

# Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed

Less-Than-Fee

Dixie

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2010
<i>Project Acres</i>	58,543
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	33,204
<i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i>	\$12,578,700
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	25,339
<i>2020 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$35,725,013

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed project will protect and enhance water quality, and wetland communities, wildlife habitat and archaeological sites found within the proposal boundary. The project will preserve the natural resources of the Suwannee River and the Gulf of Mexico and provide habitat and natural corridors for rare plants and animals over a wide swath of undeveloped public lands, including the neighboring Big Bend WMA, the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge, water management district conservation areas, and the Big Bend Seagrasses Aquatic Preserve (BBSAP).

The Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed project will enhance the coordination and completion of land acquisition projects, preserve significant archaeological or historic sites, and increase the amount of forestland available for sustainable management of natural resources. The project will support state water quality and the protection of Florida's biodiversity at the species, natural community and landscape levels through the protection, restoration, and maintenance of the quality and natural functions of land, water and wetland systems of the site.

## General Description

This project consists of four undeveloped, forested less-than-fee tracts in Dixie County. The parcels range in size from 5,800 to 19,200 acres and include a 10-acre tract proposed for fee-simple acquisition. The 10-acre parcel will guarantee continued public access to California Lake, a traditional use located within the SRWMD's adjacent conservation easement area.

The proposal area is located between County Road (CR) 358 to the north and CR 349 to the south, about 6 to 10 miles south-southwest of U.S. 19/98, and 1 to 7 miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico shoreline. The BBSAP encompasses the submerged lands in this region. Hunting leases are in place over much of the property. Timber harvesting will be prohibited in the hardwood and cypress swamps under the proposed easement, as it is in the adjacent California Lake easement. Considering the importance of the hardwood and cypress swamps to many wildlife species, this would provide substantial wildlife conservation benefits. This is also secondary habitat for the Florida black bear.

The vast natural wetlands on the proposal lands serve to funnel and filter water from the upland areas toward the Suwannee River and/or Gulf of Mexico as well as buffer several small stream systems that meander through the proposal. The topography of the three westernmost properties gradually slope downward toward the Gulf, forming numerous braided, intermittent stream systems that empty into the marshlands and tidal creeks of the Gulf. About half of the easternmost tract drains westward into the California Creek basin, a flat, highly braided stream system that is mostly outside the boundary of this tract, and empties into the Gulf. Waters on the other half of this tract drain southward, bounded by higher ground along CR 349, and then eastward to the Suwannee River. A portion of the easternmost tract is within the Fanning/Manatee Springshed.

For the last century, approximately half of the project area has been managed for silviculture. Before, the site would have supported a mosaic of mesic and wet flatwoods, hydric hammocks, and swamp, interspersed with many small depression marshes and ponds. Although deep bedding has significantly altered the groundcover, many stands of pines and even recently planted areas seen on site retain good remnant flatwoods vegetation. The proposal property is managed under guidelines of the Sustainable Forestry Initiative to protect water quality, biodiversity, and species at risk.

Hydric hammocks make up the bulk of the natural community acreage on the property. There are several large hammocks in excellent condition with canopies of large hardwood trees. Species composition is typical of good quality hammocks with limestone near the soil surface. Basin and floodplain swamps within the larger hammocks are in excellent condition. Canopy trees are large and dominated by pond cypress, with a mix of hardwoods. Smaller dome swamps are common throughout the pine plantations.

### FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<b>FNAI Elements</b>	<b>Score</b>
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
Florida olive hairstreak	G5T2/S2
Eastern diamondback rattlesnake	G3/S3
Pine snake	G4/S3
Bald eagle	G5/S3
White ibis	G5/S4

### Public Use

The Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed is proposed for less-than-fee acquisition and does not provide for public access.



## Acquisition Planning

### **2010**

On December 10, 2010, the ARC added the Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed project to the Florida Forever Priority List in the Less-than-Fee category, ranking it as number six of 25 projects considered in that category.

This less-than-fee project was sponsored by The Conservation Fund and the SRWMD in a proposal submitted on June 30, 2010. It is approximately 46,441 acres in one ownership with a 2010 market value of \$94,249,477. The 10 acres on the SRWMD's California Lake conservation easement is for fee simple acquisition.

### **2011**

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

### **2015**

On October 16, 2015, the ARC voted to add the 12,023-acre Otter Sinks proposal in Dixie County to the Florida Forever list, and then to make it an addition to the Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed project. This is a rectangular area west of County Road 349, adjacent to the existing project.

### **2016**

On September 13, 2016, a conservation easement over 8,075 acres of the Lyme Timber Company was acquired in this project at a cost of \$4,178,700. The easement will be managed by SRWMD.

### **2019**

On June 26, 2019 a conservation easement over 19,075 acres of the Lyme Timber Company was acquired in this project at a cost of \$2,400,000.

### **2020**

On April 1, 2020 a conservation easement over 5,785 acres of the Lyme Timber Company was acquired in this project at a cost of \$2,000,000.

## Coordination

SRWMD is a partner in this project. Since SRWMD holds the easement for the California Lake parcel, it may be more appropriate for them to pursue the fee simple acquisition of the ten-acre parcel providing access to California Lake.

## Management Policy Statement

As a less-than-fee acquisition, the Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed would be managed for conservation purposes by the landowner as outlined in the conservation easement.

## Manager(s)

If acquired as less-than-fee, management responsibility of the Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed 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 the Office of Environmental Services (OES).



### **Management Prospectus**

OES will periodically monitor the conservation easement, while the management will be conducted by the property owner.

