

# Ranch Reserve

Less-Than-Fee

Brevard, Indian River, and Osceola Counties

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	1997
<i>Project Acres</i>	37,227
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	31,301
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	5,926
<i>2025 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$23,422,221

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Ranch Reserve project includes a vast area of open lands—pastures, pine flatwoods, palmetto prairies and marshes—west of the St. Johns River. These flatlands are important for wildlife such as the Florida sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis*) and an experimental group of extremely rare whooping crane (*Grus americana*). The Ranch Reserve project will ensure that a large part of these lands remain as they are today, thus preserving a connection with public lands to the north and east.

## General Description

The Ranch Reserve’s four cattle ranches lie on the Osceola Plain, west of and above the St. Johns River marshes. Mesic flatwoods interrupted by depression marshes cover approximately 40 percent of the project area. Swamps and hammocks make up much of the remaining natural communities. Improved pastures cover approximately 30 percent of the area.

Multiple rare or imperiled species are known or reported to occur within the project, including the red-cockaded woodpecker and one of the largest populations of sandhill crane in Florida. Additionally, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has released whooping crane on the St. Johns River Water Management District’s (SJRWMD) Escape Ranch to re-establish the species in Florida. The wildlife habitat within the project is threatened by the harvest of old-growth pines and conversion to more intensive agriculture or non-agricultural use. The project also includes the headwaters of several streams that flow into the St. Johns River marsh.





Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) Element Occurrence Summary

<b><u>FNAI Elements</u></b>	<b><u>Score</u></b>
Whooping crane	G1/S1
Florida sandhill crane	G5T2/S2
Eastern indigo snake	G2G3/S2?
Red-cockaded woodpecker	G3/S2
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Crested caracara	G5/S2
Arogos skipper	G2G3T1T2/S2
Loammi skipper	G2/S2?
Florida burrowing owl	G4T3/S3
Bachman's sparrow	G3/S3
Bald eagle	G5/S3
Southeastern fox squirrel	G5T5/S3

**Public Use**

This project qualifies as a wildlife management area. The amount and type of public use will be negotiated with the landowners.

**Acquisition Planning**

**1996**

On October 30, 1996, the Land Acquisition and Management Advisory Council adopted criteria for establishing a Less-Than-Fee acquisition category: resource value of the project/tract can be adequately protected through a less-than-fee instrument; the seller is willing to accept a less-than-fee-simple instrument and the Land Acquisition and Management Advisory Council has determined that the acquisition objectives can be met by acquiring a less-than-fee interest; and the manager is willing to oversee a less-than-fee-simple instrument.

On December 5, 1996, the Land Acquisition and Management Advisory Council transferred the remaining ownerships within the Ranch Reserve project boundary—Campbell (acquired), Mills (acquired), Kelly/Bronson and Kaup—to the Less-Than-Fee category.

On December 24, 1996, SJRWMD acquired a conservation easement over the large central tract (Escape Ranch - 11,768 acres).

**2000**

In 2000, the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund acquired a conservation easement over Mills Ranch.





## **2003**

On July 31, 2003, SJRWMD acquired the Wolf Creek Ranch conservation easement (3,810 acres).

## **2011**

On December 9, 2011, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) placed this project in the Less-than-Fee category on the Florida Forever Priority List.

## **2025**

In February 2025, ARC approved the addition of eight parcels totaling approximately 592 acres in Brevard County to the project boundary.

In April 2025, ARC approved the addition of five parcels totaling approximately 225 acres in Brevard County to the project boundary.

On August 27, 2025, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) acquired a 7,514.25-acre conservation easement in Osceola County from Kenansville Ranch LLC.

### Coordination

SJRWMD is an acquisition partner with the state and has acquired substantial acreage within the project area. The Nature Conservancy is also an acquisition partner.

### Management Policy Statement

As a less-than-fee acquisition, the Ranch Reserve 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 Ranch Reserve project would remain with the landowner. Periodic monitoring of the site's management to confirm continued compliance with the conditions of the conservation easement 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 management will be conducted by the property owner.

### **Qualifications for State Designation**

The size of the Ranch Reserve project and its importance to wildlife, particularly to birds such as the Florida sandhill crane and red-cockaded woodpecker, qualify it as a wildlife management area.





### **Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management**

The project generally includes lands requiring monitoring only and minimum-intensity management.

