

Myakka Ranchlands

Less-Than-Fee

DeSoto, Hardee, Manatee and Sarasota Counties

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	<i>2007</i>
<i>Project Acres</i>	<i>56,607</i>
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	<i>29,776</i>
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	<i>26,831</i>
<i>2025 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	<i>\$399,114,451</i>

Purpose for State Acquisition

The Myakka Ranchlands project contains land areas on opposite sides of the Myakka River State Park, creating a corridor of conservation lands in southwest Florida. Acquiring these lands will add significant acreage to the conservation lands already protecting the Myakka River watershed and Charlotte Harbor Estuary. Additionally, the project will protect lands known to support habitat for numerous rare and imperiled species including the Florida burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*), Florida sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis*) and gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*).

General Description

The original Myakka Ranchlands project contained 18,739 acres consisting of three ownerships in two disjunct tracts: Hi Hat Ranch in the northwest (10,770 acres) and the combined Walton and Longino Ranches in the southeast (7,969 acres).

The Hi Hat tract is in northern Sarasota County, about five miles east of the city of Sarasota. The Longino/Walton tract is in eastern Sarasota County, about 13 miles southeast of Hi Hat Ranch, between State Road 72 and Interstate 75. The eastern edge of the tract abuts the Lewis Longino Preserve, a 3,895-acre conservation easement purchased by Sarasota County and the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) to protect regional water supplies.

The Hi Hat tract includes 2,500 acres of wastewater spray field, owned by the city of Sarasota, for which the owners have rights to purchase back from the city. The Hi Hat owners also retain a permit from SWFWMD for the withdrawal of 6-7 million gallons of groundwater per day at the ranch. The properties are crisscrossed with internal roads, accessways and ditches associated with ranch and farming operations. Approximately half of the Hi Hat, Longino and Walton





ranches have been converted to pasture, agriculture or various uses such as impoundments, canals, roads and buildings. Most of these areas are improved pasture. The remaining natural areas support a mosaic of mesic flatwoods, depression and basin marshes, prairie and hydric hammocks. Approximately 70 percent of the Myakka-Peace River Watershed Connector ranches are in natural condition. The quality of these natural communities is variable, depending upon the fire history and levels of physical disturbances or invasive exotic plant encroachments. The Myakka Island Conservation Corridor consists of three ranches: Triangle Ranch (1,067 acres) and Sheps Island Ranch (723 acres) are along the Manatee River where Sarasota and Manatee counties join; Orange Hammock Ranch (5,774 acres) borders existing conservation lands on the DeSoto County line. The working ranches have cattle operations, sod farms, row crops, citrus groves, pine and cabbage palm harvesting, and hunting. About 90 percent of the land for the Myakka Island Conservation Corridor parcels is in various degrees of natural condition, with some improved pasture.

The Myakka Corridor Addition is 555 acres located approximately 3 miles west of Myakka City. This property lies adjacent to the Triple Oak Preserve (Manatee County) and within both the Florida Wildlife Corridor and the Scrub Jay Focal Landscape, a strategic approach designed to recover and protect the long-term viability of the M4 metapopulation of the federally listed Florida scrub-jay (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*). The Myakka Corridor Addition is largely made up of pasture (67 percent), and Manatee County plans to restore to historic conditions if acquired. The most common natural landcover type on the property is scrub, where Florida bonamia (*Bonamia grandiflora*) and nodding pinweed (*Lechea cernua*) were observed.

Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Swallow-tailed kite	G5/S2
<i>Manasota pawpaw*</i>	G1/S1
<i>Large-plumed beaksedge*</i>	G2/S2
Florida sandhill crane	G5T2/S2
<i>Many-flowered grass-pink*</i>	G3/S2S3
Wood stork	G4/S2
<i>Nodding pinweed*</i>	G3/S3
Florida burrowing owl	G4T3/S3
Bachman's sparrow	G3/S3
Crested caracara	G5/S2

**Plant species are in italics*





Public Use

Within the 802 acres comprising the Hi Hat Ranch (to be managed by Sarasota County), some existing roads and trails may become multi-use trails for hiking and horseback riding. Uses such as camping, picnicking, hiking and boating will be compatible with the protection of the area. The Myakka Corridor Addition is to be managed by Manatee County for passive uses including birding, hiking, biking and equestrian access. Longino Ranch, Walton Ranch, the remainder of Hi Hat Ranch, and the ranches of the Myakka-Peace River Watershed Connector and the Myakka Island Conservation Corridor are proposed for less-than-fee acquisition and do not provide for public access.

