired Acres</i> | 52,928 |
| <i>Remaining Project Acres</i> | 7,626 |
| <i>2025 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i> | \$15,432,115 |

Purpose for State Acquisition

The Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed project will protect and enhance water quality, wetland communities, wildlife habitat and archaeological sites found within the proposal boundary. The project will preserve the natural resources of the Suwannee River and the Gulf of America and provide habitat and natural corridors for rare plants and animals over a wide swath of undeveloped public lands, including the neighboring Big Bend Wildlife Management Area, the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge, water management district conservation areas and the Big Bend Seagrasses Aquatic Preserve.

The Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed project will protect landscapes essential to the protection of water quality and quantity, as well as archaeological and historical resources.

General Description

The Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed project is located adjacent to the Gulf of America in Dixie County between County Road 358 to the north and County Road 349 to the south. While most of the project area is proposed for less-than-fee acquisition, a 10-acre parcel is proposed for fee simple acquisition for ease of access to Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD)-protected California Lake.

The Big Bend Seagrasses Aquatic Preserve encompasses the submerged lands in this region. Hunting leases are in place over much of the property. Timber harvesting will be prohibited in the hardwood and cypress swamps under the easement, as it is in the adjacent California Lake easement. Considering the importance of hardwood and cypress swamps to many wildlife species, this would provide substantial wildlife conservation benefits. The site is also secondary habitat for the Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*).



The site’s vast natural wetlands serve to funnel and filter water from uplands to the Suwannee River and the Gulf of America. The topography of the three westernmost properties gradually slopes downward toward the Gulf, forming numerous stream systems that empty into the marshlands and tidal creeks of the Gulf. About half of the easternmost tract drains westward into the California Creek basin, which eventually empties into the Gulf. Waters on the other half of this tract drain southward, bounded by higher ground along County Road 349, and then eastward to the Suwannee River. A portion of the easternmost tract is within the Fanning/Manatee Springshed.

For the last century, approximately half of the project area has been managed for silviculture. Historically, the site has supported a mosaic of mesic and wet flatwoods, hydric hammocks and swamp, interspersed with many small depression marshes and ponds. Although deep bedding has significantly altered the ground cover, many stands of pines (even recently planted areas) appear to retain good remnant flatwoods vegetation. The property is managed under the guidelines of the Sustainable Forestry Initiative to protect water quality, biodiversity and species at risk.

Hydric hammocks make up the bulk of the natural community acreage on the property. There are several large hammocks in excellent condition with canopies of large hardwood trees. Species composition is typical of good quality hammocks with limestone near the soil surface. Basin and floodplain swamps within the larger hammocks are in excellent condition. Canopy trees are large and dominated by pond cypress, with a mix of hardwoods. Smaller dome swamps are common throughout the pine plantations.

Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) Element Occurrence Summary

| <u>FNAI Elements</u> | <u>Score</u> |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Gopher tortoise | G3/S3 |
| Florida black bear | G5T4/S4 |
| Florida mapleleaf | G2?/S1 |
| Suwannee alligator snapping turtle | G2/S2 |
| Eastern diamondback rattlesnake | G3/S3 |
| Suwannee cooter | G5T3/S3 |
| Pinesnake | G4/S3 |
| Bald eagle | G5/S3 |
| White ibis | G5/S4 |

**Plant species are in italics*

Public Use

The Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed project is proposed for less-than-fee acquisition and does not provide for public access.





Acquisition Planning

2010

On December 10, 2010, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) added the Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed project to the Florida Forever Priority List in the Less-than-Fee category, ranking it as number six of 25 projects considered in that category.

This less-than-fee project was sponsored by The Conservation Fund and SRWMD. It is approximately 46,441 acres in one ownership with a 2010 market value of \$94,249,477. The 10 acres on the SRWMD California Lake conservation easement is for fee simple acquisition.

2011

On December 9, 2011, this project was placed in the Less-than-Fee category.

2015

On October 16, 2015, ARC voted to add the 12,023-acre Otter Sinks project located in Dixie County to the Florida Forever Priority List. ARC then voted to make it an addition to the Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed project.

2016

On September 13, 2016, a conservation easement over 8,075 acres of the Lyme Timber Company was acquired in this project for \$4,178,700. The easement will be managed by SRWMD.

2019

On June 26, 2019, a conservation easement over 19,075 acres of the Lyme Timber Company was acquired in this project for \$2,400,000.

2020

On April 1, 2020, a conservation easement over 5,785 acres of the Lyme Timber Company was acquired in this project for \$2,000,000.

2023

In June of 2023, ARC voted to add one parcel totaling approximately 72 acres in Levy County.

2024

In November 2024, ARC voted to add six parcels totaling approximately 744 acres in Dixie County and nine parcels totaling approximately 494 acres in Dixie County.





In December 2024, ARC voted to add seven parcels totaling approximately 692.65 acres in Levy County.

2025

The Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed project is more than 85 percent complete and was moved into the Substantially Complete Category in preparation for project ranking at the December ARC meeting.

Coordination

SRWMD is a partner in this project. Because SRWMD holds the easement for the California Lake parcel, it may be more appropriate for them to pursue the fee simple acquisition of the 10-acre parcel providing access to California Lake.

Management Policy Statement

As a less-than-fee acquisition, the Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed 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 Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed project would remain with the landowner. Periodic monitoring of the site's management to confirm continued conservation easement compliance would be coordinated by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Division of State Lands.

