

Peace River Refuge

Less-Than-Fee

DeSoto and Hardee Counties

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	<i>2010</i>
<i>Project Acres</i>	<i>7,658</i>
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	<i>1,200</i>
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	<i>6,458</i>
<i>2025 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	<i>\$36,635,780</i>

Purpose for State Acquisition

The Peace River Refuge project will preserve the water quality and habitat of the Peace River and its tributaries, protect water quality for the downstream Charlotte Harbor Estuary, and conserve habitat for aquatic and upland wildlife associated with the area's hardwood forested uplands and riverine wetlands.

General Description

The Peace River Refuge is in central DeSoto County, southwest of the city of Arcadia. The project follows the Peace River on both sides for approximately 8 river miles before meeting the Peace River State Forest to the south. The Peace River State Forest Addition is an opportunity to connect and expand the two distinct units of the state forest. The eastern portion of the project also contains frontage along Joshua Creek, a Peace River tributary. Most of the site's eastern boundary is formed by an abandoned railroad grade located less than one mile west of U.S. 17.

Overall, the project consists of primarily hardwood forested uplands; however, bottomland forests and open point bars are associated with the river and old meander features of the floodplain. The forested hardwood and floodplain areas of the Peace River State Forest Addition are designated under the U.S. Endangered Species Act as critical habitat for the federally endangered Florida bonneted bat (*Eumops floridanus*). Approximately 88 percent of the total project can be classified as natural communities.

Most uplands within the project proposal are mesic hammock with a live oak canopy over a predominantly saw palmetto understory. While flooding from the Peace River likely inundates many of these hammocks occasionally or even annually, the land is dry for most of the year.





Much of the land on the northeastern portion of the proposal has been converted to improved pastures. Scattered oaks are common throughout these pastures. Various other clearings are scattered on the property, including areas with standing structures (hunt camps, bridges and remnants of old buildings such as a sawmill on the western side of the property).

The Peace River State Forest Addition has been managed with prescribed fire. Scrubby flatwoods are mostly in good condition, and a single band of sandhill in very good condition occurs in the southern part of the tract. The property contains 2.7 miles of land trail opportunities and 3 miles of paddling opportunities along the Peace River.

Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Round-tailed muskrat	G2/S2
<i>Florida spiny-pod</i>	G2G3/S2
<i>Redmargin zephyrlily*</i>	G2G3/S2S3
Wood stork	G4/S2
Bald eagle	G5/S3
Little blue heron	G5/S4

**Plant species are in italics*

Public Use

The project is proposed for both fee and less-than-fee acquisition. The Peace River State Forest Addition (fee simple) could provide opportunities for hiking, wildlife viewing, primitive and group camping, canoeing, kayaking, boating, fish and Operation Outdoor Freedom events.

Acquisition Planning

2010

On June 11, 2010, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) added the Peace River Refuge project to the Less-Than-Fee category of the Florida Forever Priority List. The project had an estimated tax-assessed value of \$12,567,267.

2021

In 2021, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) acquired a 771.20-acre conservation easement in DeSoto County from Peace River Preserve, LLC.

2022

On April 8, 2022, ARC approved the 700-acre Johnson Homestead project proposal and combined it with the Peace River Refuge project.





2023

In December of 2023, ARC approved the addition of one parcel totaling approximately 149.11 acres in DeSoto County.

2024

In April 2024, ARC approved the addition of four parcels totaling approximately 259.4 acres in Hardee County to the project boundary.

On November 1, 2024, ARC approved the addition of the Rock Bend Ranch project proposal (658 acres) in DeSoto County to the project boundary.

In December 2024, ARC approved the addition of one parcel totaling approximately 103.82 acres in Hardee County to the project boundary.

2025

On April 17, 2025, DEP acquired a 359.5-acre conservation easement in Hardee County from Rafael and Corina Montalvo.

In June 2025, ARC approved the addition of four parcels totaling approximately 593 acres in DeSoto and Hardee counties to the project boundary.

On October 10, 2025, ARC approved the addition of the Peace River State Forest Expansion project (1,320.85 acres) in DeSoto County to the project boundary.

Coordination

For the Peace River State Forest Addition, the Trust for Public Land is working with the Florida Forest Service (FFS) to apply for Forest Legacy funding.