Acquisition Planning

2007

On December 14, 2007, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) voted to add the Myakka Ranchlands to Group A of the Florida Forever Priority List. The application proposes a combination of full-fee and less-than-fee acquisition. Longino Ranch is less-than-fee; Hi-Hat is fee-simple and/or less-than-fee; and Walton Ranch was proposed as fee-simple, but the owner is willing to consider it as a less-than-fee acquisition.

2010

On July 15, 2010, Sarasota County and SWFWMD purchased 3,760 acres in partnership. Known as Walton Ranch, the properties were purchased as both fee and less-than-fee; lands purchased as less-than-fee are held jointly by SWFWMD and Sarasota County.

On August 19, 2010, SWFWMD and Sarasota County acquired 3,981 acres in partnership. Known as Longino Ranch, the property was acquired less-than-fee and the easement is held jointly by SWFWMD and Sarasota County. This easement has a provision for public access to a recreational trail along the southern property boundary that if developed would connect public ownerships from the Myakka River to the Peace River.

2011

On September 27, 2011, SWFWMD and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service purchased 1,237 acres in partnership known as Horton Ranch for \$2,230,000.

On December 9, 2011, ARC placed this project in the Less-Than-Fee category.





2014

On June 27, 2014, ARC approved the proposed Myakka-Peace River Watershed Connector and voted to combine it with the Myakka Ranchlands project.

On December 12, 2014, ARC added the proposed Myakka Island Conservation Corridor as an addition to the Myakka Ranchlands, bringing the project to a total of 31,853 acres.

2015

On August 21, 2015, ARC approved a boundary amendment to add the 543-acre Murphy Marsh parcel to the Myakka Ranchlands Florida Forever project.

On October 16, 2015, ARC added the 1,356-acre Myakka Addition Lands project in Sarasota County and the 2,659-acre Upper Myakka Watershed project in Manatee County to the Florida Forever Priority List. ARC then combined the two projects into the existing Myakka Ranchlands project.

2016

On May 16, 2016, SWFWMD established the Upper Myakka River Watershed – Triangle Ranch conservation easement (1,142.31 acres).

On October 21, 2016, ARC approved the 4,530-acre Blackbeard’s Ranch project in southern Manatee County, then added it to the existing Myakka Ranchlands project.

2019

On April 19, 2019, ARC approved adding the 4,044-acre BR Ranch project in DeSoto County to the 2020 Florida Forever Priority List. BR Ranch was proposed as a less-than-fee acquisition and had a tax-assessed value of \$11,700,000. After its approval, ARC added it to the existing Myakka Ranchlands project.

On October 18, 2019, ARC approved adding the 2,393-acre MJ Ranch project in Manatee County to the 2020 Florida Forever Priority List. ARC then moved to incorporate the lands within the MJ Ranch into the Myakka Ranchlands project boundary. MJ Ranch was proposed as a less-than-fee acquisition and had a tax-assessed value of \$5,800,632.

2020

On May 4, 2020, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) acquired a 559.1-acre conservation easement in Manatee County from Matthew Pallardy.





On May 29, 2020, DEP acquired, in fee, 5,776.3 acres in Sarasota County from B Becker Partners, LTD., TCC Partners, L.P. and Michael George. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission manages the property as Orange Hammock Ranch Wildlife Management Area.

2021

In 2021, DEP acquired a 380.2-acre conservation easement in DeSoto County from the Rawls family.

On August 13, 2021, ARC approved the addition of J Bar C Ranch — East (996 acres) in Manatee County to the project boundary.

On December 10, 2021, ARC approved the addition of J Bar C Ranch — West (576.05 acres) in Manatee County to the project boundary.

2022

On October 14, 2022, ARC approved the addition of the Keen Ranch project proposal (995 acres) to the project boundary.

On December 9, 2002, ARC approved the addition of three parcels totaling approximately 748 acres in DeSoto and Manatee counties with a tax-assessed value of \$1,314,040 (Flint Ranch).

2023

On April 14, 2023, ARC approved the addition of the Quail Creek Ranch project proposal (2,698 acres) in Hardee County to the project boundary.

On October 13, 2023, ARC approved the addition of the Myakka Ranch project proposal (998 acres) in Manatee County to the project boundary.