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

Within the first year after acquisition, SJRWMD will take aerial photographs to record the condition of each ranch and will begin to inventory natural resources on site. Landowners will develop management and monitoring plans to address site security, monitor and control public access, and implement fire management. Long-range plans will stress ecosystem management and the protection and management of rare species. Forest communities will be managed using techniques recommended by the Florida Forest Service (FFS). Appropriate protection will be provided to environmentally sensitive areas. Minimal infrastructure development will be required.

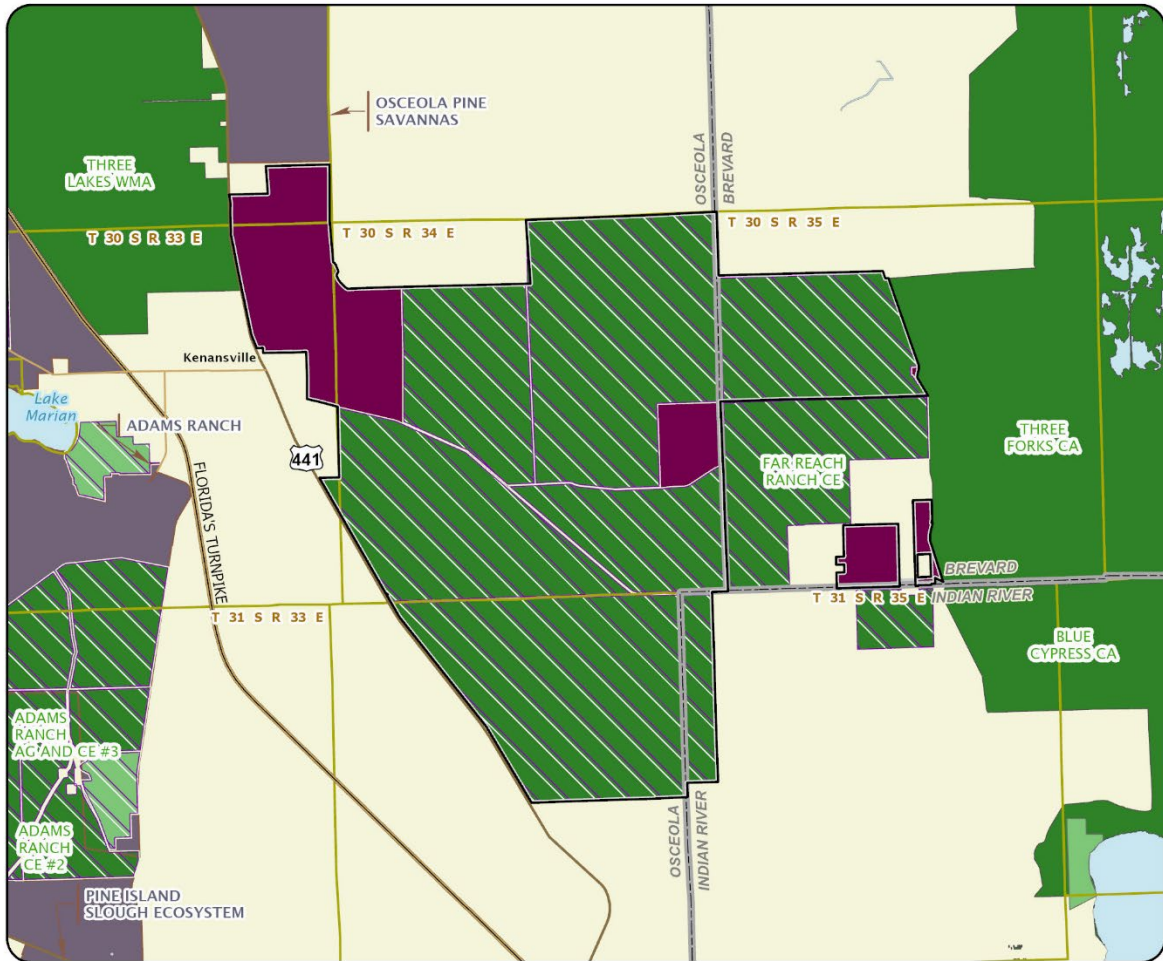
### **Revenue-generating Potential**

The underlying fee ownership will remain with the present landowners, so no public revenue is anticipated from this area.

### **Cooperators in Management Activities**

SJRWMD will cooperate with other state and local government agencies in monitoring land in the project.





### RANCH RESERVE

#### BREVARD, INDIAN RIVER, AND OSCEOLA COUNTIES

