

# Ridge Manor Gap

Partnerships and Regional Incentives

Hernando County

|   |                     |
|---|---------------------|
| <i>Year Added to Priority List</i>            | <i>2025</i>         |
| <i>Project Acres</i>                          | <i>2,894</i>        |
| <i>Acquired Acres</i>                         | <i>587</i>          |
| <i>Remaining Project Acres</i>                | <i>2,307</i>        |
| <i>2025 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i> | <i>\$49,096,398</i> |

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Ridge Manor Gap project would connect two existing tracts of Withlacoochee State Forest; protecting wildlife habitat and providing opportunity for wildlife dispersal over a significant existing gap in the Florida Wildlife Corridor. In addition, acquisition would enhance outdoor-based public recreation opportunities on a regional and statewide scale, with the potential to bridge a gap in the Florida National Scenic Trail. The project would also promote natural floodplain attenuation by precluding commercial and residential conversion in an area facing imminent development pressure.

## General Description

The Ridge Manor Gap project is located 1 mile north of Ridge Manor and 10 miles east of Brooksville in eastern Hernando County. The project is a strategic effort to connect two currently disjunct tracts of Withlacoochee State Forest; the Richloam and Croom units to the east and west, respectively. Two units of the state forest are within the project area ( $\pm 150$  acres and  $\pm 40$  acres) and Hernando County's Cypress Lakes Preserve borders the southwestern edge of the project.

The project area was platted in the 1960s and 1970s and has been heavily subdivided into what is now known today as Ridge Manor Estates, with most parcels having an average size of less than 2.5 acres. All lots are vacant, except for two which contain improvements. Due to the nature of these lots being vacant for decades, the natural communities present have not been managed and as such, over one-third of the project area is largely successional in composition and many vacant lots in the project area are being cleared and listed for sale





Approximately 45 percent of the project area is vegetated with intact natural communities, with xeric hammock being the predominant natural community, largely found in higher elevations where scrub historically occurred. Bottomland forest occupies five percent of the project, with a particularly large area and some smaller patches near the Withlacoochee River. Sandhill varies in quality but is generally overgrown due to fire suppression and a few areas disturbed by ATV use. One sandhill upland lake was identified during the site visit, but it has been heavily impacted by off-road vehicles. Four percent of the project area consists of improved pasture; one such pasture contained a gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) burrow at the time of the site visit. Invasive plants are common, with the most abundant being cogon grass (*Imperata cylindrica*). As much as 394 acres (14 percent) of the project contain road shoulders and road-related clearings

The northern border of the Ridge Manor Gap abuts the Little Withlacoochee River, and its western boundary borders the Withlacoochee River, an Outstanding Florida Water. Due to the site’s proximity to these two rivers, the area is prone to flooding and in 2024, Hurricane Milton caused prolonged high-water levels.

The Florida National Scenic Trail extends along the southern and western border of the project along Ridge Manor Boulevard and State Road 50. This causes users to travel along busy roads for over 2.5 miles, which could potentially be eliminated by connecting the two disjunct tracts of the Withlacoochee State Forest should the project be acquired.

There are three recorded archaeological sites within the Ridge Manor Gap. Notably, the project includes the former location of Rerdell, an early Florida settlement.

Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) Element Occurrence Summary

| <b><u>FNAI Elements</u></b>          | <b><u>Score</u></b> |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Gopher tortoise                      | G3/S3               |
| Swallow-tailed kite                  | G5/S2               |
| Floyd's sandhill millipede           | G1/S1               |
| <i>Florida spiny-pod*</i>            | G2G3/S2             |
| Southern hognose snake               | G2G3/S2S3           |
| Tricolored heron                     | G5/S4               |
| White ibis                           | G5/S4               |
| <i>*Plant species are in italics</i> |                     |

**Public Use**

If acquired, the Ridge Manor Gap project will be managed by Florida Forest Service (FFS) as a part of Withlacoochee State Forest.





## Acquisition Planning

### **2025**

On October 10, 2025, the Acquisition and Restoration Council voted to add the Ridge Manor Gap project to the 2026 Florida Forever Priority List.

## Coordination

The project was proposed by Putnam Land Conservancy (PLC) through a grant funded by the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation. PLC will begin initial acquisition of individual parcels. Through private sector aggregation and owner consolidation, PLC could then present sections to the state via a phased approach, thereby making state acquisition more attainable.

## Management Policy Statement

The purpose for acquisition is to connect two major tracts of the Withlacoochee State Forest — the Richloam Tract and the Croom Tract — under one ownership and management regime. This would provide a natural corridor for wildlife across the landscape. Additionally, more desirable corridors for the Florida National Scenic Trail may become available with this potential acquisition.

## Manager(s)

If acquired, FFS will manage the Ridge Manor Gap project as part of Withlacoochee State Forest.

## Management Prospectus

### **Qualifications for State Designation**

Acquisition of the land within this project 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.

Acquisition of this project by the state would be significant because it will provide a terrestrial corridor between two currently distinct tracts. It will provide a buffer around two parcels on the Croom Tract that are isolated and difficult to manage with fire. The addition of management resources will enhance management of the two distinct parcels in terms of prescribed burning and invasive species management, creating a cohesive balanced landscape. This terrestrial corridor will additionally improve the western half of the Florida National Scenic Trail, providing a better experience for recreational users.





## **Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management**

Development exists within the project, complicating management. Cogon grass infestations will require treatment. Developed areas may allow for unauthorized off-road vehicle access which may result in erosion, the spread of invasive species and noise pollution. Heavy rain events may cause flooding at some locations.

