

# Forest and Lakes Ecosystem

Critical Natural Lands

Bay, Washington

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2019
<i>Project Acres</i>	54,862
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	0
<i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i>	\$0
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	54,862
<i>2020 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$54,693,228

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Forest and Lakes Ecosystem project will provide the opportunity to plan and implement a more measured approach to the inevitable development of the Panhandle, while at the same time providing for the conservation of the landscapes and watersheds that sustain biological diversity. The Florida Panhandle is showing signs of the rapid growth and development that has already occurred in South and Central Florida. Conservation actions will ensure that traditional outdoor recreational uses can continue to be made available to the citizens of the region. It is the opinion of TNC that all this can be accomplished while ensuring the economic vitality of this region of Florida continues to thrive. It can be done in a way that maintains the outstanding natural resources and the quality of life for those who live, work and visit the region.

## General Description

The Forest and Lakes Ecosystem project spans portions of Washington and Bay counties in the Florida Panhandle. The property is roughly square in shape but also has four small, disjunct parcels of land along Holmes Creek. It is south of Interstate 10 and between the city of Vernon and the town of Ebro. A portion of the southwestern boundary is contiguous with the Pine Log State Forest. Within ten miles of the boundary are the Florida Forever projects of Sand Mountain, Seven Runs Creek Final Phase, St. Joe Timberland, West Bay Preservation Area, and Florida's First Magnitude Springs.

The project and immediate area contain more than 50 miles of river and stream corridors. There are 152 lakes, ponds, and depressions varying in size from 635 acres (Big Blue Lake), to less than ¼ acre. The proposal has almost five miles of direct frontage on the Choctawhatchee River, next to the Choctawhatchee River Water Management Area and 6.3 miles of direct frontage on Holmes Creek. The property provides important surface water protection and a high volume of aquifer recharge.

This area has long been considered a significant linkage, providing landscape connectivity in the northwest Florida Panhandle. In 2019, much of the area remains a relatively intact, interconnected ecosystem supporting a variety of habitats of considerable significance for sustaining the biodiversity of this region of the state, though there are impacts of commercial pine plantation and other landscape

alterations on expanses of the uplands. The wetlands resources are in near-pristine conditions, and include rare sandhill lakes, blackwater streams, seepage springs, seepage slopes, springs, and spring runs. Many species of animals – invertebrates and vertebrates- have been reported and are known to occur on the project. More than 40 imperiled species of plants were identified by FNAI. The area is home to at least 21 species of amphibians, along with a multitude of species of dragonflies, damselflies, spiders, beetles, butterflies, moths, fish, crayfish, and a species of freshwater shrimp. The Forest and Lakes Ecosystem Project is expected to include both fee and less-than-fee acquisition.

### FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

FNAI Elements	Score
Gulf sturgeon	G3T2T3/S2?
Eastern indigo snake	G3/S2?
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
<i>Crystal Lake nailwort</i>	G3T1/S1
Purple skimmer	G1G2/S1S2
<i>Morzenti's spleenwort</i>	G2/S1
Apalachicolan cave isopod	G1G3/S1S2
<i>quillwort yellow-eyed grass</i>	G2/S2
<i>smoothbark St. John's wort</i>	G2/S2
Barbour's map turtle	G2/S2
Georgia blind salamander	G2/S2

### Public Use

There are many possible options for public use in this project, but each agency's management priorities for public use may differ. The state comprehensive outdoor recreation plan notes that this Northwest Florida region has the lowest supply in the state of freshwater fishing structures, hiking trails, horseback riding trails, and paved biking trails. It is second lowest for unpaved biking trails, and third lowest in its supply or picnic facilities. This project would boost recreational opportunities for the public visiting or living in this region of the state. Public access for canoeing, kayaking, boating, fishing, as well as bird watching, nature photography, limited camping, hunting, horseback riding, hiking and biking, could all be enjoyed within this project's acreage. In the project design that will be developed prior to pursuing acquisition, the public's use with potential management areas will be determined.

