

Waccasassa Watershed

Partnerships and Regional Incentives

Levy County

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2023
<i>Project Acres</i>	44,893
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	37,168
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	7,725
<i>2025 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$26,480,714

Purpose for State Acquisition

The Waccasassa Watershed project will help ensure the water quality and quantity of Chunky Pond, the Waccasassa River and Waccasassa Bay, which drain into the Big Bend Seagrasses Aquatic Preserve before emptying into the Gulf of America. The project will also help expand ecological connections among existing conservation lands in the region, extending from Waccasassa Bay Preserve State Park to Goethe State Forest.

General Description

The Waccasassa Watershed project was created by combining several proposals, including Chunky Pond, Little Pine Ranch, Trailhead Blue Springs, Waccasassa Bay Headwaters and Waccasassa Flatwoods. The Waccasassa Watershed project surrounds Devil's Hammock Wildlife Management Area and the Upper Waccasassa Conservation Area. Goethe State Forest adjoins the southeastern border of the project.

The Waccasassa Watershed project will help to conserve several natural community types including hydric hammock, basin swamp, mesic hammock, wet flatwoods and floodplain swamp, among others. A variety of rare species have been documented on the project including swallow-tailed kite (*Elanoides forficatus*), Florida hasteola (*Hasteola robertiorum*) and gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*).

The Chunky Pond property includes the headwaters of Mule Creek, which flows into the Waccasassa River. This property also includes portions of wetlands with little alteration, these areas likely host a variety of migratory birds, reptiles and amphibians.

The Little Pine Ranch property features basin swamps on about a third of the site, with evidence of past logging. However, pond cypress was codominant in the canopy, along with slash pine





and red maple. This property is predominantly made up of pine plantations and mixed scrub-shrub wetland.

The Trailhead Blue Springs property is a working cow/calf cattle ranch, with the Waccasassa River crossing the northern portion of the site. Levy Blue Springs Park surrounds three sides of the property and features two springs, one of which is second magnitude. The acquisition of Trailhead Blue Springs would help maintain the water quality of the spring, the river, and the watershed.

The Waccasassa Bay Headwaters property is mostly made up of pine plantation and hydric hammock. There are also wetlands in good condition on site, which are likely to provide habitat for migratory birds, amphibians and reptiles.

The Waccasassa Flatwoods property is a working timber operation also used for hunting and recreation. In silviculture since the 1940s, the property’s uplands have largely been converted to pine plantation, interspersed with cypress-dominated dome swamps, hydric hammock and bottomland forest. Two tributaries of the Waccasassa River, Magee Branch and Otter Creek, flow through the property.

Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Swallow-tailed kite	G5/S2
<i>Florida hasteola*</i>	G1/S1
<i>Florida willow*</i>	G2G3/S2S3
Gopher frog	G2G3/S3
<i>Variable-leaved Indian-plantain*</i>	G3/S3
Bald eagle	G5/S3
Little blue heron	G5/S4
<i>*Plant species are in italics</i>	

Public Use

Property within the Waccasassa Watershed project is proposed for both fee simple and less-than-fee acquisition. The Waccasassa Flatwoods portion of the project would provide public access as an addition to Goethe State Forest, if acquired.





Acquisition Planning

2023

On October 13, 2023, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) voted to combine the Chunky Pond, Little Pine Ranch, Trailhead Blue Springs and Waccasassa Bay Headwaters proposals to create the Waccasassa Watershed Florida Forever project. The project is proposed for less-than-fee acquisition.

2024

In November 2024, ARC approved the addition of 16 parcels totaling approximately 948.60 acres in Levy County, five parcels totaling approximately 795.72 acres in Levy County and eight parcels totaling approximately 1,030.04 acres in Levy County.

On November 1, 2024, ARC approved the addition of the Waccasassa Flatwoods project proposal (21,664 acres) in Levy County to the project boundary. With this addition, the Waccasassa Watershed project is proposed for fee simple and less-than-fee acquisition.

2025

On June 18, 2025, DEP acquired a 1,978.4-acre conservation easement in Levy County from WMB Land LLC.

In September 2025, DEP acquired, in fee, 21,600.85 acres in Levy County from Rayonier Forest Resources. DEP also acquired a 794.58-acre conservation easement in Levy County from M3BLT, LLC and a 1,028.07-acre conservation easement in Levy County from Rocky Hammock Timber Corporation.

Coordination

This project was proposed by Alachua Conservation Trust (ACT), Florida Conservation Group, and the landowner. ACT through its partnership with the National Resources Conservation Services Regional Conservation Partnership Program may be partners in acquisition of the project. The Florida Forest Service (FFS) is proposed to manage the Waccasassa Flatwoods, if acquired.

