

# Wekiva-Ocala Greenway

Critical Natural Lands

Lake, Orange, Seminole and Volusia Counties

|   |               |
|---|---------------|
| <i>Year Added to Priority List</i>            | 1995          |
| <i>Project Acres</i>                          | 80,224        |
| <i>Acquired Acres</i>                         | 59,262        |
| <i>Remaining Project Acres</i>                | 20,962        |
| <i>2025 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i> | \$198,384,210 |

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The springs, rivers, lakes, swamps and uplands stretching north from Orlando to the Ocala National Forest are an important refuge for the Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*) and a variety of other wildlife. The Wekiva-Ocala Greenway project will protect these species and the Wekiva and St. Johns River basins by creating natural corridors connecting the Wekiva Basin state parks with the Ocala National Forest. It will provide the people of the Orlando area with access to outdoor resource-based recreation and support the Florida National Scenic Trail, a statewide non-motorized trail that crosses several Florida Forever project sites.

## General Description

The project provides an important link between Ocala National Forest and the extensive state holdings along the Wekiva River. It is habitat for many rare animal species including Florida black bear, Florida sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis*), eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon couperi*), Florida scrub-jay, southern fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger niger*), Florida scrub lizard (*Sceloporus woodi*) and gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*). It incorporates most of the forested wetlands along the St. Johns River and Wekiva River between Orlando and Ocala National Forest. The St. Johns River site consists of three large bottomlands and adjacent uplands between three existing state ownerships. The Seminole Springs/Woods site is reported to have between 50-75 springs within its boundary. The Wekiva-Ocala Connector site provides a critical wildlife corridor between Ocala National Forest and the other portions of the project along the Wekiva River.





Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) Element Occurrence Summary

| <b><u>FNAI Elements</u></b> | <b><u>Score</u></b> |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| Florida scrub-jay           | G2/S2               |
| Swallow-tailed kite         | G5/S2               |
| Florida black bear          | G5T4/S4             |
| <i>Okeechobee gourd*</i>    | G1/S1               |
| Striped newt                | G2/S2               |
| Eastern indigo snake        | G2G3/S2?            |
| Gopher tortoise             | G3/S3               |
| Bald eagle                  | G5/S3               |
| <i>Florida hasteola*</i>    | G1/S1               |
| Seminole spring siltsnail   | G1/S1               |
| St. Johns elephantear       | G1G2/S1S2           |
| Short-tailed snake          | G2/S2               |

*\*Plant species are in italics*

**Public Use**

The project sites are designated as state reserves or preserves and state forests, offering opportunities for canoeing, hiking, fishing and camping. Acquisition would also help complete the Florida National Scenic Trail, a statewide non-motorized trail that crosses several Florida Forever project sites.

**Acquisition Planning**

**1994**

On November 18, 1994, the Land Acquisition Advisory Council approved combining the Seminole Springs/Woods, Wekiva-Ocala Connector, St. Johns River and BMK Ranch projects and renaming the project Wekiva-Ocala Greenway. Based on GIS data, the approximate total project acreage was 67,585 acres. Seminole Springs/Woods: Seminole Springs - core tracts include Strawn Tract; M.S. Carter (acquired); and Brumlick parcels (acquired through eminent domain). Wekiva-Ocala Connector: Core Tracts West - Maxwell and Holman (acquired); Shockley (acquired); Harper (acquired by the St. Johns River Water Management District; SJRWMD); Alger Enterprises (acquired); Fisch (acquired by SJRWMD); Southland Gardens (contingent upon the acquisition of Harper and Fisch); Clemmons (acquired); Blaskovic (acquired); Kittridge (acquired). Core Tracts East - Stetson University (acquired); Stein; Lenholt Farms; Francolino (acquired); Jung (acquired); Hollywood Pines, Inc. St. Johns River: New Garden Coal, the largest ownership, was acquired in 2005. The BMK Ranch parcel has been acquired.

