

# Blue Head Ranch

Critical Natural Lands

Highlands

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2012
<i>Project Acres</i>	43,051
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	0
<i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i>	\$0
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	43,051
<i>2020 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$21,056,030

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Blue Head Ranch project will protect a large portion of the Fisheating Creek watershed and interlinked hydrological system, including creek frontage and important tributaries. The project will extend conservation ownership and management in a region of the state with renowned, high quality natural, hydrological and wildlife resources. Additionally, the project encompasses a wide range and diversity of natural resources within a matrix dominated by high quality natural communities, including large blocks of endemic Dry Prairie and Mesic Flatwoods communities. The Blue Head Ranch project also serves to capture, store and slowly release substantial volumes of water that ultimately make their way to the interconnected downstream ecosystems of Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

## General Description

Blue Head Ranch is in the heart of the native, and endemic, Florida grassland country that stretches north and west of Lake Okeechobee. The entire Blue Head Ranch ownership lies within Highlands County, Florida, straddling the northern and southern sides of S.R. 70. Blue Head Ranch is a working ranch with approximately 4,000 head of cattle and associated facilities and employee residences.

Pasture is interspersed among prairie, hammocks, and depressional wetlands throughout the property with the largest pasture occurring in the southern quarter of the proposal. Fisheating Creek has been channelized for about 75 percent of its length through the property but retains a more natural flow at the southern end of the project. Other ditching, some substantial, is present throughout the ranch along roads and through wetlands. There are woods roads throughout most of the property and several regularly graded limerock roads.

One, very large, block of improved pasture along the southern boundary of the was the site of the old Graham Dairy and was previously owned by the family of former Florida Governor and U.S. Senator Bob Graham. Although highly disturbed, the pasture areas often support abundant vertebrate wildlife, including several rare species.

### FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

FNAI Elements	Score
Florida scrub-jay	G1G2/S1S2
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
Florida Keys sweat bee	G2/S2
Florida sandhill crane	G5T2/S2
<i>Edison's ascyrum</i>	G2G3/S2S3
Short-tailed hawk	G4G5/S1
<i>cutthroatgrass</i>	G3/S3
Wood stork	G4/S2
Bachman's sparrow	G3/S3
Crested caracara	G5/S2
Bald eagle	G5/S3

#### Public Use

Public use would depend on the property being acquired in full fee or less-than-fee. If acquired in less-than-fee, public access would be dependent on the landowner's consent. The property could be used for hiking, geocaching, bird watching, and primitive camping if it were publicly accessible.

#### Acquisition Planning

##### **1987**

Much of this area was submitted as a proposal and approved as a project in 1986. However, the landowner requested its removal from the list in 1987 because he was not interested in selling the land.

##### **2012**

On August 17, 2012, the current project was presented to ARC by TNC and Realtor Dean Saunders representing the landowner. The proposal was approved by ARC as a Florida Forever project in the Critical Natural Lands category on December 14, 2012. It had an estimated tax assessed value of \$5,559,153.

##### **2015**

On June 19, 2015, ARC approved evaluation of a new project proposal for A.P. Ranch, 822 acres in Highlands County adjacent to the Blue Head Ranch Florida Forever project. At the October 16, 2015 ARC meeting this was project, with a 2015 tax assessed value of \$255,910, was approved. ARC added this acreage into the boundary of the adjacent Blue Head Ranch Florida Forever project. This proposal is three parcels south of Lake Placid, all bordering the Blue Head Ranch Florida Forever project, but hydrologically connected to the Fisheating Creek area. The land is a mix of improved pasture that has been regularly burned (694 acres), scattered natural pines (467 acres) and wetland forests (448 acres).

#### Coordination

This project would help establish a wildlife corridor between the Lake Wales Ridge and the SFWMD's Bright Hour Watershed Conservation Easement. There are no acquisition partners currently.



### **Management Policy Statement**

The primary goals of managing the Blue Head Ranch are to establish a landscape-size connection with adjacent conservation properties, to ensure the environmental and hydrological health of the Florida Everglades Ecosystem with minimal residential and commercial development and provide and enhance habitat of numerous rare species and imperiled communities.

### **Manager(s)**

The project could be acquired through less-than-fee acquisition. If acquired in full fee, FWC would be the designated manager.

### **Management Prospectus**

#### **Qualifications for state designation**

The Blue Head Ranch would conserve, protect, manage, or restore important ecosystems, landscapes, and forests, enhance or protect significant surface water and wildlife resources, and conserve, protect, manage or restore the Fisheating Creek and other area watersheds and the interconnected downstream systems of Lake Okeechobee and the Florida Everglades. The project would also conserve and protect significant landscape scale habitat and provide wildlife corridors.

#### **Conditions affecting intensity of management**

The intensity of the management of Blue Head Ranch would depend on the conditions of its acquisition or its monitoring. Much of the area used for cattle ranching is dry prairie that has been converted to improved pasture, with ditching, clearing, tilling, and reseeding with specific grass types.