Management Policy Statement

As a primarily less-than-fee acquisition, the project would be managed for conservation purposes by the landowners as outlined in the conservation easement. The Peace River State Forest Addition will be managed by FFS as part of the Peace River State Forest, once acquired by the state.

Manager(s)

If acquired as less-than-fee, management responsibility of the Peace River Refuge 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. The Peace River State Forest Addition is to be managed by FFS as part of Peace River State Forest.





Management Prospectus

DEP's Division of State Lands will periodically monitor the conservation easement, while the management will be conducted by the property owner.

Management Prospectus – Peace River State Forest Addition

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of acquiring this tract is to conserve and restore the natural ecosystems in Florida while providing recreation for our citizens and tourists. In addition, proper management of the property will also enhance water quality along the Peace River which is a designated Outstanding Florida Waterway that feeds into the Charlotte Harbor and provides drinking water for many Southwest Florida citizens.

Qualifications for State Designation

The acquisition of this land aligns with FFS' mission and strategic goals. A vital part of the mission is to "manage the forest resources through a stewardship ethic to assure they are available for future generations." FFS strategic goals are to promote sound forest management practices to maintain the integrity of the environment and provide for future natural resource needs, and to manage public lands for their unique character while providing multiple benefits to the public.

This acquisition will allow expanded public access and recreation, ecosystem restoration, and multiple-use silvicultural management activities in line with Best Management Practices to protect water quality. Additional benefits for the Peace River State Forest include increased acreage for recreational opportunities, such as hiking, hunting, kayaking/canoeing, horseback riding, photography and hosting FFS-administered Operation Outdoor Freedom events.

Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management

Public river access and securing the property along the Peace River may be difficult. Numerous trails could create issues with prescribed burning but would be corrected over time.

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

Management strategies will center on the multiple-use concept, as defined in sections 589.04(3) and 253.034(2)(a) F.S. Implementation of this concept will utilize and conserve state forest resources in a harmonious and coordinated combination that will best serve the people of the State of Florida, and that is consistent with the purpose for which the forest was acquired. Multiple-use management for the tract will be accomplished with the following strategies:





- Practice sustainable forest management for the efficient generation of revenue and in support of state forest management objectives;
- Provide for resource-based outdoor recreation opportunities for multiple interests;
- Restore and manage healthy forests and native ecosystems ensuring the long-term viability of populations and species listed as endangered, threatened, or rare, and other components of biological diversity including game and nongame wildlife and plants;
- Protect known archaeological, historical, cultural, and paleontological resources;
- Restore, maintain, and protect hydrological functions related to water resources and the health of associated wetland and aquatic communities.

Short-term goals may include:

- Establish and mark state forest boundaries
- Develop timber stands and inventory plots
- Consider additional recreational opportunities
- Evaluate the need for a flora and fauna survey
- Consider various types of leases for potential income
- Consider additional Operation Outdoor Freedom event opportunities

Long-term goals may include:

- Develop and implement a timber management plan
- Conserve, protect, manage, and restore the native natural ecosystems
- Conserve and protect natural resources
- Develop and mark recreational multiple-use trail; continue to consider other recreational opportunities; correct trails to align with prescribed burn activities
- Create infrastructure to support land management goals

Revenue-generating Potential

This property has the means to provide revenue. Possible revenue sources may be:

- Recreational user fees
- Leases
- Non-timber forest products

Other potential revenue-generating opportunities will be evaluated as appropriate.





Potential Multiple-Use Activities

The acquisition of the subject property will allow FFS to enhance the multiple-use activities on the state forest as required by Florida Statutes (253.034 – State-owned Land; Uses and 589.011 – Use of State Forest Lands). State acquisition and FFS management will promote harmonious and coordinated management of timber, conservation of fish and wildlife, forage, habitat, water resources, the protection of cultural and other biological resources, and recreational activities to best serve the citizens of the State of Florida.

Recreational usage will be evaluated for provision of the greatest public benefits while allowing for the best conservation of the land, the water, and resources. Recreational activities may include, but are not limited to, multiple-use trails, hiking, wildlife viewing, primitive camping, group camping, canoeing/kayaking/boating, fishing, and Operation Outdoor Freedom events.

Timber resources will be managed to promote and improve forest health and would include prescribed fire, invasive species treatment and eradication, timber thinning and plantings, as appropriate.