### Acquisition Planning

#### **2019**

The Forest and Lakes Ecosystem proposal was submitted by TNC for 2019 Cycle 2 and was approved by the ARC for the Florida Forever Priority List in October of 2019. The project proposal included possible fee and less-than-fee acquisitions. During the interim between the proposal's submittal and approval by the ARC as a Florida Forever project, the owner, Northern Trust Company, was exploring options for sale



of the property. Before the end of 2019, the property had been sold to a consortium of entities, with the acreage with the airstrip and house beside Court Marshall Lake sold to the Agricola family. All the new owners are also willing to include this acreage in the Florida Forever program. The ARC determined at the time of approval of the project for the priority list, that the project design would develop prior to pursuing acquisition, as the project is quite large and DRP, FFS, and FWC have all submitted management proposals. Each management prospectus has been provided as a part of this project description.

### Coordination

Because of this project's location and role in ensuring a wildlife linkage and corridor for the Panhandle, conservation of the project area would be done in coordination with NFWFMD, FFS, the Seven Runs Creek Conservation Easement's management and the DOD, though additional entities could assist with management or acquisition going forward.

### Management Policy Statement

The protection of the James L. Knight Forest and Lakes Ecosystem Project will conserve valuable timber and other natural resources, wildlife corridors, native habitats, and regionally important waters within an area of the state with renowned biodiversity, rare and imperiled species, and significant hydrological and archaeological resources. The project will conserve portions of the forested floodplain along the Choctawhatchee River and Holmes Creek that in addition to providing habitat, recreational opportunities, and supplying vital nutrients and flows to downstream estuaries, also serve to increase the overall management efficiency of the suite of contiguous managed areas already protected by the state and NFWFMD. The lands and waters within the boundary score very highly in many Florida Forever goals and numeric performance measures, including protection of important Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas, Rare and Imperiled Species Habitat, Landscape Connectivity, Underrepresented Ecosystems, Natural Floodplain Functions, Surface Waters, Functional Wetlands, Sustainable Forestry, and more. As such, the State of Florida is now presented with the opportunity to protect lands and waters that will help to maintain water supplies, enhance water quality, protect aquifer recharge, protect myriad special plant and animal assemblages, and a wide variety of other indispensable ecosystem services for the residents of North Florida and beyond.

### Manager(s)

DRP, FWC, and FFS each submitted a Management Prospectus for this parcel. The understanding was that the project would work best if divided among these managers, depending on natural resources, opportunities, protection and restoration needs, but that division and the changes have not been settled. The agreement was that recommended management would be resolved prior to pursuit. TNC identified FFS as a logical manager for the timber resources.



## **Management Prospectus: DRP**

### **Qualifications for state designation**

Acquisition of this project would meet goals A, B, D, E, F, and G as provided in the Florida Forever goals and measures in 259.105, Florida Statutes

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

Wetland resources on the property are in near-pristine condition. These resources include rare sandhill lakes, blackwater streams seepage streams, springs, and spring runs require protection, but not restoration. The existing network of roads, bridges, culverts, and utility easement provide the necessary access infrastructure and compartmentalization for restoration zones. The longtime industrial forest lands will be converted to their former natural communities using the Torreya (Sweetwater Tract) model, emphasizing native groundcover reintroduction.

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

Provision would be made to ensure the protection and security of the resources and infrastructure of the property. A complete inventory of the site would occur once the property was assigned to DRP for management. Any areas requiring immediate management attention, security or protection will be identified and addressed. A complete survey and subsequent fencing of critical property boundaries would be a top priority. Initial focus would be on the development of low-intensity passive recreation such as hiking, fishing and paddling. "Starter kits" would be installed at strategically located points within the property and provide access to a preliminary system of hiking trails. DRP starter kits also include a composting restroom, picnic pavilion, and trailhead kiosk. Paddling access would need to be sensitive to preserving the integrity of the property's pristine lakes and streams.

### **Revenue-generating potential**

Park entrance fees, other fees and charges associated with enhancement of resource recreational experiences, and timber harvest revenue in areas where natural community restoration or exotic plant control measures are being undertaken.