**1995**

On October 30, 1995, the Land Acquisition Advisory Council approved a fee-simple, ± 5,616-acre addition to the project boundary. It was sponsored by Eastern Marketing Inc. and consisted of





multiple landowners and parcels. All tracts were designated as essential. In addition, the project phasing was removed.

In 1995, the Lake Tracey parcel (441 acres) was donated to the Lake County Water Authority.

### **1996**

On October 30, 1996, the Land Acquisition Advisory Council approved a fee-simple, 425-acre addition to the project boundary. It was sponsored by the Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Division of State Lands, consisted of seven landowners (Jung, Hollywood Pines, Miranda Trust, Overstreet, New Garden Coal, Seminole Springs and Fisch) and 12 parcels. Other acquisitions in the Wekiva Basin totaled 18,400 acres and included Wekiva Buffers, Wekiwa Springs State Park, Rock Springs Run, Lower Wekiva River State Park, Hontoon Island State Recreation Area and Blue Spring State Park.

### **1997**

On July 18, 1997, the Land Acquisition Advisory Council approved a fee-simple, 128-acre addition to the project boundary. It was sponsored by the landowner, Conway Kittredge, who already had 20 acres in the current project boundary. Any portion of the addition that is not needed for resource protection or management will be surplus.

### **1998**

On December 3, 1998, the Land Acquisition and Management Advisory Council approved a fee-simple, 1,507-acre addition to the project boundary. It was sponsored by DEP's Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) and consisted of 20 parcels. At the time, the parcels were owned by Neighborhood Lakes LTD and Lake Lerla LTD Partnership and were designated as essential parcels. They were subsequently purchased by BARN, LLC.

On December 16, 1998, SJRWMD established the Holman conservation easement (1,041 acres) in the project boundary.

### **2001**

On December 6, 2001, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) approved a fee-simple, 5,455-acre addition to the project boundary. It was sponsored by the Wekiva Basin Working Group, consisted of 14 sites, multiple landowners and parcels and 13 tracts.

### **2002**

On December 5, 2002, ARC approved a fee-simple, 5,455-acre addition to the project boundary.





## **2003**

On June 12, 2003, Florida Communities Trust (FCT) acquired Kelly Park (109.39 acres).

## **2004**

On June 4, 2004, ARC approved a less-than-fee, 572-acre addition to the project boundary. The property, owned by Robert Maxwell, consisted of two parcels and was sponsored by the owner's representative, Roland Pacetti Realty.

## **2006**

On August 15, 2006, the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund (BOT) approved the purchase of a conservation easement from Robert Maxwell.

On December 8, 2006, ARC approved a fee-simple 77-acre addition in Lake County (a.k.a. the Ellis and Windsor tracts) to the project boundary. It was sponsored by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and consisted of two parcels with two owners (Natalie Windsor and Jerry Ellis). DRP will manage the 17-acre Windsor tract as part of Lower Wekiva River Preserve State Park. The 60-acre Ellis tract will be managed by the Florida Forest Service (FFS) as part of Seminole State Forest.

On December 19, 2006, the BOT acquired approximately 1,584 acres.

## **2007**

On March 2, 2007, Neighborhood Lakes (210.5 acres) was created in the project boundary by SJRWMD and Lake County.

On October 10, 2007, Lake County acquired Peavy/Cardinal Homes (74 acres) in the project boundary.

On December 14, 2007, ARC approved a fee-simple 675-acre addition to the project boundary. Known as the Pine Plantation Addition, it was sponsored by Henry Dean Esq. and consisted of five parcels with four landowners. DRP will manage the parcels. The parcels have been designated essential. Approximately 421 acres of the addition have been acquired and are being managed as part of the greenway.

## **2008**

On June 10, 2008, Lake County acquired the Ellis Acres Reserve (410 acres), of which 121 acres are in the project boundary.