In December of 2023, ARC approved the addition of 34 parcels totaling approximately 433.87 acres in Manatee County.

DEP acquired a 557-acre conservation easement in Manatee County from Big Slough Ranch, LLC. DEP also acquired a 1,045-acre conservation easement in Manatee County from Land South Manatee, LLC.

2024

In April 2024, DEP acquired a 402.38-acre conservation easement in Manatee County from Flint Properties II, a 324.1-acre conservation easement in DeSoto County from Gwen Flint Trust and a 1,515.7-acre conservation easement in DeSoto County from 4L's Ranch.





On November 25, 2024, DEP acquired a 2,646.45-acre conservation easement in Hardee County from Quail Creek Farms, Inc.

In December of 2024, ARC approved the addition of one parcel totaling approximately 546.71 acres in Manatee County.

2025

On April 11, 2025, ARC approved the addition of the Myakka Corridor Addition project (555 acres) in Manatee County to the project boundary.

In June 2025, ARC approved the addition of two parcels totaling approximately 660 acres in Hardee County to the project boundary.

Coordination

Acquisition of the Myakka Ranchlands would be a shared acquisition with Manatee County, Sarasota County and SWFWMD. It is already part of SWFWMD's Work Plan and abuts Myakka River State Park. The Myakka Corridor Addition tract may be acquired in partnership with Manatee County, who has committed to contribute 50 percent of the purchase amount, or \$5 million dollars, of available Conservation and Parks Projects Referendum funds. The rest of the project is recommended for less-than-fee acquisition and would be monitored through DEP's Division of State Lands.

Management Policy Statement

Principal purposes of the project include the protection of biodiversity; protection of the quality and natural functions of the land and water systems; availability of sufficient quantities of water; and, within the portion to be managed by Sarasota County, provision of resource-based public recreational and educational opportunities. Programs would be oriented towards conservation and protection of wildlife species with careful control of public uses. The primary land management goals are to restore, maintain and protect native ecosystems; to integrate compatible human use; and to ensure long-term viability of populations and species considered rare. This ecosystem and multiple-use approach will guide the management activities for this project.

The main purposes for protection of the Myakka Corridor Addition include landscape linkage/corridor creation, watershed restoration in the Myakka River Watershed, and scrub and Florida scrub-jay restoration/recovery.

The proposed less-than-fee acquisitions of Myakka Ranchlands would be managed by the landowner as outlined in the conservation easement.





Manager(s)

Sarasota County's Natural Resources division is the recommended manager the majority of fee-simple acquisitions, with assistance and cooperation from SWFWMD and DEP's Division of Recreation and Parks. Manatee County is the identified manager for the Myakka Corridor Addition portion of the project. The remainder of Myakka Ranchlands is proposed for less-than-fee acquisitions; management responsibility would remain with the landowner. Periodic monitoring of the site's management to confirm continued conservation easement compliance would be coordinated by DEP's Division of State Lands.

Management Prospectus

Most of the lands acquired fee-simple will be managed by Sarasota County (excluding the Myakka Corridor Addition -see below). DEP's Division of State Lands will periodically monitor the conservation easement(s), while the management will be conducted by the property owner for the less-than-fee tracts.

Qualifications for State Designation

The project's size, diversity and location make it desirable for use and management compatible with the adjacent state park. Most of the acreage of this project consists of isolated wetlands in oak hammock and improved pasture supporting an active cattle operation. Approximately 20 percent of the proposal has been converted to cattle operations and spray irrigation. The improved pastures total approximately 160 acres with multiple grass species planted in them. Hi Hat Ranch has been managed for cattle for over 40 years and its pastures are devoid of most native groundcover and understory species.

Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management

Much of the project's former dry prairie and pine flatwoods have been altered by cattle operations and spray-irrigation fields. Hi Hat Ranch will be fenced and the above-ground spray-irrigation equipment will be removed by the landowner. Hydrological alterations in the form of ditches will be analyzed for potential restoration. Such areas may be restored with native ground cover and canopy. The level of management intensity and related management costs is expected to be minimal to obtain the necessary information and resources required to restore and manage this system compatible with Myakka River State Park. Long-term management costs are expected to be low.

