

Natural Bridge Creek

Critical Natural Lands

Walton

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2012
<i>Project Acres</i>	1,967
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	0
<i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i>	\$0
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	1,967
<i>2020 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$2,568,093

Purpose for State Acquisition

The Natural Bridge Creek project will provide a buffer for Natural Bridge Creek, protect surface water, functional wetlands and aquifer recharge, and preserve underrepresented natural communities. The project will conserve important ecosystems, landscapes, and forests for the purpose of water resource development that benefits natural systems and citizens of the state. The project will provide areas for natural resource-based recreation; the county intends to manage the area around the creek as a county park with uses compatible with conservation purposes. Significant archeological and historic sites are known on the property and will be preserved as part of the project.

General Description

The project is in northern Walton County along the Alabama state line, situated roughly mid-way between the Yellow and Choctawhatchee Rivers. Natural Bridge Creek, a sand-bottomed seepage stream, flows northeastward across the property before entering Alabama. Much of its tributary seepage arises within the property, although two streams drain from uplands just to the south. The stream temporarily sinks at Natural Bridge in the northeastern disjunct tract, and then rises as a small “spring” reported to be the westernmost sink/rise formation in the Floridan Aquifer. The rise is a locally popular recreational site (currently closed for liability reasons) but was also used by both Native American and 19th century historic cultures.

FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

FNAI Elements	Score
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3

Public Use

Walton County has provided a management prospectus for 62 acres of this site for recreation if it is acquired in fee simple. FWC has prepared a management prospectus for the more than 1,700 acres in pinelands.

Acquisition Planning

The project was submitted for acquisition in fee or conservation easement by the landowners, Mr. Benton Hester and Ms. Judith Hester. Their family has managed it as pinelands since World War II.

2012

On August 17, 2012, the current project was presented to the ARC and accepted for review. It was added to the Florida Forever list in the Critical Natural Lands category on December 14, 2012.

2020

On June 12, 2020, the ARC approved an addition of 170-acres in Walton County to the project boundary.

Coordination

Walton County may provide some of the funding toward the acquisition of the Natural Bridge Creek Park. At the time of this project's approval however, the Board of County Commissioners committed only to using revenue set aside for the park's development, once acquired. There has also been discussion of participation from the federally funded Forest Legacy program.

Management Policy Statement

The primary management goals for the portion managed by the county as the Natural Bridge Park include restoring and protecting the spring and creek, providing public access and limited facilities for recreation, managing and controlling exotic invasive species, protecting any existing cultural or historical resources and protecting habitat for imperiled species. Other recreational activities that could take place on this parcel to a limited degree are hiking, nature studies, picnicking and interpretation of archaeological and historic sites. (Evidence of an old creekside grist mill and historic turpentine activities are present.)

Manager(s)

As approved in 2012, Walton County would manage the Natural Bridge Creek area, and FWC would manage the remaining acreage.

Management Prospectus

Qualifications for state designation

As well as its recreational value, much of the site retains the "park-like" characteristic of longleaf pine forest with an abundance of native ground cover. Many rare, imperiled and species of special concern have been documented on site including gopher tortoise and bluenose shiner. While specific species densities are unknown, the property could potentially serve as a gopher tortoise recipient or mitigation site due to its high-quality habitat.

Conditions affecting intensity of management

Most of the property has never been converted to cropland or undergone commercial forestry type rotations with clear-cut, site preparation, and herbicide applications. The sink/rise formation of Natural Bridge Creek has been disturbed for many years due to its popularity as a local swimming hole and the



road that crosses the natural bridge itself. A spring stabilization report (NFWFMD 2008) lists previous agricultural practices and road erosion as sources of sediment in the creek system.

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

A management plan would be developed by FWC describing the management goals and objectives necessary to implement future resource management. The management plan would establish the current and future roles of cooperating entities including governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders. Long-range plans would stress ecosystem management and the protection and management of focal, species of special concern, rare and imperiled species. Historic analysis of natural communities and vegetation types may be conducted if deemed necessary. Quantified vegetation management objectives shall be developed. FWC shall assess the condition of wildlife resources and provide planning support to enhance management of focal species and recovery of imperiled species on the NBCFFP. Use of prescribed fire and other essential resource management activities have been implemented by the landowner to maintain and restore natural communities and vegetation types to benefit native wildlife 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. If needed, thinning operations within the longleaf pine forests to improve or reset the basal area consistent with the target for this forest community type and the species that occur there may generate additional revenues. Area regulations would be developed to identify the necessary and required permits, fees and regulations. The initial non-recurring (first year only) start-up costs for the pinelands of the NBCFFP are estimated to be \$289,920.00, which includes public access and infrastructure and fixed capital outlays necessary for management. Optimal management of the area would require one fulltime equivalent (FTE) position to optimally manage the area. Salary requirements for these FTE positions, as well as those of other needed FWC staff, and costs to operate and manage the project are reflected in the following cost estimate. All land legislative appropriations management funding is dependent upon annual.

Cooperators in management activities

If this project is acquired and leased to FWC for management, FWC will cooperate with other Federal, State and local governmental agencies including Walton County, the FWS, USDA, FFS, DEP, NFWFMD, and others in management of the property.