On September 30, 2008, the BOT approved the purchase of 385 acres from Project Orlando LLC; Pinestraw Partners LLC; and Herscho Properties, Inc.





On October 3, 2008, a 345-acre parcel was purchased from Palmer ownership in Pine Plantation for \$24,930,304. About 40 acres in the southeast corner of the Palmer parcel was acquired by the Orlando-Orange County Expressway Authority for a future conveyance to Orange County for a park.

On November 20, 2008, the BOT approved a 36-acre purchase from Project Orlando LLC.

In November 2008, 35.7 acres of the Project Orlando, LLC ownership were purchased. DRP will manage the site.

## **2009**

On March 27, 2009, 307.17 acres were purchased from the Orlando-Orange County Expressway Authority for BARN, LLP parcel (reimbursement of \$10 million paid by the Authority—Neighborhood Lakes, Phase II).

In June 2009, Orange County acquired the Pine Plantation Property (40 acres) in the project boundary.

## **2011**

On March 15, 2011, TNC acquired the Hollywood Pines Tract (651 acres) in the project boundary.

On July 27, 2011, SJRWMD established the Sutton Ranch conservation easement (198 acres), of which 186 acres are in the project boundary.

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

## **2016**

On August 8, 2016, ARC added the Shell Creek/Ginsbach parcel (30 acres) to the project boundary.

## **2017**

In 2017, a total of 236.26 acres in the project were acquired using Florida Forever program funding.

## **2020**

In September 2020, the 4.6-acre “Arnold” parcel was acquired for \$253,300 and will be managed by FFS as part of Seminole State Forest.

On December 11, 2020, ARC approved the addition of 9 acres (Wekiva River Islands) in Seminole County and a 170-acre parcel (St. Johns Riverbend) in Volusia County to the project boundary.





## **2022**

In 2022, DEP acquired 150.21 acres in fee in partnership with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and FFS from Ann and Fred Hunter that will be managed as part of Seminole State Forest.

## **2023**

In December 2023, ARC approved the addition of two parcels totaling approximately 138.2 acres in Lake County to the project boundary.

## **2024**

On January 29, 2024, DEP acquired, in fee, 9.7 acres in Lake County from Sue Lee.

On April 10, 2024, DEP acquired, in fee, 31.8 acres in Lake County from the estate of Mercedes Murrell.

## **2025**

In February 2025, ARC removed approximately 1,953 acres from the project boundary that were deemed unsuitable for state acquisition.

On June 20, 2025, DEP acquired, in fee, 0.02 acres in Lake County from LJR Property Solutions, LLC.

On November 5, 2025, DEP acquired, in fee, 664 acres in Lake County from TNC.

### Coordination

Department of Transportation, FCT, Lake County Water Authority, Orlando-Orange County Expressway Authority, SJRWMD and TNC are all acquisition partners in the project.

### Management Policy Statement

The primary management goals of the Wekiva-Ocala Greenway project are: to conserve and protect lands that contain native, relatively unaltered species representing a natural area unique to or scarce within a region of the state or a larger geographic area; to conserve and protect significant habitat for native or imperiled species; to conserve, protect, manage or restore important ecosystems, landscapes and forests in order to enhance or protect significant water, recreational, timber or wildlife resources; to provide areas for natural-resource-based recreation; and to preserve significant archaeological or historical sites.





## Manager(s)

FFS proposes to manage the Seminole Springs and western connector portions of the project. The remainder will be managed by DRP. DRP may elect to assume management of the western portion of the Strawn property later if it is purchased.

## Management Prospectus

### **Qualifications for State Designation**

The large size, variety of forest resources and diversity of the former Seminole Springs and the western Wekiva-Ocala Connector projects make them highly desirable for management as a state forest. The quality of resources on the remainder of the project makes them suitable for state preserves.

