

South Walton County Ecosystem

Substantially Complete

Walton

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	1995
<i>Project Acres</i>	23,281
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	20,623
<i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i>	\$189,388,710
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	2,657
<i>2020 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$898,737,686

Purpose for State Acquisition

Where the Gulf of Mexico meets the coast of Walton County is a line of some of the most beautiful beaches and dunes in the world, backed by sparkling freshwater lakes and pine flatwoods and marshes spreading to Choctawhatchee Bay—one of the largest natural areas on the northern Gulf coast. The South Walton County Ecosystem project will conserve this unique coast and the forests behind it and link three state parks. The project will protect several rare plants and animals such as the Choctawhatchee beach mouse and red-cockaded woodpecker. This project will provide residents and tourists a scenic area in which to enjoy many recreational activities, ranging from hunting and fishing to hiking, picnicking, and sunbathing.

General Description

This project includes much of the undeveloped land in Walton County south of Choctawhatchee Bay. This land is covered with a diverse mix of flatwoods, sandhills, and wetlands in the interior and superb sand-pine scrub, unique coastal dune lakes (occurring only in Florida and globally critically imperiled), and beach dunes on the Gulf Coast.

The Topsail Hill and Deer Lake tracts are some of the most scenic and ecologically intact coastal areas in the panhandle and shelter the endangered Choctawhatchee beach mouse and red-cockaded woodpecker, as well as several other rare plants and animals (13 rare plant species, six rare animal species, and 14 natural communities). Seven archaeological sites are known from the project.

The explosive coastal development of Walton County is a serious threat to this project, particularly the sensitive coastal areas.

FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

FNAI Elements	Score
Choctawhatchee beach mouse	G5T1/S1
Snowy plover	G3/S1
Green sea turtle	G3/S2S3
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Loggerhead sea turtle	G3/S3
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
Gulf Coast solitary bee	G1G2/S1S2
<i>Godfrey's goldenaster</i>	G2/S2
<i>southern milkweed</i>	G2/S2
<i>Cruise's goldenaster</i>	G5T2/S2
<i>Florida flame azalea</i>	G3/S3
<i>wiregrass gentian</i>	G3/S3

Public Use

The interior will be managed as a state forest, and the Topsail Hill and Deer Lake tracts will become state parks. The project will provide many recreation opportunities, including hiking, hunting, freshwater and saltwater fishing, camping, picnicking, nature appreciation, and beach activities.

Acquisition Planning

1996

On July 16, 1996, the LAMAC directed staff to hold two public hearings to receive public input on the potential revision of the South Walton County Ecosystem project boundary.

Public hearings were held on August 23 and 30, 1996.

As a result of the public hearings and input from other interested parties and managing agencies, the LAMAC modified the project boundary on December 5, 1996, by adding approximately 41 acres and removing 820 acres from the project boundary.

Point Washington: Inholdings (approximately 1,150 acres) within the State forest and parcels connecting Topsail to the Choctawhatchee Bay remain to be acquired. Acquisition of parcels (approximately 210 acres) along the State Forest to State Park trail/ greenway is needed to better connect portions of the trail/greenway.

Topsail: Most tracts have been acquired but the remainder are extremely vulnerable. Several ownerships were acquired through eminent domain in the 1990's.

Deer Lake: A 172-acre tract was acquired through eminent domain. The remaining property in the Deer Lake project was removed from the overall project boundary as part of the court settlement.

Grayton Beach: A small 20-acre inholding remains to be acquired in the Grayton Beach State Recreation Area.



Not included in the totals are the acres acquired (1,129) and funds spent (\$38,709,943) for the acquisition of the state recreation area.

1999

On December 9, 1999, the LAMAC added 90 acres to the project boundary as an essential parcel. The addition included several hundred feet on Choctawhatchee Bay.

2002

On August 15, 2002, the LAMAC added 75 acres (the Coldeway Tract) to the project boundaries.

On October 24, 2002, the LAMAC added 90 acres (the Davie Tract) to the project boundaries.

