

Fisheating Creek Ecosystem

Less-Than-Fee

Glades, Highlands

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2000
<i>Project Acres</i>	190,739
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	68,526
<i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i>	\$55,628,563
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	122,213
<i>2020 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$552,472,833

Purpose for State Acquisition

Fisheating Creek, the only undammed tributary to Lake Okeechobee, flows through vast prairies and flatwoods primarily owned by Lykes Brothers, Inc. The Fisheating Creek Ecosystem project will acquire both less-than-fee and fee-simple property to help preserve this natural land, which links the Okaloacoochee Slough, Big Cypress Swamp, Babcock-Webb Wildlife Management Area, and Lake Okeechobee. This project will also help to ensure the survival of the Florida panther, swallow-tailed kite, and other native plants and animals that require these natural lands. It may also help complete the Florida National Scenic Trail, a statewide non-motorized trail that crosses several Florida Forever project sites.

General Description

Natural communities in the project area include dry prairies and flatwoods interrupted by numerous freshwater marshes, including seepage slopes, wet prairies, and depression marshes. Diverse prairie hammocks occur east of U.S. 27. Hydric hammocks, bottomland forests, and floodplain swamp along Fisheating Creek comprises the remaining natural communities. Large areas of the project are improved pasture, former and current eucalyptus plantations, or current pine plantations. Invasive exotic plants are largely confined to the Hoover Dike system around Lake Okeechobee.

As one of the largest natural areas in the Florida peninsula, with a strategic position between several untouched native areas, the project is important for the protection of rare plants and animals through conservation connectivity. The area includes large populations of plants endemic to central Florida, notably: Edison's ascyrum, cutthroat grass, and nodding pinweed. The proposal is extremely important as a Strategic Habitat Conservation Area for the Florida panther and the American swallow-tailed kite, as well as Audubon's crested caracara, snail kite, Florida grasshopper sparrow, Florida sandhill crane, mottled duck, red-cockaded woodpecker, short-tailed hawk, and recorded breeding grounds for bald eagles.

While the water quality of Fisheating Creek and Gator Slough is good, agricultural runoff has impaired some of the canals in the project.

The project area includes at least 31 archaeological sites, many associated with the important Fort Center Site Complex of the Belle Glades culture (500 B.C. to A.D. 1700). More recent sites are also known, and there is potential for many more to be discovered in the project. The Fort Center Complex also offers an opportunity for an interpretive center.

FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

FNAI Elements	Score
Florida panther	G5T1/S1
Swallow-tailed kite	G5/S2
Florida scrub-jay	G1G2/S1S2
Red-cockaded woodpecker	G3/S2
Eastern indigo snake	G3/S2?
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
<i>wedge-leaved button-snakeroot</i>	G1/S1
<i>Carter's warea</i>	G1/S1
<i>Florida blazing star</i>	G2/S2
<i>Highlands scrub hypericum</i>	G2/S2
Southwest Florida stelis bee	G2/S2

Public Use

This project is proposed as a WMA, with uses such as hunting, hiking, and wildlife observation. A portion of the Fisheating Creek Ecosystem project is proposed for less-than-fee acquisition and does not provide for public access. However, the fee-simple portion of the project could support such activities as hiking, horseback riding, hunting, fishing, and canoeing.

Acquisition Planning

1999

On May 6, 1999, the LAMAC added the Fisheating Creek Ecosystem project, in Glades and Highlands counties, to the CARL Priority list. This less-than-fee acquisition, sponsored by TNC, consisted of approximately 168,360 acres, a single owner, Lykes Bros. Inc., and a 1999 taxable value of \$22,297,408.

On May 25, 1999, the BOT approved a settlement agreement with Lykes Bros. Inc. on the case of Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund v. Lykes Bros. Inc. The settlement agreement was contingent upon, among other things, a multiple-phase, and combined less-than-fee acquisition.

2000

On December 12, 2000, the ARC approved a less-than-fee addition, in Glades County, to the project boundary. This addition, also known as the Venus Ranch, sponsored by TNC, consisted of approximately 8,400 acres with a single owner at a 1999 taxable value of \$667,863. The Fisheating Creek project was



also moved to Group A of the Florida Forever Priority list. This easement was acquired by the BOT in 2003.

2002

On August 15, 2002, the ARC approved an addition, seized by law enforcement in Glades County, to the project boundary. The .46-acre Lucky Whidden parcel was sponsored by the DSL and FWC. It had a 2001 taxable value of \$4,000.

2004

On June 16, 2004, the ARC approved a fee-simple addition to the project boundary in Glades County. The addition, sponsored by the two owners and known as Journigan Place, consisted of 115.4 acres and a 2003 taxable value of \$207,692.

2011

On December 9, 2011, the ARC placed this project in the Less-than-Fee list of Florida Forever projects.

2015

On June 19, 2015, the ARC voted to add a new project proposal, Chaparral Slough to the Florida Forever list. Chaparral Slough is a 11-mile long and 1-mile wide tributary to Cypress Branch. The ARC then immediately added this new project boundary into the boundary of the existing Fisheating Creek Florida Forever project. Chaparral Slough was originally proposed by Lykes Brothers as a standalone less-than-fee project to provide habitat preservation, an ecological greenway, and preserve lands for aquifer recharge. The land has been used for cattle ranching, silviculture and hunting. It includes 1,919 acres of pine plantation and a 669-acre eucalyptus plantation that is harvested and replanted several times a year.

2020

On June 12, 2020, the ARC approved the Buck Island Ranch addition of 6,560-acres in Highlands County to the project boundary.

Coordination

TNC is considered an acquisition partner and there may be some potential for joint acquisition with the SFWMD.