Cooperators in Management Activities

Florida Department of Environmental Protection	Advisory Role
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission	Advisory Role
Southwest Florida Water Management District	Advisory Role
Peace River Water Authority	Advisory Role

Management Cost Summary

<u>FFS</u>	<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Source of Funds	LATF	LATF
Salary (# FTE)	\$210,633	\$210,633
OPS (# OPS)	\$50,000	\$50,000
Resource Management	\$10,000	\$10,000
Capital Improvements	\$5,000	\$15,000
Visitor Services/ Recreation	\$5,000	\$5,000
Support	\$50,000	\$8,000
Administration	-	-
TOTAL	\$330,633	\$298,633

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted



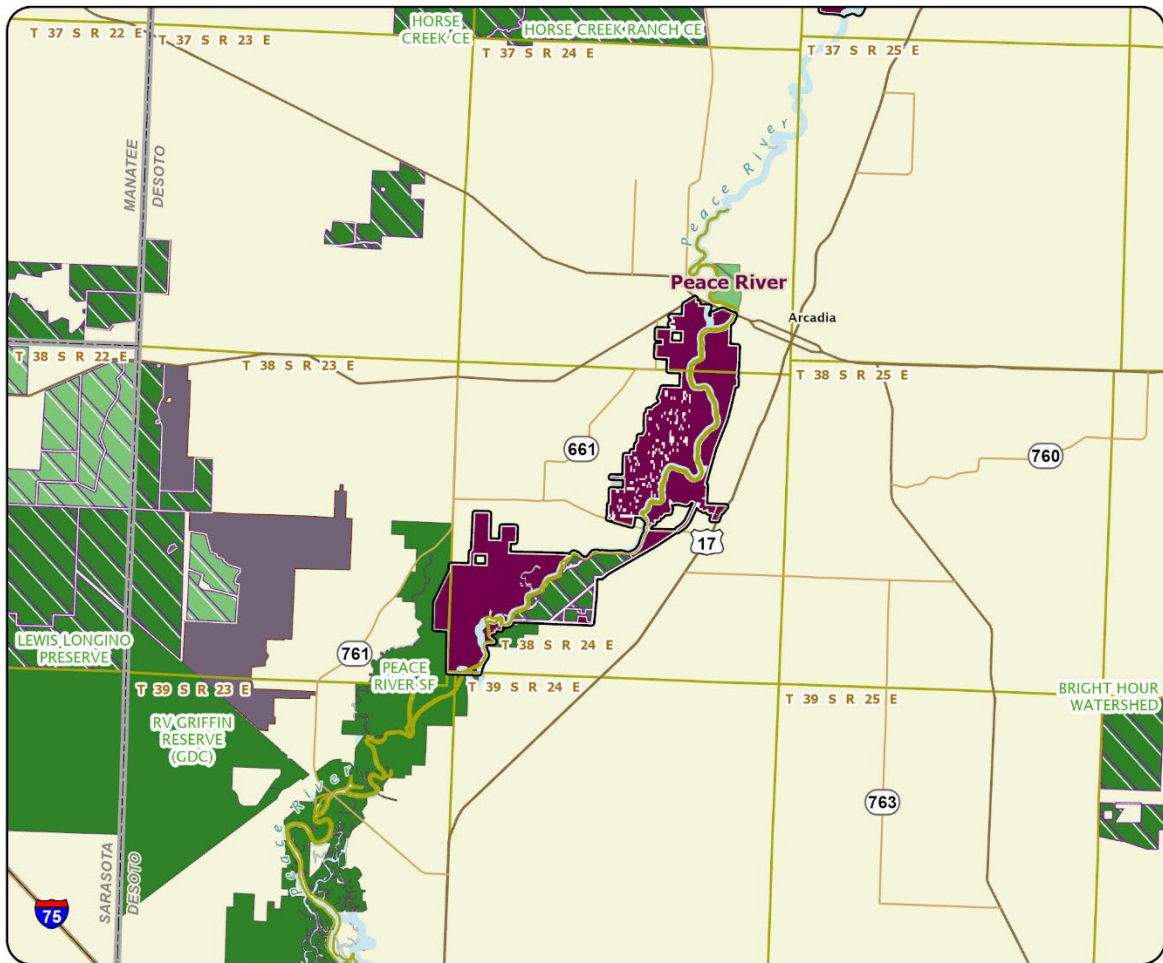


PEACE RIVER REFUGE: OVERVIEW

DESOTO AND HARDEE COUNTIES








- Map 1 Peace River Site
- Map 2 Horse Creek Site
- Map 2 Peace River Site

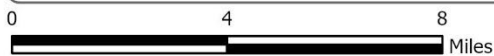


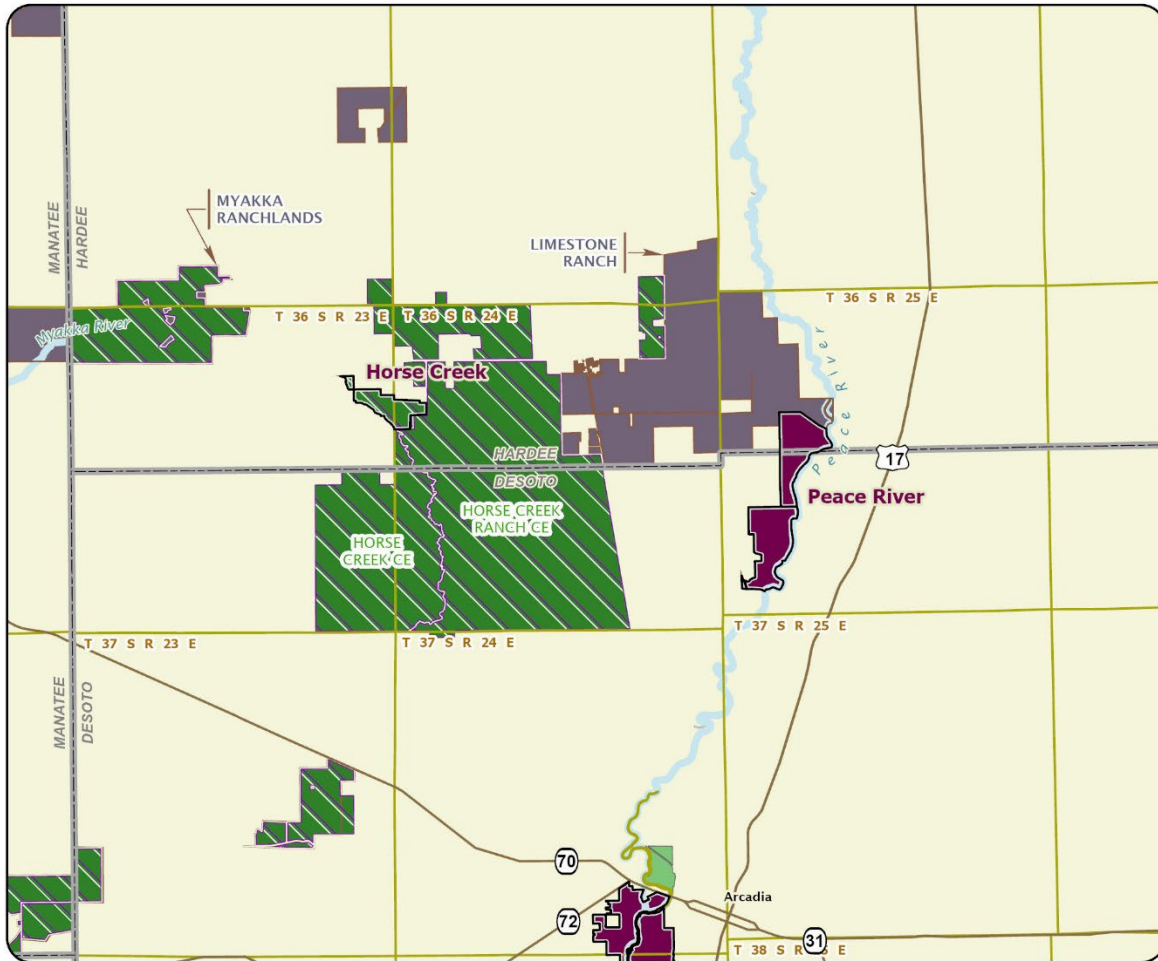


PEACE RIVER REFUGE: MAP 1

DESOTO COUNTY

-  Florida Forever Project Boundary*
 -  Essential Parcels Remaining
 -  Other Florida Forever Projects
 -  State Conservation Lands
 -  Other Conservation Lands
 -  Other Public Lands
 -  Less-Than-Fee Acquisition
- *Project boundary has been generalized for map clarity.*





PEACE RIVER REFUGE: MAP 2

DESOTO AND HARDEE COUNTIES