Management Prospectus

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Division of State Lands will periodically monitor the conservation easement, while the management will be conducted by the property owner.

Qualifications for State Designation

The less-than-fee portion of the Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed project meets Florida Forever measures of using alternatives to fee simple acquisitions, protecting strategic habitats, natural floodplains and significant surface waters. The proposed 10-acre fee simple title site meets Florida Forever measures of protecting Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas, natural floodplains and significant surface waters.

Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management

Half of this property has been managed for silviculture for the last century. Sustainable timber management practices have evolved over the years and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative bolsters conservation practices such as providing for buffers around wetlands. The overall





historic management of the property has been for wood and wood products using sustainable timber management practices. The 10-acre site includes a mixture of natural pine and bottomland hardwood tree species as well as an access road and boat ramp. SRWMD does not expect to harvest timber on the site for commercial purposes but may need to remove underbrush or selected individual trees to maintain a healthy ecosystem. The cost of the monitoring by SRWMD staff could add to the administrative costs of the easement. No sources of revenue are known at this time, nor are there any startup costs involved.

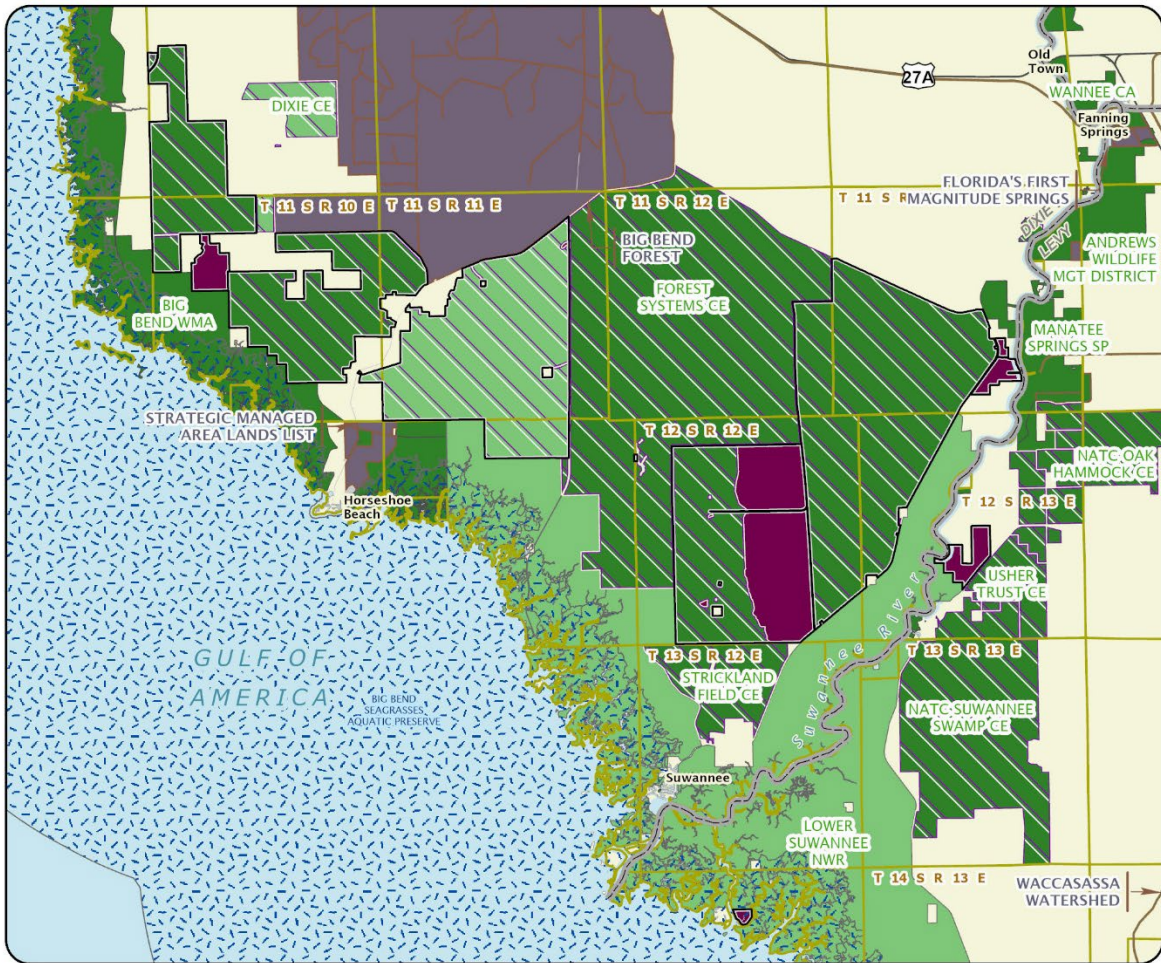
Management Implementation, Public Access, Site Security and Protection of Infrastructure

Management implementation will begin immediately after fee simple title is taken on the 10-acre site to keep the boat ramp available for public use. Other improvements on the 10-acre site will begin within one year. Security will be provided through the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission as well as other existing contractors for the maintenance of infrastructure.

Revenue-generating Potential

This project has no direct revenue-generating potential under a conservation easement, nor is any revenue expected from the fee simple acquisition of the 10-acre site.





LOWER SUWANNEE RIVER AND GULF WATERSHED

DIXIE COUNTY