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

On the portion to be managed by FFS, there are no known disturbances that will require extraordinary attention, so the level of management intensity is expected to be typical for a state forest. The portion to be managed by DRP, the BMK Ranch (acquired), is a high-need management area, while the Eastern Connector of the former Wekiva-Ocala Connector project and the former St. Johns River project are low-need management areas. The BMK Ranch is expected to have a higher level of recreational use and development compatible with resource management than the other properties.

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

About 8,000 acres have been purchased by the state and SJRWMD and have been assigned to FFS for management as Seminole State Forest. FFS is currently providing for public access for low-intensity, non-facilities-related outdoor recreation. Initial activities include securing the site, providing public and fire management access, inventorying resources and removing refuse. The project's natural resources and threatened and endangered species will be inventoried to provide the basis for a management plan. Long-range plans for the property will generally be directed toward restoring disturbed areas to their original conditions, as well as protecting threatened and endangered species. An all-season burning program will use existing roads, black lines, foam lines and natural breaks to contain fires wherever possible. Timber management will mostly involve improvement thinning and regeneration harvests. Plantations will be thinned and reforested with species found in natural ecosystems. Stands will not have a targeted rotation age. Infrastructure will primarily be in disturbed areas and will be the minimum required for management and public access. DRP will promote recreation and environmental education. For DRP, within the first year after acquisition, management activities will concentrate on site security, natural and cultural resource protection and the development of a plan for long-term public use and resource management.





### Revenue-generating Potential

FFS will sell timber as needed to improve or maintain desirable ecosystem conditions. These sales will provide a variable source of revenue, but the revenue-generating potential for the project is expected to be low. DRP expects no significant revenue to be generated initially. After acquisition, it will probably be several years before any significant public facilities are developed on the BMK Ranch properties, and public facilities will probably not be a major emphasis. The amount of any future revenue will depend on the nature and extent of public use and facilities.

### Cooperators in Management Activities

FFS will cooperate with and seek the assistance of other state agencies, local government entities and interested parties as appropriate. DRP recommends no local governments or others for management of its project area.

#### Management Cost Summary

| <u>DRP</u>      | <u>1996/97</u> | <u>1997/98</u> |
|-----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Source of Funds | SPTF/LATF/CARL | SPTF/LATF/CARL |
| Salary          | \$0            | \$0            |
| OPS             | \$425          | \$425          |
| Expense         | \$5,739        | \$5,739        |
| OCO             | \$0            | \$0            |
| FCO             | \$38,798       | \$0            |
| TOTAL           | \$44,962       | \$6,164        |

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted

#### Management Cost Summary

| <u>FFS (Seminole State Forest)</u> | <u>1995/96</u> | <u>1996/97</u> |
|------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Source of Funds                    | CARL           | CARL           |
| Salary                             | \$35,440       | \$64,440       |
| OPS                                | \$0            | \$4,500        |
| Expense                            | \$22,600       | \$40,225       |
| OCO                                | \$0            | \$29,270       |
| FCO                                | \$0            | \$0            |
| TOTAL                              | \$58,040       | \$138,435      |