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

Once the fee-simple portion of the project is acquired and assigned to Sarasota County for management, existing trails will be evaluated for nature-based recreational use. After the





installation of the fence and removal of the above-ground irrigation equipment by Hi Hat Ranch, primitive trails will be opened to hikers. Initial and intermediate management efforts will concentrate on resource inventory, providing site security, assessing public and fire management access, and hydrological restoration potential. Inventories of the site's natural resources and rare and imperiled species will be conducted to provide a basis for the formulation of a management plan. The numerous roads throughout the property necessitate the development of a road plan to identify which roads will continue to be used for vehicular access by the public, which are required for administrative use, and which are unnecessary for management or access and should be closed. Steps will be taken to ensure that the public is provided appropriate access while simultaneously affording protection of sensitive resources.

Revenue-generating Potential

The revenue-generating potential of the portion managed by Sarasota County is expected to be moderately low. Some future revenues might come from recreational user fees and ecotourism activities if such projects could be economically developed. No capital project expenditures will be needed on the full-fee parcel managed by Sarasota County, but land management activities such as prescribed fire, vegetative restoration and primitive public access/use will need to be funded. As more information is gathered and an analysis of the site is completed, Sarasota County intends to include project funds contingent on availability.

Cooperators in Management Activities

Sarasota County proposes to manage the 802-acre section of the project (adjacent to Myakka River State Park) and will carry out management activities and coordinate public access and use. Sarasota County will cooperate with and seek the assistance of DEP's Division of Recreation and Parks, SWFWMD and interested parties as appropriate.

Management Prospectus (Myakka Corridor Addition)

Qualifications for State Designation

The Myakka Corridor Addition project is located immediately adjacent to the recently acquired 105-acre Triple Oak Preserve. The project's acquisition would enhance the habitat value and management of Triple Oak Preserve, as well as the value of natural connections to the north (i.e. multiple conservation easements) and south (i.e. Myakka River State Park). The Myakka Corridor Addition could significantly contribute to the solution of regional water resource problems, as have been initiated for Tatum Sawgrass. Fee simple acquisition of the property is a rare opportunity to protect high-quality, under-represented habitat and protected species





within the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Acquisition will protect a key portion of a corridor connection from future development.

Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management

There are relatively few barriers to the implementation of a robust adaptive management regime. Fuel loading on site is low due to history of intensive grazing on site. The fact that there are few smoke-sensitive targets in the area, low residential density, and neighboring agricultural land uses means that for the near term the implementation of an active fire regime will be highly feasible. Restoration of improved pasture is both time and labor intensive. We anticipate that restoration of the mesic upland areas will occur along two main trajectories/strategies. The first could be thought of as a “top-down” canopy-first approach where long leaf pine and/or South Florida slash pine will be planted in dense plantations to shade competing grasses and shrubs to promote pine canopy establishment. Over the following 30 years, progressive thinning, invasive plant management and finally under seeding/planting with a diverse mix of native local ecotype seeds of grasses and wildflowers supplemented with potted shrub plant materials will ultimately yield a desired natural density and an assemblage of native shrubs and groundcover. This approach is cheaper and slower and can be used to begin restoration on a larger portion of the site. Manatee County has applied this approach to thousands of acres at Duette Preserve and Headwaters Preserve in northeastern Manatee County.

The second could be thought of as a “bottom-up”, groundcover-first approach where intensive site preparation using herbicides, fire, and disking is implemented to prepare smaller areas (20-50 acres per year) for direct seeding using a diverse groundcover mix of native grasses and wildflowers. Manatee County has successfully implemented this strategy on approximately 120 acres to date. This approach is more expensive and labor intensive but greatly reduces the amount of time needed to produce a proxy for extant native longleaf pine or slash pine flatwoods.

Scrub restoration on-site is also needed, although — for the most part — these areas have not had substantial ground disturbance. Restoration of scrub structure is the primary focus where scrub oaks (primarily sand live oak [*Quercus geminata*, Chapman’s oak [*Q. chapmanii*], and Myrtle Oak [*Q. myrtifolia*]), are top-killed using chainsaws and/or fire to encourage coppicing or resprouting from roots thereby re-establishing the clonal shrub growth habit of these scrub oaks. Once basic structure has been reestablished and bare ground patches/shrubby aspects have been restored, then supplemental groundcover plantings/seedings can be used to further push these scrub areas towards complete restoration.





In the northern portion of the property, a drastic reduction in wetland and surface water area between 1940 and 2024 appears to have resulted from drainage features.