### **Cooperators in management activities**

Cooperators will include other regional park management, as well as FFS, FWC, and DHR. These other state agencies would assist in the development of wildfire emergency plans, enforcement of state wildlife laws, and implementation of wildlife management programs, and ensure protection of archaeological and historical sites, and interpretation of those sites for park visitors.

### **Management costs and sources of revenue**

It is anticipated that management funding will come from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund. Estimated budget needs for interim management are as follows:



Management Cost Summary

DRP	Amount	Notes
Source of funds		State of Florida Visitor entrance fees and charges
Salary	\$293,300	for 7 FTE positions
Expense	\$100,000	
OCO	\$50,000	
FCO	\$1,000,000	Year 1
FCO	\$200,000	Year two and beyond

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted

**Management Prospectus: FFS**

**Qualifications for state designation**

This property meets numerous Florida Forever goals, performance measures, criteria as outlined in F.S. 259.105.

**Conditions affecting intensity of management**

The Property should not require intensive management in the short term. Over the long term, the intensity of management and related costs will significantly increase as management emphasis shifts from protection and planning, to restoration efforts and a broader public use, with more use of the infrastructure already on the property.

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

Once the Property is acquired and assigned to FFS, short term management efforts will concentrate on site security, control of vehicle access, and management planning. Consideration will be given during the management planning process to accommodate a variety of recreational developments. 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 using established infrastructure. FFS will expedite short-term management on portions of the Property that are in close proximity to already FFS-managed lands including, Pine Log State Forest, Blackwater River State Forest, and Point Washington State Forest by utilizing existing resources. Additional equipment required to manage the property includes, but is not limited to, two 4x4 pickups, one tractor plow/transport, one farm tractor with implements, one road grader, and two UTVs.

**Revenue-generating potential**

FFS foresees revenue generation from the management of this property. The amount of future revenue generated from silviculture will depend on the acreage that is managed as such. Due to the high recreational potential of the Property, revenue generated by visitor fees will increase significantly as time progresses and opportunities are established.



**Cooperators in management activities**

FFS, acting as lead manager, will work with DRP and FWC as cooperating managers, federal (Department of Defense and United States Forest Service) and state agencies, local governments, and NFWFMD to further resource management, recreational and educational opportunities.

**Management costs and sources of revenue**

It is anticipated that management funding will come from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund. Estimated budget needs for interim management are as follows:

Management Cost Summary		
FFS	Amount	Notes
Salary	\$165,000	(3 FTEs; Forestry Sup II, Forest Ranger, Park Ranger)
Expense	\$120,000	(Annual operating costs)
OCO	\$693,250	(2 - 4x4 pickups, 1 tractor plow/transport, 1 farm tractor with implements, 1 road grader, and 2 UTVs)
Outsourcing	\$25,000	
TOTAL	\$1,003,250	

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted

**Management Prospectus: FWC**

**Qualifications for state designation**

This project would serve to: conserve, protect, manage, or restore important ecosystems, landscapes and forests to enhance or protect significant surface water, recreational, timber and fish and wildlife resources; conserve, protect significant landscape-scale habitat and provide wildlife corridors for rare and imperiled species and increasing linkages and conservation corridors between public land and private conservation easements in the region; conserve, protect, manage or restore coastal habitat in Northwest, Florida, provide surface and groundwater protection, and protect natural floodplain functions; and provide opportunities for fish and wildlife resource-based public outdoor recreation.

**Conditions affecting intensity of management**

Resources described in this Management Prospectus indicate conditions affecting intensity of management. These include natural community types, topography and soils, surface and ground water conditions, extent of historic disturbance and already existing improvements. Environmentally sensitive areas, such as erosion-prone sites, important habitats, outstanding natural areas and wetlands shall be identified, appropriately managed and protected.