### **Qualifications for state designation**

The less-than-fee portion of the Lower Suwannee River and Gulf Watershed project meets Florida Forever measures of using alternatives to fee-simple acquisitions, protecting Strategic Habitats, natural floodplains and significant surface waters. The proposed 10-acre fee-simple-title site meets Florida Forever measures of protecting Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas, natural floodplains and significant surface waters.

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

Half of this property has been managed for silviculture for the last century. Sustainable timber management practices have evolved over the years and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative bolsters conservation practices such as providing for buffers around wetlands. The overall historic management of the property has been for wood and wood products using sustainable timber management practices. The 10-acre site includes a mixture of natural pine and bottomland hardwood tree species as well as an access road and boat ramp. SRWMD does not expect to harvest timber on the site for commercial purposes but may need to remove underbrush or selected individual trees to maintain a healthy ecosystem. The cost of the monitoring by SRWMD staff could add to the administrative costs of the easement. No sources of revenue are known at this time, nor are there any startup costs involved.

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

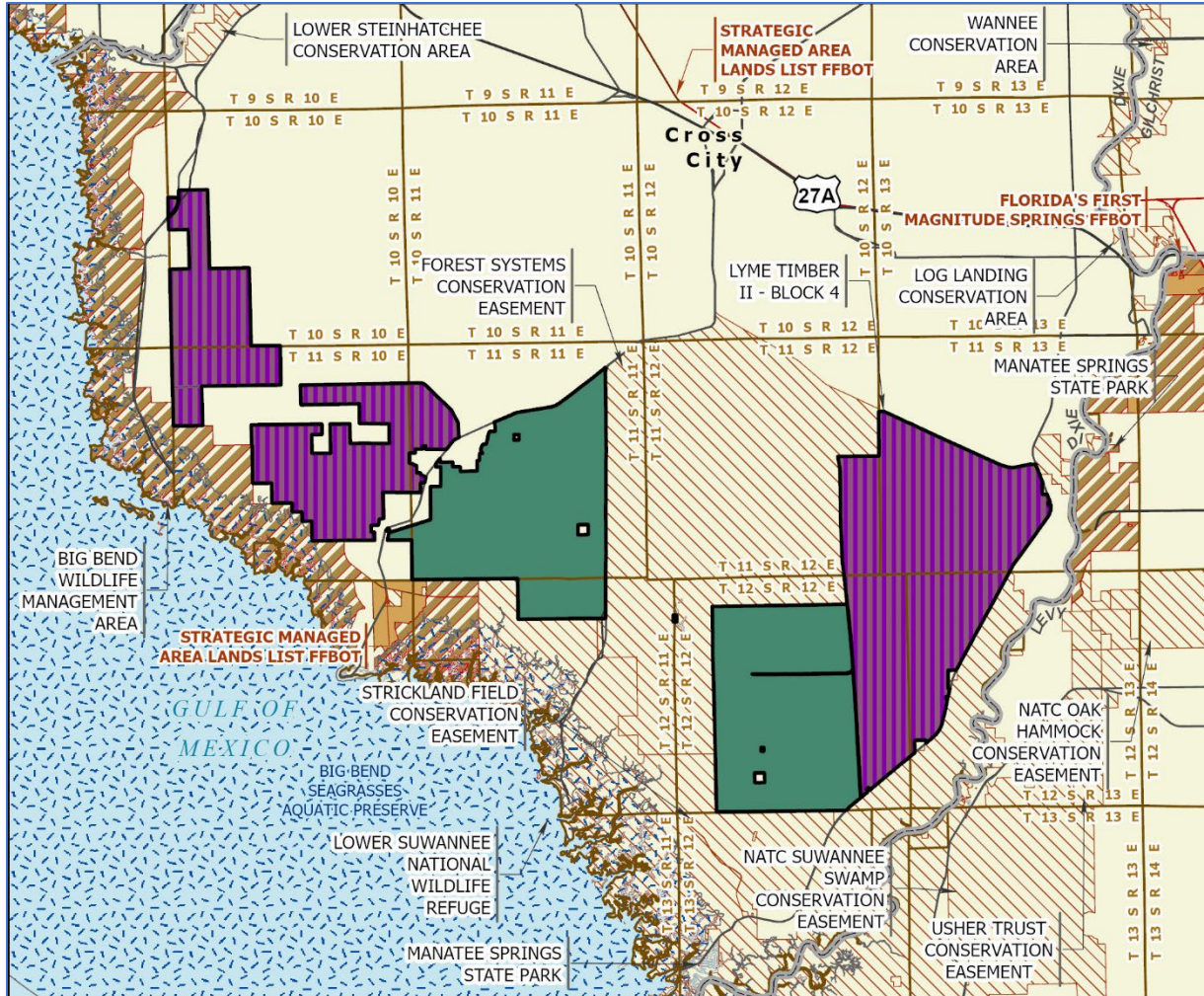
Management implementation will begin immediately after fee simple title is taken on the 10-acre site to keep the boat ramp available for public use. Other improvements on the 10-acre site will begin within one year. Security will be provided through FWC as well as other existing contractors for maintenance of infrastructure.

### **Revenue-generating potential**

This project has no direct revenue-generating potential under a conservation easement, nor is any revenue expected from the fee simple acquisition of the 10-acre site.



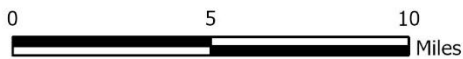




**LOWER SUWANNEE RIVER AND GULF WATERSHED**

**DIXIE COUNTY**

-  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
-  State Aquatic Preserve



FEBRUARY 2022

Map 1: FNAI, February 2022