Hydric soils mapped in the location of historic wetlands indicate a possible opportunity to restore hydrology, recreate wetlands, increase flood storage capacity and improve water quality downstream. Manatee County staff have discussed the potential for hydrologic and habitat restoration with the SWFWMD. County staff intent to apply to the SWFWMD Cooperative Funding Initiative program in 2025 for a Natural Systems Project, more specifically a Restoration Projects Incorporating Multiple Elements to restore the drained area in partnership with SWFWMD.

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

One of the most immediate goals of our management regime would be to establish and maintain site security. Perimeter fences are in relatively good shape with boundaries well delineated. Desktop analysis does show some substantial discrepancies between Manatee County GIS-indicated parcel boundaries and where fence lines have been constructed are substantial. The work of a Professional Survey will be required to reconcile these differences. Manatee County Natural Resources department has a great deal of experience dealing with these issues and working collaboratively with neighbors to resolve boundary issues.

The adjacent Triple Oaks Preserve (approximately 105 acres) currently has a resident ranger who — among other things — is responsible for periodic site patrols for site security. Regular site patrols can begin as soon as the site is acquired. The use of wildlife cameras for areas of suspected unauthorized access and close working relationships with Sherriff's Range Deputies will facilitate resource protection.

The site can be opened for multi-modal public access relatively quickly. Minimal parking improvements, a kiosk with trail map and trail blazing/marking can be completed within several months of acquisition. Since overall site visitation is anticipated to be low in the near-term, pedestrian, bicycle, and equestrian use can be supported on the existing interior road network with limited improvements. Redundant and unnecessary trails will be closed off and restored with appropriate signage and plants.

Revenue-generating Potential

Opportunities for revenue generation are somewhat limited for several reasons. With a number of other public lands available for no entry fee, this site will not support the collection of fees for entry. The cost of collecting the fees relative to the anticipated revenue would be prohibitive. There are no significant stands of timber on site that need to be thinned. Cattle





leases in this area typically provide only around \$15 per acre. Although approximately 350-400 acres of the site could feasibly be leased for cattle, generating up to \$6,000 annually, significant up-front investments in fencing and water improvements would need to be made to adequately implement standard Best Management Practices and to address other water quality concerns associated with lands purchased for conservation purposes. These improvements would likely need to be made by the county, and it could be 10-15 years before the county recovered initial investment costs and began to generate positive revenue leasing land for cattle. This will be considered further with a much more in-depth economic analysis and public comment.

Other opportunities for revenue include the sale of palmetto berries and the sale of carbon credits. With the significant needs for reforestation on site we are in a good position to expand our existing partnership with the non-profit The Climate Trust to this site. The American Carbon Registry provides a marketplace for the sale of these credits which are derived under the "Afforestation" protocol. Where lands that have a demonstrated paucity of trees can be both funded for planting and then as the trees grow, carbon credits are generated through careful documentation by the non-profit partner. The credits are sold on the open market generating revenue to the landowner and a percentage (fee) for the broker.

As restoration progresses, open pastures are reforested, and the site improves with respect to its ability to support game species, we expect that limited special opportunity hunts could be held for quail, turkey, white-tailed deer and/or feral hogs. While the permits sold for these hunts could be set for higher prices than most wildlife management areas, national forests, etc. in Florida due to the lack of public land hunting opportunities in the area, it is unlikely that this revenue would do little else other than cover the cost of staffing and administering them. Nevertheless, these opportunities will be strongly considered to help meet increasing public demand for hunting grounds as opportunities on private lands dwindle in the face of development pressure.

Cooperators in Management Activities

Florida Forest Service (FFS): FFS provides assistance with equipment and training of prescribed fire crews and is a vital cooperator for fire management generally. They currently offer several programs for assistance with reforestation.

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC): FWC provides direct funding assistance for the management of upland invasive plant control through its upland invasive working group. Manatee County is a regular recipient (several projects annually) of this funding assistance which has been a decisive factor in landscape level control of Old-World climbing fern, cogon grass, Brazilian pepper and many other invasive plant species. Similarly, the Gopher





Tortoise Habitat Assistance Program regularly provides assistance and has been a catalyst for the successful restoration of many scrub and flatwoods areas.

Big Waters Land Trust (formerly Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast): The non-profit Big Waters Land Trust has consistently provided South Florida Ecotype longleaf pine seedlings for the reforestation of Manatee County preserves.