The FWC conducts analysis of historic vegetation of natural community types when necessary to determine appropriate desired future conditions. Upland wildlife management concentrates on appropriate vegetative manipulations guided by the FWC’s Objective Based Vegetative Management



program, which includes the application of prescribed fire to achieve conditions acceptable to a broad range of wildlife species within the area's fire-adapted natural communities. Some areas may require ecological restoration of ground cover, control of invasive and exotic species, and either thinning or reforestation. Such resource management projects may be necessary to accomplish restoration objectives and to attain the desired future conditions for communities. This is especially important for conservation of habitats and populations of imperiled or rare species. Landscape ecology is also important, as land use changes in the vicinity of the area, such as intensive residential, commercial and industrial developments, and the roads that often accompany them, may also affect the attainment of resource conservation goals for the area and the effectiveness of necessary resource management projects.

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

If acquired and leased to the FWC for management, FWC will develop a Management Plan describing the management goals and objectives necessary to implement future resource management programs on the Forest and Lakes Ecosystem. The management plan will also establish the current and future roles of cooperating entities including DRP, FFS, other governmental agencies, nongovernmental organizations and other stakeholders.

Long-range plans would stress ecosystem management and the protection and management of locally important, rare, and imperiled species. If acquired, historic analysis of natural communities and vegetation types may be conducted, if deemed necessary, and quantified vegetation management objectives will be developed. FWC would also assess the condition of wildlife resources and provide planning support to enhance management of locally important species and recovery of imperiled species on the area. Use of prescribed fire and other essential resource management activities will be implemented to maintain and restore natural communities and vegetation types to benefit native wildlife resources.

Programs providing multiple fish and wildlife-based public outdoor recreational uses will be considered for implementation following acquisition. These potential recreational uses will enhance the public's understanding of the region while providing ample opportunities for outdoor recreational enjoyment. Essential roads will be maintained to provide all weather public access and management operations. Unnecessary roads, fire lanes, and hydrological disturbances will be abandoned or restored as practical. Infrastructure development will be limited to only that which is necessary to allow public access and to provide for the necessary facilities, security, and management of the property. Archaeological and historical sites will be managed in coordination with Division of Historical Resources.

### **Revenue-generating potential**

Revenue from conservation lands can include sales of various 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 may also yield additional revenue. Apiary leases will be considered as a revenue source depending on whether the area meets the criteria of the FWC’s Apiary Policy. In addition, the Florida Legislature appropriates funds for land management. The long-term values of ecosystem services to local and regional land and water resources, and to human health, are expected to be significant.

**Cooperators in management activities**

FWC will work with DRP and FFS as cooperating managers, federal (DOD and USFS) and state agencies, local governments, and the Northwest Florida Water Management District to further resource management, recreational and educational opportunities.

**Management costs and sources of revenue**

The initial non-recurring (first year only) start-up cost for the Forest and Lakes Ecosystem is estimated to be \$8,751,840, which includes public access and infrastructure and fixed capital outlays necessary for management of the area. Optimal management of the area would require 11 full-time equivalent (FTE) position. Salary requirements for these FTE positions, as well as those of other needed FWC staff, and costs to operate and manage the Forest and Lakes Ecosystem, are reflected in the cost estimate below. All land management funding is dependent upon annual legislative appropriations.

