

# Upper Shoal River

Critical Natural Lands

Walton County

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	<i>2003</i>
<i>Project Acres</i>	<i>13,702</i>
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	<i>2,495</i>
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	<i>11,207</i>
<i>2025 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	<i>\$42,983,156</i>

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Upper Shoal River project will conserve fragile resources within the Upper Shoal River watershed, protect unaltered and intact natural seepage streams and enhance habitat for rare and imperiled species. The project will support the creation of a connected landscape corridor with nearby conservation lands including important buffer lands surrounding Eglin Air Force Base.

## General Description

The Upper Shoal River project is comprised of four tracts which include part of the river and its floodplain. The first of the two tracts, the Pine Log Creek tract contains 9,727 acres and is located about 3.5 miles north of the river and abuts the Okaloosa County line. The second tract, Gum Creek, contains 2,300 acres and is located about five miles southeast of the Pine Log Creek tract. Combined, the two tracts contain approximately 20 miles of headwater tributary streams. The Permenter tract adds 329 acres just downstream of where the river forms from the confluence of Gum and Big Swamp creeks. The Shoal River Camp is a 1,338-acre tract situated along the river and mostly contains river floodplain. Conservation lands near the project include those on nearby Eglin Air Force Base, Yellow River Water Management Area and Blackwater River State Forest.

The project is characterized by high, rolling sandy hills that drain through rolling sandy hills downward through mesic or wet flatwoods and through slope forests into bottomland and floodplain forests along the seepage streams that are tributaries of the Shoal River. Most of the site's original pinelands have been disturbed by conversion to pine plantations that comprise most of the proposal. The Permenter tract features isolated areas of longleaf pine regeneration,





with some areas of native groundcover remaining. Uplands in the southeastern section of the Shoal River Camp tract appear to represent sandhill or possibly upland pine.

Upland communities in the Pine Log and Gum Creek tracts include approximately 750 acres of sandhill and 300 acres of upland hardwood forest or slope forest. Approximately 100 acres of mesic and wet flatwoods are interspersed around these other natural community types. The sandhill communities are in moderately good condition with an intact diverse indigenous groundcover including wiregrass. Forested wetlands have 1,550 acres of baygall, floodplain or bottomland forest. The actual seepage stream communities are about 10 acres. Neither of the tracts show evidence of intensive management activities. Fire has not occurred on the tracts for many years, resulting in increased fuel loads.

Imperiled or rare animal species either occurring or likely to occur within the project, include the blackmouth shiner (*Notropis melanostomus*), eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon couperi*), Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*) and gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*). Bear have been documented to use riparian corridors of the Shoal River and its tributaries in Okaloosa County, and to occur in Walton County. Slope forests, forested wetlands and seepage streams may support several listed plant and animal species, such as the pine barrens tree frog (*Hyla andersonii*), which has been documented to occur in the project area. Imperiled or rare plant species documented to occur in the proposed project include Arkansas oak (*Quercus arkansana*), mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*), red pitcher plant (*Sarracenia rubra*) and white-top pitcher plant (*Sarracenia leucophylla*). Other imperiled or rare plant species known to occur nearby that may occur in the proposed project include Florida flame azalea (*Rhododendron austrinum*), hairy wild indigo (*Baptisia calycosa var. villosa*) and yellow fringeless orchid (*Platanthera integra*).

Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) Element Occurrence Summary

<b><u>FNAI Elements</u></b>	<b><u>Score</u></b>
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
<i>Wherry's redflower pitcherplant*</i>	G3T1?/S1
Pine barrens treefrog	G3/S2S3
<i>Arkansas oak*</i>	G3/S3
<i>Mountain laurel*</i>	G5/S3
<i>*Plant species are in italics</i>	

**Public Use**

The Upper Shoal River project has the potential to provide a diverse resource-based recreational experience. The project parcels have good boundary configurations that will





enhance management efforts and are easily accessible from paved and unpaved public roads. The tracts can support a diversity of resource-based outdoor recreational opportunities. Hiking, off-road bicycling and horseback riding can be accommodated.

Horseback riding may be more appropriate for the larger Pine Log Creek tract. Depending on management emphasis, hunting would be suitable on the Pine Log Creek tract. The smaller Gum Creek tract is closer to residential areas and would not be as suitable for this activity. However, both tracts could support camping, natural resource appreciation and educational activities.

### Acquisition Planning

#### **2003**

On December 5, 2003, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) placed this fee-simple project on the Florida Forever project list.

#### **2011**

On December 9, 2011, ARC placed this project in the Critical Natural Lands category.

#### **2024**

In June 2024, ARC approved the addition of three parcels totaling approximately 329.26 acres in Walton County.

In December 2024, ARC approved the addition of five parcels totaling approximately 1,338.42 acres in Walton County to the project boundary.