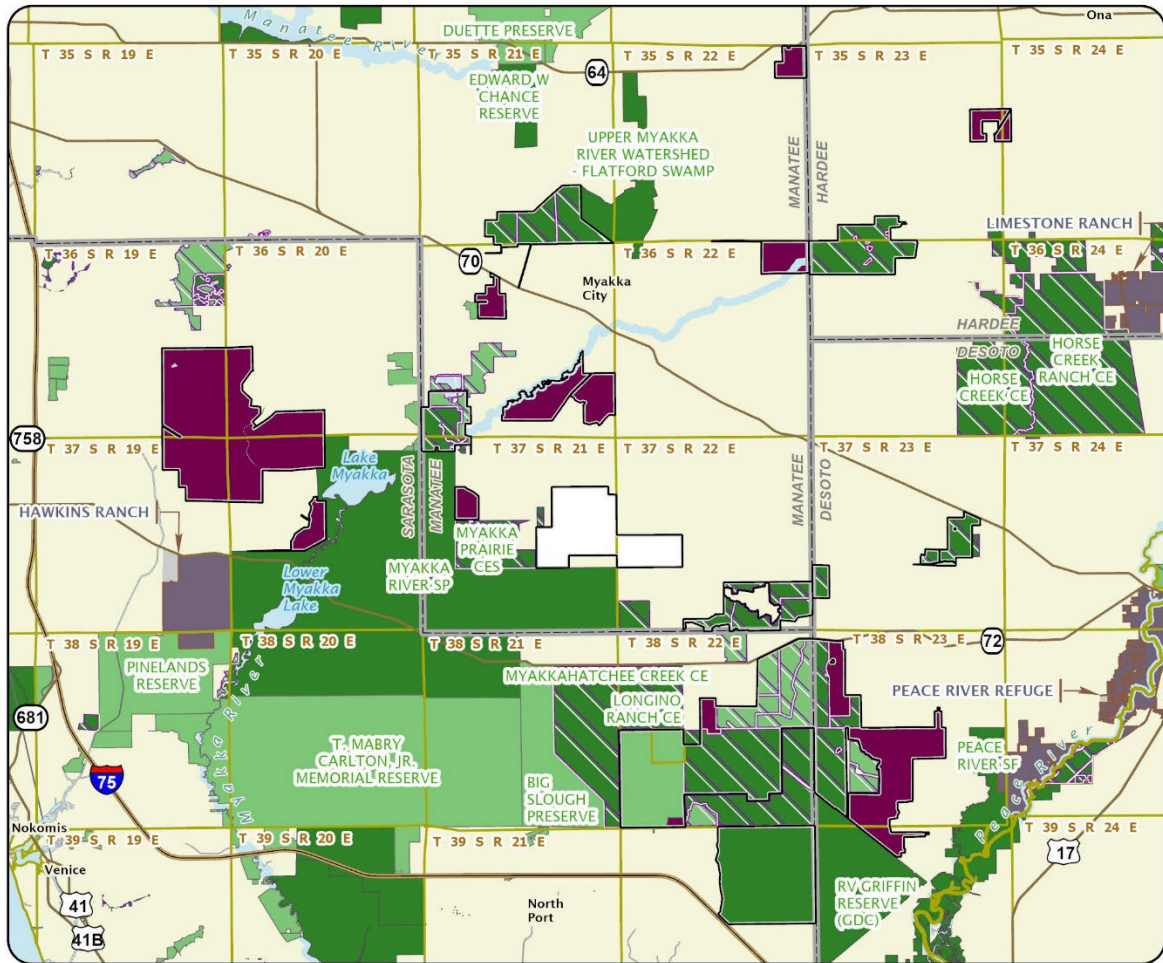
SWFWMD: Restoration and enhancement of historic wetlands could store water to reduce the impacts of flooding, improve water quality downstream and support imperiled species. Such a capital improvement project could be done in coordination with the SWFWMD Surface Water Improvement and Management Program, as well as Tatum Sawgrass restoration and water management plans.

Management Cost Summary

<u>Manatee County</u>	<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Source of Funds	County and Grants	County
Salary	not provided	not provided
OPS	not provided	not provided
Resource Management	\$190,000	\$47,600
Capital Improvements	\$660,000	not provided
Visitor Services/ Recreation	\$83,000	\$5,000
Support	\$100,000	\$500
Administration	not provided	\$3,000
TOTAL	\$1,033,000	\$56,100

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted





MYAKKA RANGLANDS

DESOTO, HARDEE, MANATEE, AND SARASOTA 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