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted



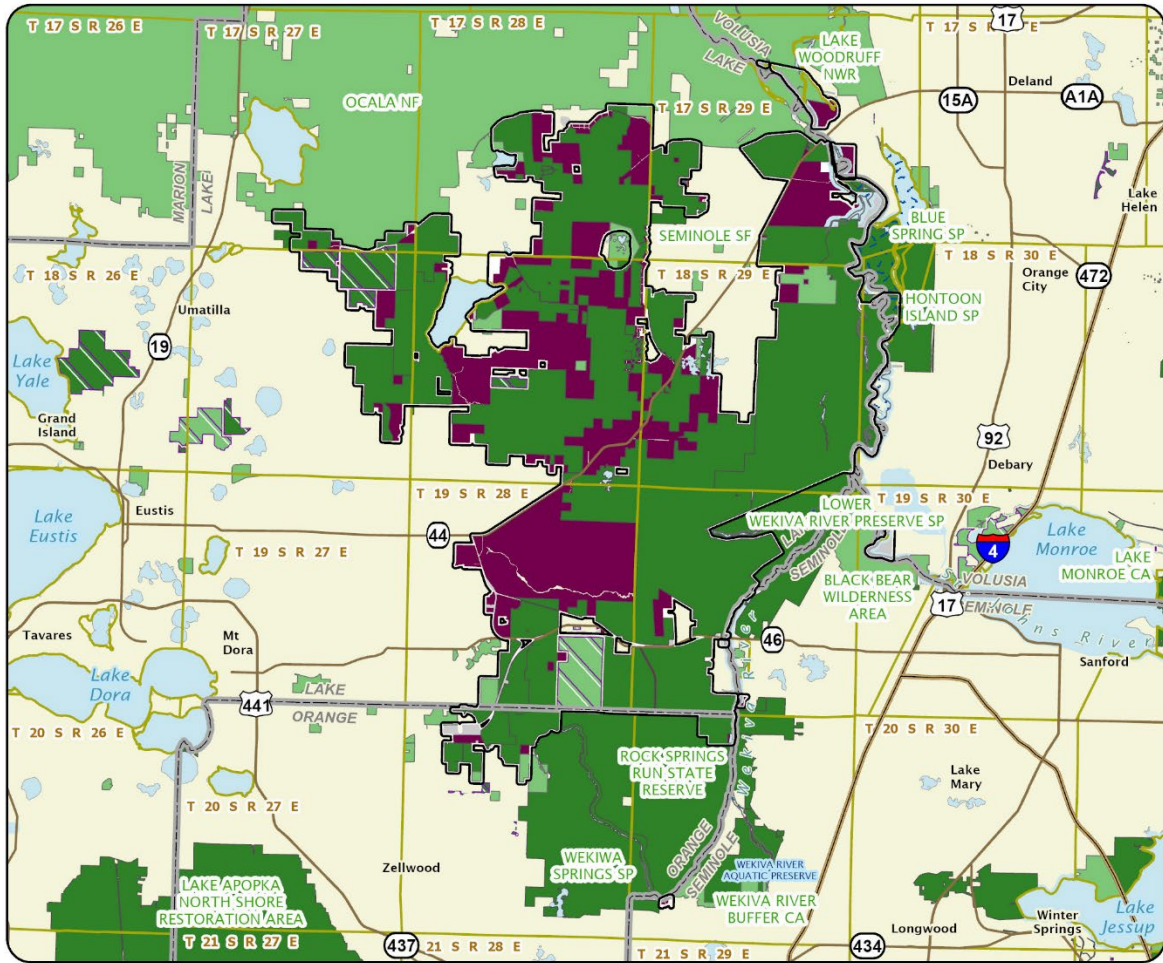


Management Cost Summary

| <u>FFS (Wekiva-Ocala Connector: West Corridor)</u> | <u>Startup</u> | <u>Recurring</u> |
|--|----------------|------------------|
| Source of Funds                                    | CARL           | CARL             |
| Salary   | \$28,140       | \$28,140         |
| OPS  | \$0            | \$0              |
| Expense  | \$20,000       | \$15,000         |
| OCO  | \$90,400       | \$4,500          |
| FCO  | \$0            | \$0              |
| TOTAL  | \$138,540      | \$47,640         |

*Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted*





### WEKIVA-OCALA GREENWAY

#### LAKE, ORANGE, SEMINOLE, AND VOLUSIA COUNTIES

- Florida Forever Project Boundary\*
  - Essential Parcels Remaining
  - Other Florida Forever Projects
  - State Conservation Lands
  - Other Conservation Lands
  - Other Public Lands
  - Less-Than-Fee Acquisition
  - State Aquatic Preserve
- \*Project boundary has been generalized for map clarity.