#### **2025**

On March 11, 2025, DEP acquired, in fee, 2,479.84 acres in Walton County from The Trust for Public Land.

### Coordination

The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Department of Defense are acquisition partners for this project.

### Management Policy Statement

The primary land management goal for the Florida Forest Service (FFS) is to restore, maintain and protect in perpetuity all native ecosystems; to integrate compatible human use; and to ensure long-term viability of populations and species considered rare. This ecosystem approach will guide the FFS management activities on this project.





### Manager(s)

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and FFS will be co-managers. The Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Division of Recreation and Parks will manage the Gum Creek tract.

### Management Prospectus

FFS and FWC are prepared to share all management responsibilities for Upper Shoal River under a unified management concept. The project has the capability to provide important fish and wildlife habitat in a manner that is compatible with silviculture. Since the project goals include protecting biodiversity and providing natural resource-based recreational and educational opportunities, programs would be developed that serve to manage ecosystems for multiple use. Conservation and protection of native habitats and rare or imperiled species should be an important management goal for the project. Particular attention should be directed to the protection of upstream riparian systems that are an important habitat for imperiled fish and invertebrates. Under the unified management approach, timber stands would be managed to maintain a broad diversity of age classes ranging from young stands to areas with old growth characteristics. This would provide habitat for species that would be found in the natural environment, therefore benefitting biodiversity. The project area is near many users that enjoy fishing, hiking, hunting and wildlife viewing.

### **Qualifications for State Designation**

The project area consists of two separate tracts and ownerships situated in the Northern Highlands physiographic province (where some of Florida's highest elevations occur). The project includes headwater streams and creeks connected to the Shoal River system and is entirely within its watershed.

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

Upper Shoal River is a medium-need tract that will require up-front resource management activities, including the frequent use of prescribed fire where appropriate. Approximately 75 percent of the project area has been subjected to ground cover disturbance from past silvicultural activity; additional effort will be required to accomplish restoration. FFS and FWC propose to work cooperatively to assess site management needs and develop the conceptual management plan for the site. Examples of situations that may require cooperative effort include restoration of mesic and wet flatwoods previously managed for timber production, removal or thinning of off-site timber species to promote the regeneration of native ground covers and appropriate tree species and reforestation of recently harvested areas. As part of the





unified management approach, the managing agencies will conduct a historic vegetation analysis to determine appropriate desired future conditions and identify appropriate restoration methods and tools.

Other unified management priorities will include protection and restoration of sensitive wetlands along with the identification, control and follow-up monitoring of exotic species. Restoration methods will also include thinning of dense pine stands to decrease canopy cover and facilitate the restoration of native groundcovers. An adequate road system exists on both sites to assist with prescribed burning operations. Because many imperiled or rare species are expected to occur in the project, biotic surveys would be conducted as part of early unified management activities. Environmentally sensitive areas (such as erosion-prone sites, listed species habitats, outstanding natural areas and wetlands) are to be identified during the initial resource inventory to implement appropriate protective measures.

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

It is anticipated that during the first year after acquisition, both agencies will emphasize site security, posting boundaries, public access for low-intensity outdoor recreation, fire management, resource inventory and removing refuse. The managing agencies will meet frequently to coordinate task assignments and other related management duties. Both managing agencies will participate in the joint development of a conceptual management plan specifying area management goals and objectives.

Long-term goals would emphasize management and the conservation of the site's natural resources including timber, wildlife and water. These goals would include restoring habitat and hydrology and conserving and protecting listed species.

Following completion of plant community inventory and historic vegetation analysis, quantified vegetation management objectives would be developed pursuant to an objective-based vegetation management process. Where practical, disturbed sites would be restored to conditions expected to occur in naturally functioning ecosystems, including re-establishment of species expected to occur naturally on specific sites. Management would emphasize enhancement of abundance and spatial distribution of imperiled or rare species. Essential roads would be stabilized to provide all-weather public access and management operations. Programs providing multiple recreational uses would also be implemented.

Both agencies will work towards the development of a fire management plan that will apply prescribed burning in a manner that maximizes natural resource protection and enhancement. Whenever possible, existing roads, black lines, foam lines and natural breaks will be utilized to





contain, and control prescribed and natural fires. Growing season prescribed burning would be used where appropriate to best achieve management objectives. Where appropriate, timber resources will be managed using acceptable silvicultural practices.

Archaeological and historic sites would be managed in coordination with the Division of Historical Resources. A plan identifying road for vehicular access by the public, and roads required for administrative use will be developed. Unnecessary roads, fire lanes and hydrological disturbances would be abandoned or restored as practical. Other existing infrastructure necessary for management would be protected to the extent possible. Infrastructure development would be the minimum required to serve needs of the public, including provisions for facilities necessary for the security and management of the project area.