#### **Management implementation, Public access, Site security and Protection of infrastructure**

If acquired and leased to FWC for management, they will develop a management plan describing the management goals and objectives necessary to implement future resource management. The management plan will also establish the current and future roles of cooperating entities including governmental agencies, non-government organizations and other stakeholders.

#### **Revenue-generating potential**

Revenue from conservation lands such as Blue Head Ranch can include permits and recreational user fees and ecotourism activities, if such projects could be economically developed. Area regulations would be developed to identify the necessary and required permits, fees and regulations. Timber sales from thinning operations or restoration of off-site plantations may also yield additional revenue. Apiary leases will be considered as a revenue source depending on the area meeting the criteria of FWC's Apiary Policy. Additionally, cattle grazing leases may also be considered, contingent upon the suitability of the site within FWC's cattle grazing criteria.

**Cooperators in management activities**

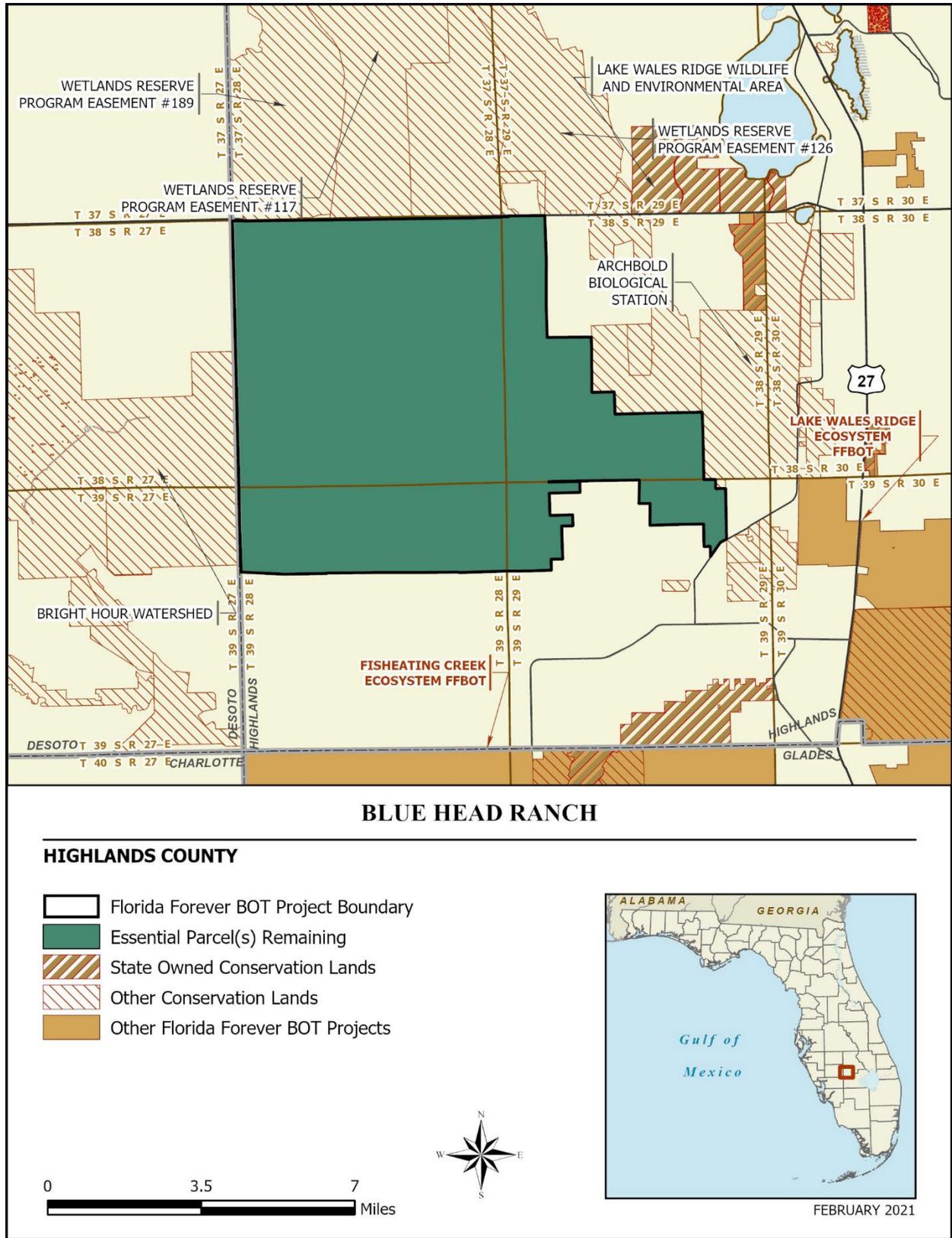
If Blue Head Ranch is acquired and leased to FWC for management, FWC will cooperate with other Federal, State and local governmental agencies including FWS, USDA, FFS DEP, SFWMD, and Highlands County, among others, in management of the property.

Management Cost Summary

FWC	Startup	Recurring
Source of Funds	LATF	LATF
OCO	\$0	\$1,992,098
FCO	\$6,490,240	\$424,299
TOTAL	\$6,490,240	\$2,416,397

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted in 2012





Map 1: FNAI, February 2021