Management Policy Statement – Waccasassa Flatwoods

The primary goals of the Waccasassa Flatwoods portion of the Waccasassa Watershed project are to practice sustainable forest management; provide resource-based recreation opportunities; restore and manage healthy forests and native ecosystems; protect





archaeological, historical and cultural resources; and to restore, maintain and protect hydrological functions.

Manager – Waccasassa Flatwoods

FFS is the identified manager of the Waccasassa Flatwoods portion of the Waccasassa Watershed project.

Management Prospectus – Waccasassa Flatwoods

Qualifications for State Designation

This property is adjacent to the Black Prong Tract on Goethe State Forest along County Road 343. FFS may manage this as a new tract on Goethe State Forest. The subject site will be managed with an emphasis on sustainable forest management.

Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management

Soil and Water Protection: Management activities will be executed in a manner to minimize soil erosion and impacts to both surface and groundwater. All silvicultural activities will be conducted in compliance with current Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' FFS Silviculture Best Management Practices.

Fire Management: Ideally, prescribed fire will be the primary tool utilized for resource management on the forest. The long-term goal of prescribed burning will be healthy forest ecosystem improvement which will include both dormant and growing season burns. Natural fire frequencies will be implemented when possible for each community once in maintenance status. Due to the absence of fire from the property, fuel loads on the property are high in most areas. Therefore, fire must be carefully reintroduced in a way that prevents/minimizes damage to the forest structure. As such, initial burns should be confined to the dormant season on days with lower temperatures and within a few days following a rain event. Areas with particularly heavy fuel loads may require mechanical treatment, such as mowing or roller chopping, prior to the reintroduction of fire.

Silvicultural Operations: Waccasassa Flatwoods will be managed to promote and improve overall forest health. Timber is a valuable economic resource, and timber harvesting for the purposes of ecological restoration, forest health improvement and revenue generation are recognized silvicultural objectives. Proposed silvicultural activities include both commercial timber harvests and timber stand improvement activities. Commercial timber harvests shall focus on removal of undesirable pine species to promote the health and vigor of the overstory and to promote natural or artificial regeneration of desired pine species. Timber stand





improvement projects may include both mechanical and chemical control of unwanted vegetation to promote healthy forests and habitat as appropriate for all natural communities. Care should be taken to both improve and maintain the existing road system throughout the site for practical management access.

Wildlife Management: Management of the wildlife resource on Waccasassa Flatwoods will largely focus on the rare species found in and around the property. A key attribute of this tract is adjacent or close in proximity to several existing conservation areas, including the Waccasassa Watershed project, Devil's Hammock, Upper Waccasassa Conservation Area and Sheppard Sanctuary. Waccasassa Flatwoods has the potential to provide habitat for Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*) and bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), as under-represented natural communities exist on-site including mesic/wet flatwoods and upland hardwood forest. Dome swamps and marshes exist on site and play an important role in supporting a variety of Florida's endangered species. Rare plants documented and others found on adjacent conservation lands include the Florida willow (*Salix floridana*), Godfrey's swamp privet (*Forestiera godfreyi*), variable-leaved Indian-plantain (*Arnoglossum diversifolium*) and diverseleaf crownbeard (*Verbesina heterophylla*). Reintroduction of fire into the flatwoods will further improve habitat for Florida black bear and bald eagle. It will be imperative to evaluate the effects management may have on the habitat of these and other rare species when conducting operations on site.

Non-native Invasive Species: Prevention should be the focus of non-native invasive species management. When such species are discovered, an eradication plan will be developed and implemented based upon the severity of the infestation and the availability of personnel and funding. At present, the only observed non-native species onsite are areas of wild hog (*Sus scrofa*) damage. Potentially, cogon grass (*Imperata cylindrica*) and climbing fern (*Lygodium* sp.) may exist along major rights of way.

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

Once the property is acquired and FFS assumes management, short-term efforts will concentrate on onsite security and management planning. Consideration will be given in the management planning process to accommodate recreational development. The magnitude and diversity of future resource-based recreation opportunities offered will depend on establishment of a management plan for the property, funding for positions, and potential funding for and usage of infrastructure.

Revenue-generating Potential





Most uplands on Waccasassa Flatwoods are pine plantation. In accordance with the management plans, staff will conduct timber harvests and other management activities to achieve or maintain uneven-aged or even-aged forest structure, as appropriate. Given the proximity to forest product processing facilities, timber harvests should provide significant revenue over time. However, the planted pine stands on the tract have been thoroughly merchandised over the last 3-8 years. Marketable timber has been thinned or harvested followed by reforestation. As such, the planted pine stands on the tract are of a young age. The estimated average age the current aggregate of planted pine stands is between 6 and 8 years. Recreation developments will provide long-term opportunities for revenue while providing access to the public. Additionally, there may be opportunities for apiary leases and fuelwood harvests.