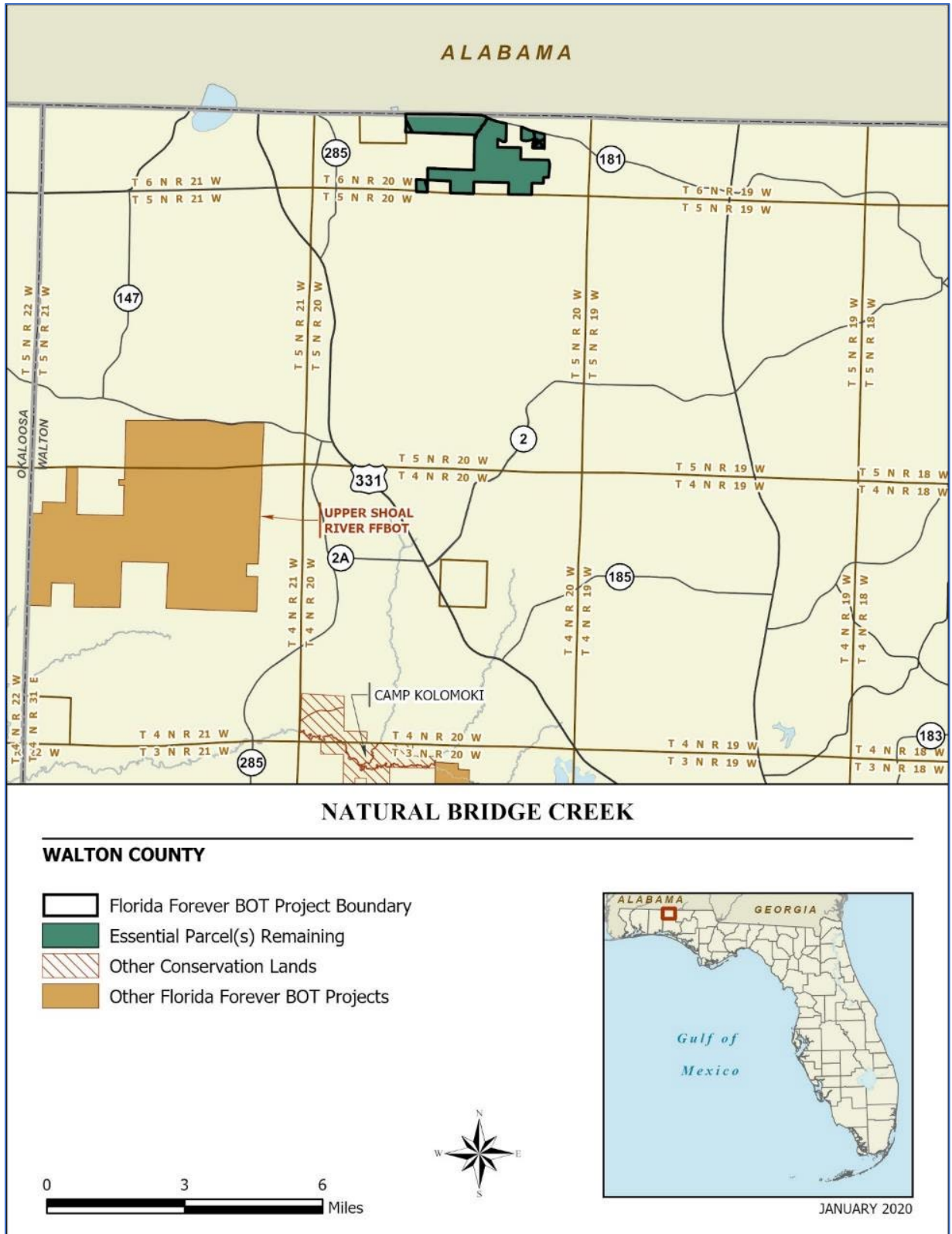


Management Cost Summary

FWC	Expenditure	Priority
<u>Resource Management:</u>		
Exotic Species Control	\$4,476	(1)
Prescribed Burning	\$9,585	(1)
Cultural Resource Management	\$399	(1)
Timber Management	\$616	(1)
Hydrological Management	\$4,059	(1)
Other (Restoration, Enhancement, Surveys, Monitoring, etc.)	\$50,120	(1)
Subtotal	\$69,255	
<u>Administration:</u>		
General Administration	\$1,504	(1)
<u>Support:</u>		
Land Management Planning	\$2,446	(1)
Land Management Reviews	\$362	(3)
Training/Staff Development	\$435	(1)
Vehicle Purchase	\$7,556	(2)
Vehicle Operation and Maintenance	\$4,458	(1)
Other (Technical Reports, Data Management, etc.)	\$4,113	(1)
Subtotal	\$19,370	
<u>Capital Improvements:</u>		
Facility Maintenance	\$10,546	(1)
<u>Visitor Services/Recreation:</u>		
Information/Education/Operations	\$6,650	(1)
<u>Law Enforcement:</u>		
Resource Protection	\$1,395	(1)
TOTAL	\$108,720	

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted





Map 1: FNAI, January 2020