Management Policy Statement

The primary objectives of the acquisition of the Fisheating Creek project are to conserve and protect natural communities along the shores of Fisheating Creek, and thereby assist in maintaining and possibly improving the status of several rare plant and animal communities. Achieving this objective will help to secure the survival of the Florida panther in this state, as well as protect many other rare and endangered animals and a number of migratory bird species and provide for traditional public uses and recreational activities within sovereignty submerged lands and fee lands as specified in the Settlement Agreement.



For the portion of the project proposed for less-than-fee acquisition, the Fisheating Creek Ecosystem would be managed for conservation purposed by the landowner as outlined in the conservation easement.

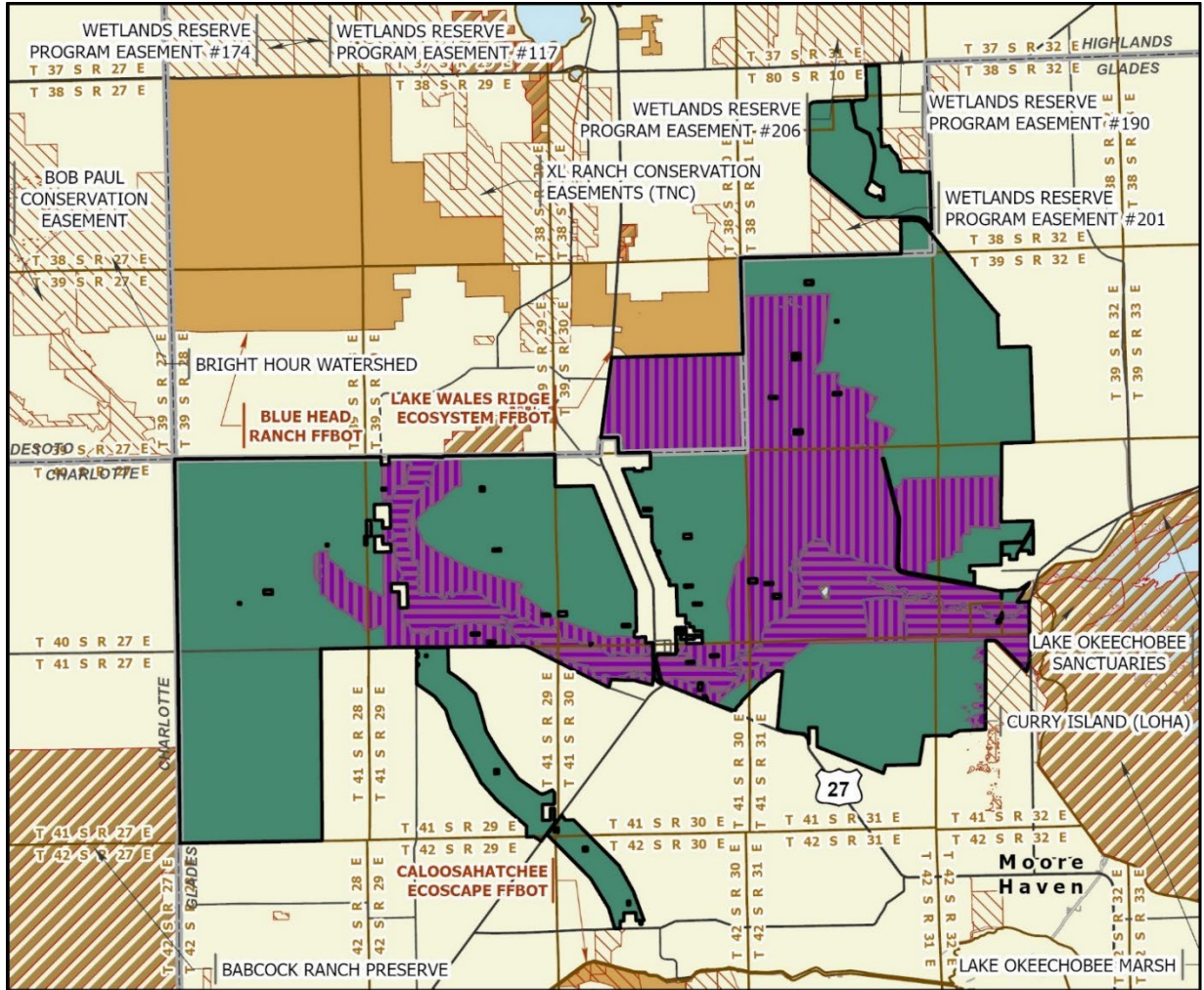
Manager(s)

If acquired as less-then-fee, management responsibility of the Fisheating Creek Ecosystem would remain with the landowner. Periodic monitoring of the site's management to confirm continued compliance with the conditions of the conservation easement would be coordinated by OES. FWC will manage the fee-simple acquisitions unless otherwise noted.

Management Prospectus

Pursuant to the Settlement Agreement the BOT will lease the sovereign submerged lands and the fee lands to the FWC, which was designated as the managing agency for sovereign submerged lands and fee lands, and as the Easement Monitor over the conservation easements at this site. The sovereignty submerged lands and the fee lands will be managed as the Fisheating Creek Wildlife Management Area. The Settlement Agreement outlining specific management guidelines is on file with the Office of Environmental Services.





FISHEATING CREEK ECOSYSTEM

GLADES AND HIGHLANDS COUNTIES

-  Florida Forever BOT Project Boundary
-  Acquired for Conservation (Fee Simple)
-  Acquired for Conservation (Less-Than-Fee)
-  Essential Parcel(s) Remaining
-  State Owned Conservation Lands
-  Other Conservation Lands
-  Other Florida Forever BOT Projects



FEBRUARY 2021



Map 1: FNAI, February 2021