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

Management strategies will center on the multiple-use concept, as defined in sections 589.04(3) and 253.034(2)(a), Florida Statutes. 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.

Security may be a challenge due to the amount of paved and unpaved roads within the proposal.

## **Revenue-generating Potential**

State acquisition of this area overtime may enhance the site's revenue-generating potential through additional recreational users, leases, timber operations, nature center development and/or campgrounds.

## **Cooperators in Management Activities**

Cooperators may include FWC regarding additional acreage into the Wildlife Management Area system as well as general law enforcement in the state forest, U.S. Forest Service, Florida Trail





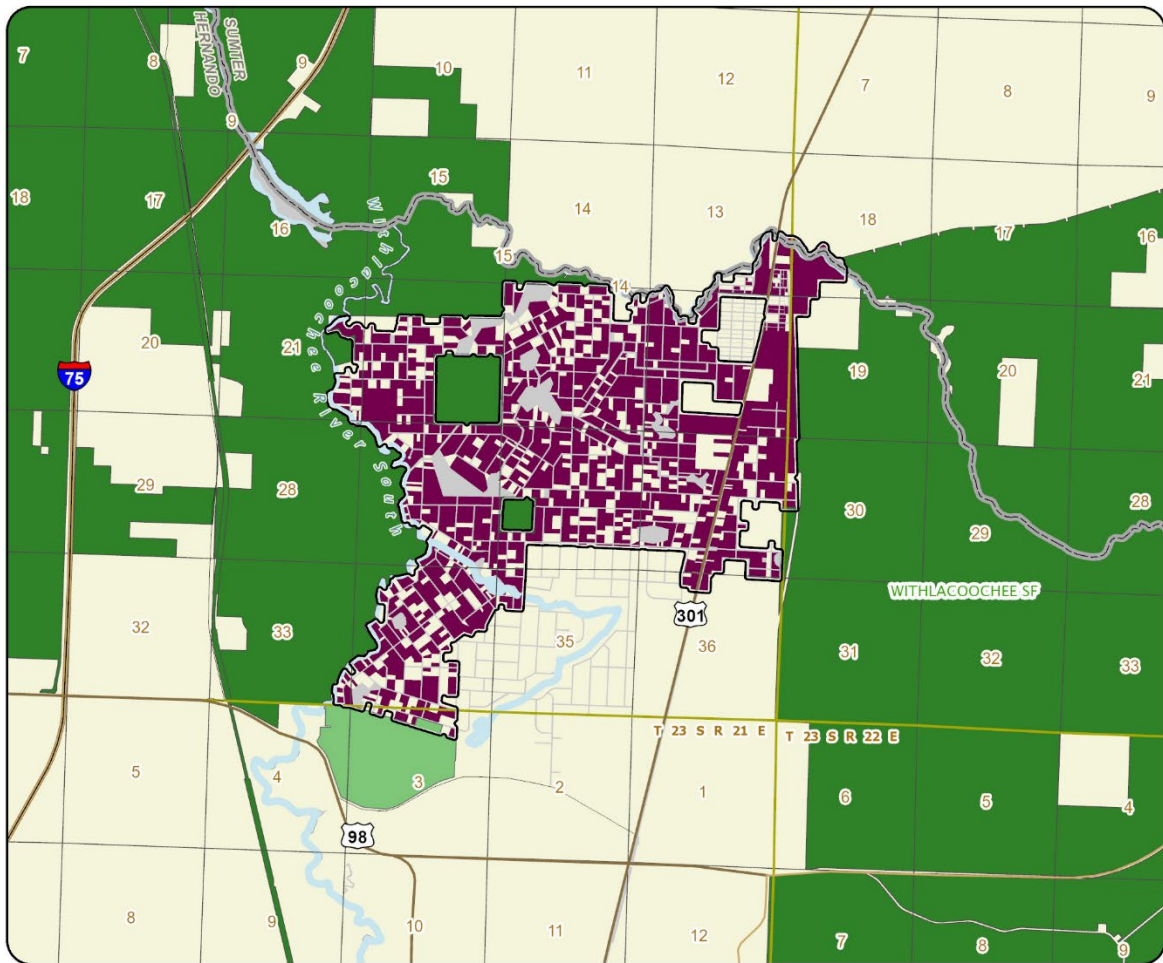
Association regarding the Florida National Scenic Trail and the Southwest Florida Water Management District regarding water management. Depending on ownership across the landscape, as well as the potential visitor-directed infrastructure additions such as a nature center, Hernando County may be consulted, as well as the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. Further, the trail users may be of local assistance regarding potential trail consultation for multi-use.

Management Cost Summary

| <u>FFS</u>                   | <u>Startup</u>                     | <u>Recurring</u> |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|
| Source of Funds              | Land Acquisition Trust Fund (LATF) | LATF             |
| Salary (1 FTE)               | \$75,000                           | \$75,000         |
| OPS (1 OPS)                  | \$50,000                           | \$50,000         |
| Resource Management          | \$100,000                          | \$35,000         |
| Capital Improvements         | \$20,000                           | \$10,000         |
| Visitor Services/ Recreation | \$15,000                           | \$10,000         |
| Support                      | \$50,000                           | \$15,000         |
| Administration               | WFC supervision                    | WFC supervision  |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                 | <b>\$310,000</b>                   | <b>\$195,000</b> |






Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted





### RIDGE MANOR GAP

#### HERNANDO COUNTY

-  Florida Forever Project Boundary\*
  -  Essential Parcels Remaining
  -  State Conservation Lands
  -  Other Conservation Lands
  -  Other Public Lands
- \*Project boundary has been generalized for map clarity.*