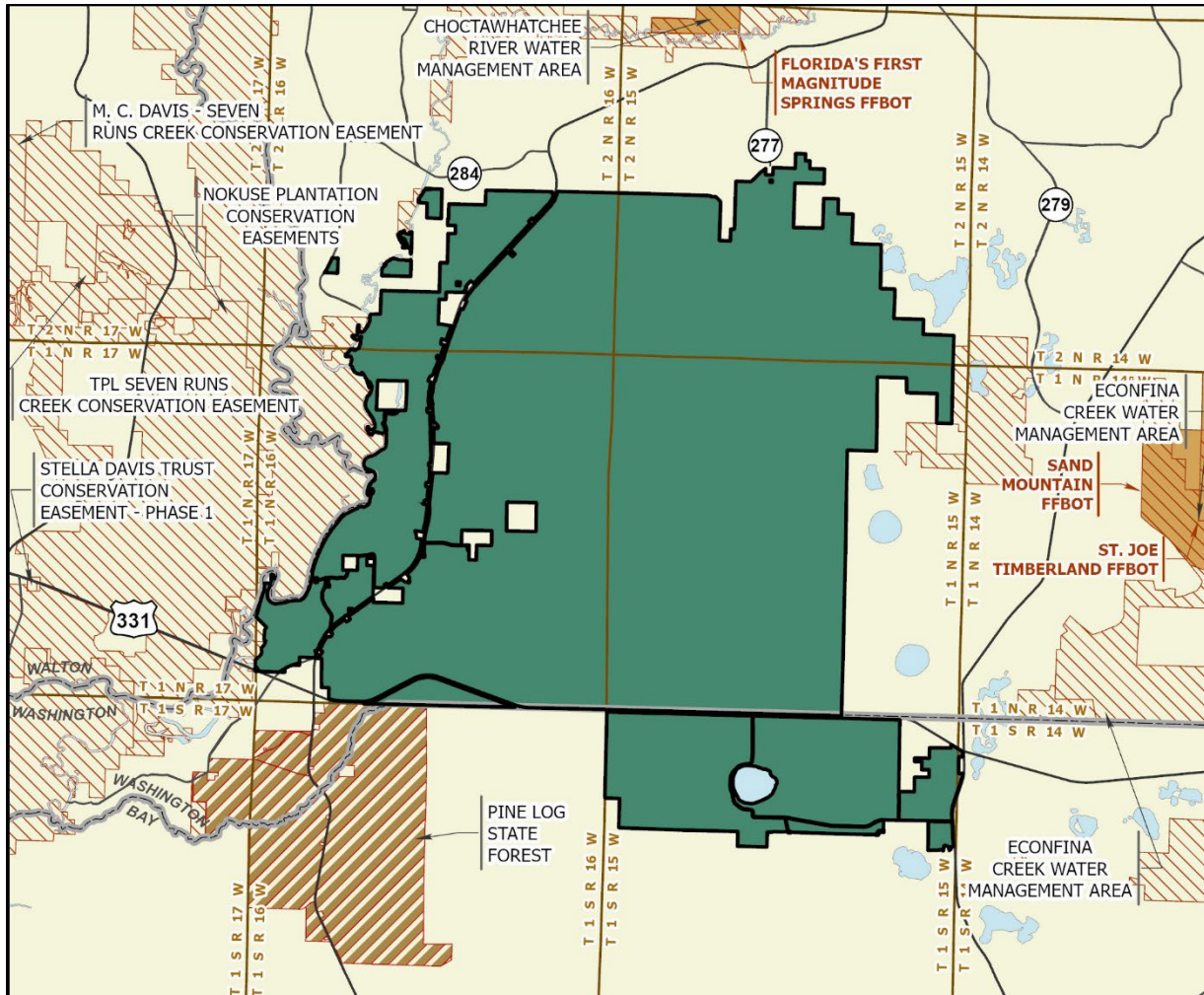
Management Cost Summary

<u>FWC</u>	<u>Recurring</u>	<u>Non-Recurring</u>
Resource Management	\$2,090,596	
Administration	\$45,400	
Support	\$584,732	
Capital Improvements	\$318,348	
Visitor Services/Recreation	\$200,745	
Law Enforcement	\$42,118	
TOTAL	\$3,281,940	\$3,281,940

Source: Legislative appropriations



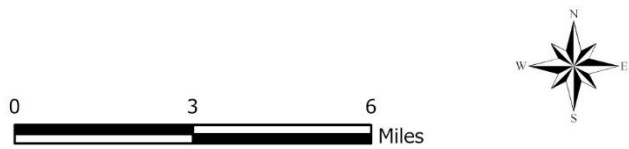




**FOREST AND LAKES ECOSYSTEM**

**BAY AND WASHINGTON COUNTIES**

-  Florida Forever BOT Project Boundary
-  Essential Parcel(s) Remaining
-  State Owned Conservation Lands
-  Other Conservation Lands
-  Other Florida Forever BOT Projects



FEBRUARY 2022

Map 1: FNAI, February 2022