**Revenue-generating Potential**

Timber sales would be conducted as needed to improve or maintain desirable ecosystem conditions. Additional revenue could come from sales of hunting licenses, fishing licenses, wildlife management area permits and other special hunting permits. Some revenues might come from recreational user fees and ecotourism activities if such projects can be economically developed. Fifteen percent of all gross revenues will be returned to the county from which funds were generated. Both agencies have agreed to a unified management framework whereby all management funds, site-generated revenues and management expenditures are to be evenly divided between FFS and FWC.

**Cooperators in Management Activities**

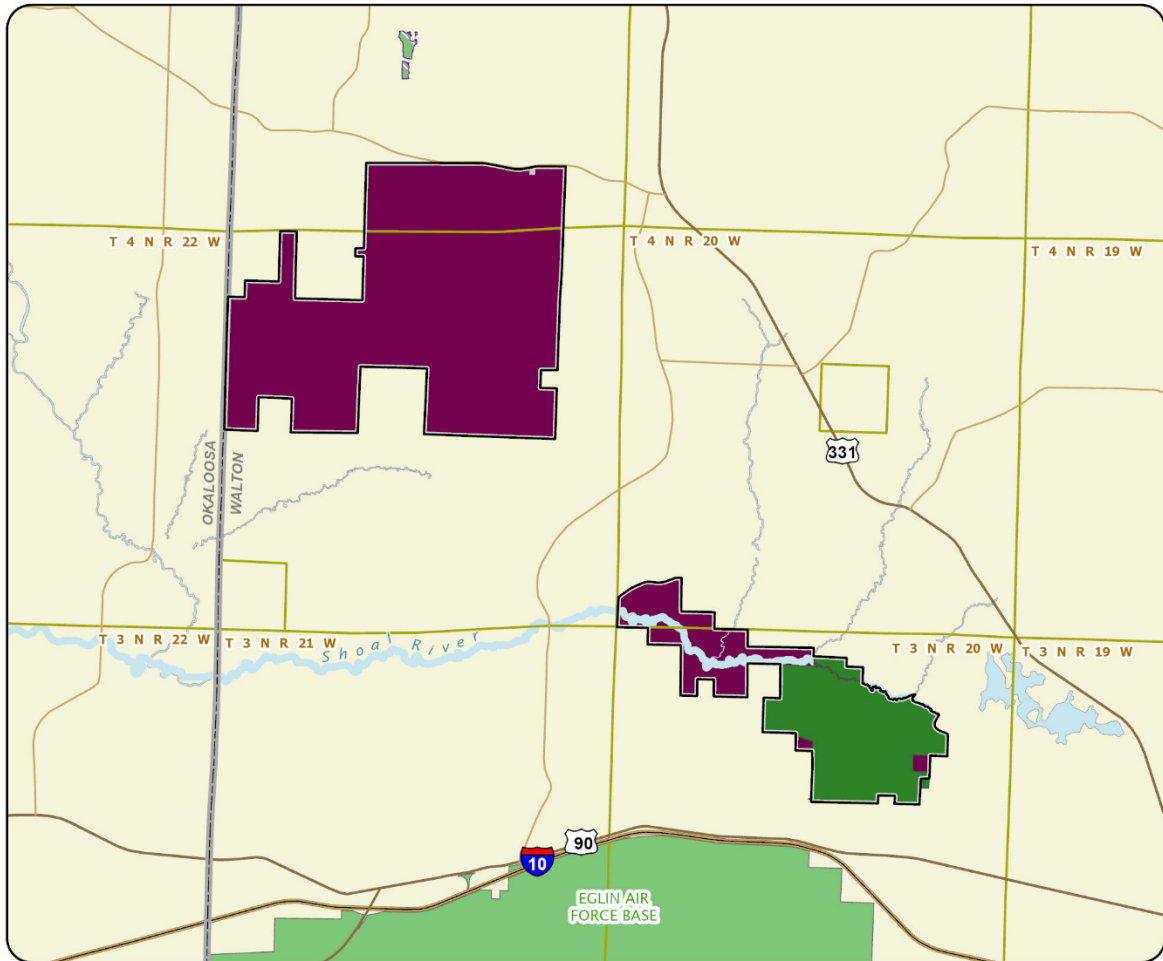
The unified managers (FFS and FWC) should cooperate with other state and local governmental agencies, including the Northwest Florida Water Management District, to manage the project area. The project should be designated as a state forest and wildlife management area.

Management Cost Summary

<u>FFS and FWC</u>	<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Source of Funds	LATF	LATF
Salary	\$82,345	\$33,072
OPS	not provided	not provided
Expense	\$2,187,189	\$58,179
OCO	\$372,162	\$286,236
TOTAL	\$2,641,696	\$377,487

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted





### UPPER SHOAL RIVER

#### WALTON COUNTY