Cooperators in Management Activities

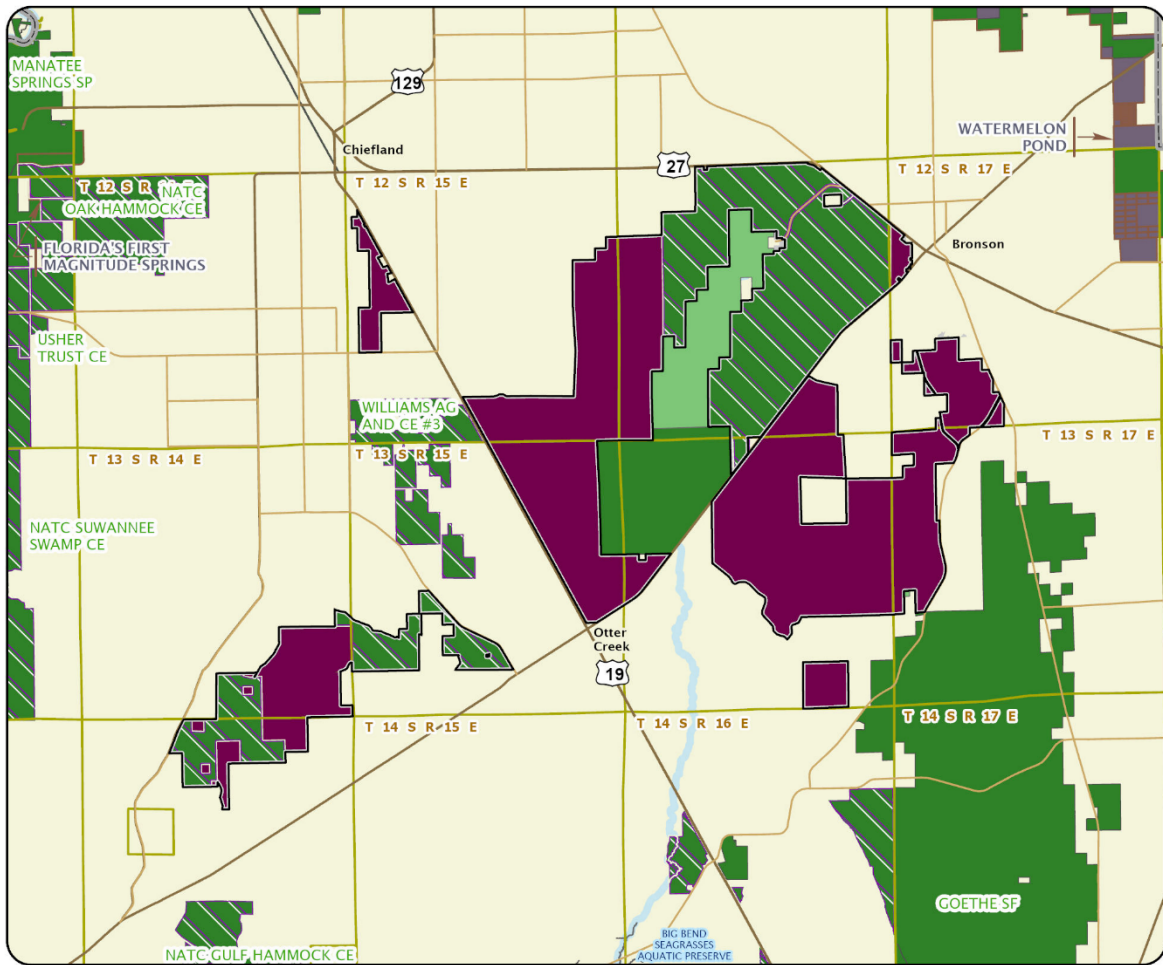
FFS may liaise with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Department of Environmental Protection, local governments, other state agencies and the Suwannee River Water Management District to further resource management, recreational and educational opportunities.

Management Cost Summary

FFS	Startup	Recurring
Source	LATF	Not Provided
Salary (1 FTE)	\$53,000	Not Provided
Expense	\$60,000	Not Provided
OCO	\$10,000	Not Provided
TOTAL	\$123,000	Not Provided

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted.





WACCASASSA WATERSHED

LEVY COUNTY

