

# Star Lake Connector

Critical Natural Lands

Putnam County

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2025
<i>Project Acres</i>	4,807
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	0
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	4,807
<i>2025 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$14,279,203

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Star Lake Connector project would close a significant gap between conservation lands extending from southern Alachua County eastward to Ocala National Forest. The project would also protect actively being restored habitat that could support a variety of imperiled wildlife species including gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*), wood stork (*Mycteria americana*) and Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*). In addition, the project would contribute to the surface water and floodplain protection of Orange Creek, an important tributary of the Ocklawaha River.

## General Description

The Star Lake Connector project is located 2.5 miles southeast of Hawthorne and would connect two large managed areas: Lochloosa Slough Preserve and Fox Pen Preserve (both owned by Alachua County) to the west, and Twin Creek Ranch Gopher Tortoise Longterm Recipient Site, Morrison and BJ Bar Ranch conservation easements to the east (both managed by St. Johns River Water Management District). The property surrounds a 900-acre area that includes Star Lake, Riley Lake and associated properties not included in the project boundary.

The property is currently used for a cow/calf operation, private recreation and wildlife management. Improved pasture is the dominate land cover (40 percent) within the project, with a portion being used for sod cultivation (±300 acres). The only improvements on site are a hunt camp and cow pens. Invasive species include cogon grass (*Imperata cylindrica*), which the landowner is currently working to eradicate.

Approximately one-third of the property contains natural or semi-natural (restoration) communities. The landowner is working to restore former pine plantations to historic sandhill

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and flatwoods with hopes of eventually becoming a gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) recipient site. Some areas have intact native groundcover and shrubs such as southern wiregrass (*Aristida beyrichiana*) and Florida rosemary (*Ceratiola ericoides*). Predominant wetland communities include baygall, bottomland forest and floodplain swamp associated with Orange Creek, which flows through the southern portion of the property and is a major tributary of the Ocklawaha River, an Outstanding Florida Water.

The Star Lake Connector project lies within Priority 3 of the Florida Ecological Greenways Network and both the Upper Silver River and Orange Creek Basin Management Action Plans. Despite historical land uses, the project provides habitat that could potentially support several rare and imperiled species such as the Eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon couperi*), Florida sandhill crane (*Antigone canadensis pratensis*), Southeastern fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger niger*) and Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*). During the site visit, gopher tortoise, wood stork, Florida sandhill crane (*Antigone canadensis*), little blue heron (*Egretta caerulea*) and tricolored heron (*Egretta tricolor*) were observed. In addition, the project contains drainages that support habitat for rare fish such as the bluenose shiner (*Pteronotropis welaka*) and the endemic southern tessellated darter (*Etheostoma olmstedii maculaticeps*) that only occurs within the Ocklawaha River watershed.

Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
Eastern indigo snake	G2G3/S2?
Wood stork	G4/S2
Florida sandhill crane	G5T2/S2
Piedmont jointgrass	G3/S3
Bald eagle	G5/S3
Southeastern fox squirrel	G5T5/S3

Public Use

The Star Lake Connector project is proposed for less-than-fee acquisition with no public access.

Acquisition Planning

**2025**

On October 10, 2025, the Acquisition and Restoration Council voted to add the Star Lake Connector project to the 2026 Florida Forever Priority List.





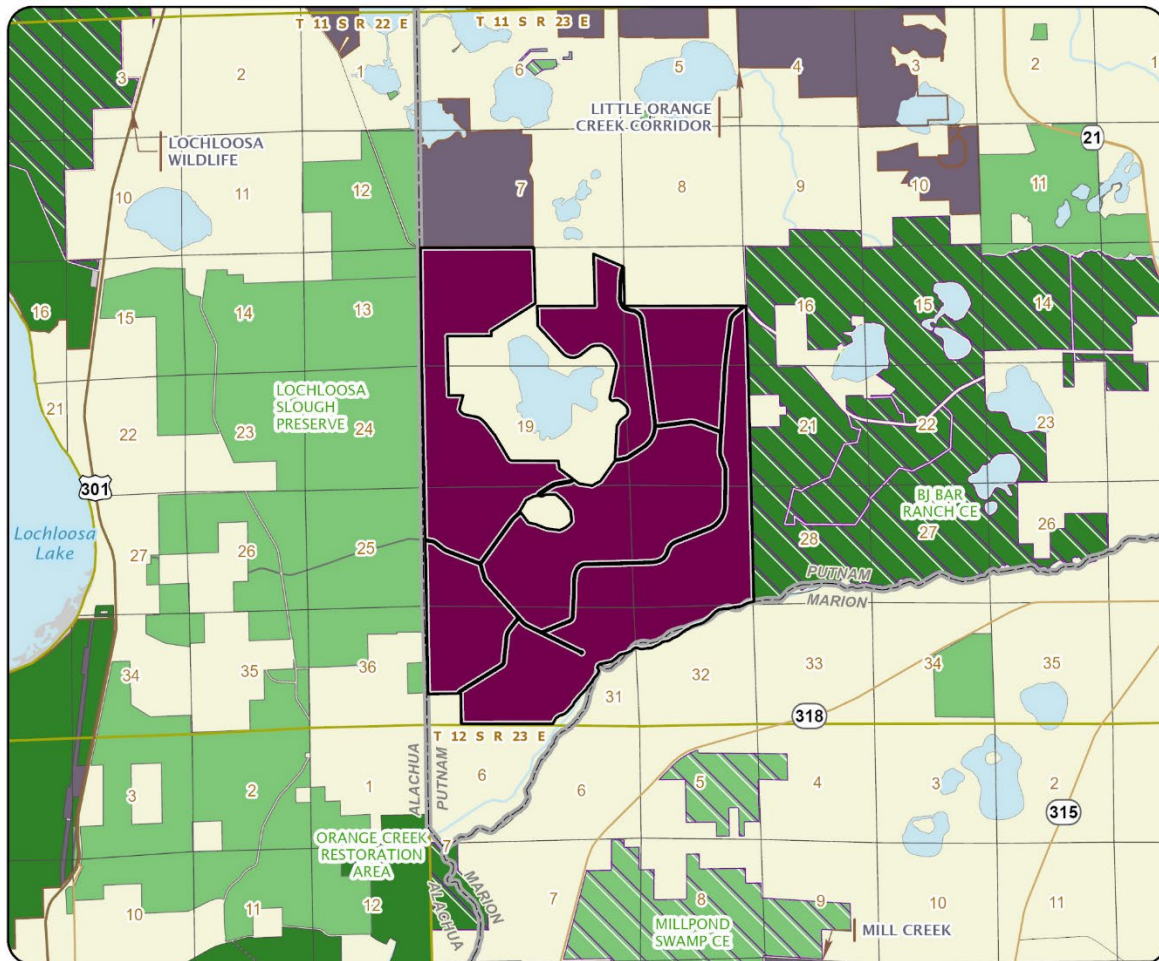
### Management Policy Statement

As a less-than-fee acquisition, the Star Lake Connector project would be managed by the landowner as outlined in the conservation easement.

### Manager(s)

If acquired less-than-fee, management responsibility of the Star Lake Connector 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.





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