2008

In December 2008, FFS purchased 38.99 acres for \$2,600,000 to add to the Point Washington SF.

2009

In June 2009, a two-parcel donation (39 acres) from DOT was accepted in Point Washington State Forest.

2011

On December 9, 2011, the ARC placed the South Walton County Ecosystem project in the Substantially Complete category of Florida Forever projects.

2012

On December 27, 2012, the BOT acquired 9.43 acres for \$85,000 to be managed by the FFS as part of the Point Washington State Forest.

2017

On October 11, 2017, the State completed a land swap with an adjoining owner of 28.5 acres of state land for 39 acres, thereby increasing the project size by 10.5 acres and adding 39 acres of acquired land.

2020

In June 2020, a 4.48-acre parcel was acquired at a cost of \$882,500 and will be managed as an addition to Topsail Hill Preserve State Park.

Coordination

TNC was an intermediary in the acquisition of the 100-acre tract in Topsail Hill held by the Resolution Trust Corporation.

Management Policy Statement

The primary goals of management of the South Walton County Ecosystem project are to conserve and protect environmentally unique and irreplaceable lands that contain native, relatively unaltered flora and fauna representing a natural area unique to, or scarce within, a region of this state or a larger geographic area; to conserve and protect significant habitat for native species or endangered and threatened species; to conserve, protect, manage, or restore important ecosystems, landscapes, and forests, in order to enhance or protect significant surface water, coastal, recreation, timber, fish or



wildlife resources which local or state regulatory programs cannot; and to provide areas, including recreation trails, for natural- resource-based recreation.

Manager(s)

DRP manages three project sites: Topsail Hill, Grayton Beach and Deer Lake State Parks, and FFS manages Point Washington State Forest.

Management Prospectus

Qualifications for state designation

The Point Washington project has the large size and forest resources—flatwoods and sandhills, some cut over but restorable—to qualify as a state forest. The exceptional flatwoods, dunes, and coastal dune lakes of the areas around Deer Lake, Grayton Beach and Topsail Hill have the diversity of resources and recreational opportunities to qualify as units of the state park system.

Conditions affecting intensity of management

Large cutover areas in the project will require reforestation and restoration efforts beyond the level typical for a state forest. Consequently, management intensity and related management costs might be slightly higher than normal for a state forest. The portions to be managed by DRP are high-need management areas with an emphasis on public recreational use and development compatible with resource conservation.

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

FFS is providing public access for low-intensity, non-facility-related outdoor recreation, while protecting sensitive resources. Initial activities include securing the site, providing public and fire management accesses, inventorying resources, and removing trash. The project's natural resources and threatened and endangered plants and animals will be inventoried to provide the basis for a management plan. Long-range plans for this project will generally be directed toward restoring disturbed areas to their original conditions, as far as possible, as well as protecting threatened and endangered species.

Large areas of pinelands have been degraded by timbering and require restoration. An all-season burning program will use, whenever possible, existing roads, black lines, foam lines and natural breaks to contain fires. Timber management will mostly involve improvement thinning's and regeneration harvests. Plantations will be thinned and, where appropriate, reforested with species found in natural ecosystems. Stands will not have a targeted rotation age. Infrastructure will primarily be located in disturbed areas and will be the minimum required for management and public access. The FFS will promote environmental education. In the first year after acquisition of its parcels. The DRP will concentrate on site security, natural and cultural resource protection, and efforts toward the development of a plan for long-term public use and resource management.



Revenue-generating potential

FFS will sell timber as needed to improve or maintain desirable ecosystem conditions. These sales will provide variable amounts of revenue, but the revenue-generating potential for this project is expected to be low.

DRP expects no significant revenue to be generated initially. Any significant public use facilities will take several years to develop, and the amount of any revenue generated will depend on the extent of these facilities. Revenues for fiscal year 1993-1994 for the nearby Grayton Beach State Recreation Area were slightly more than \$162,000.

Cooperators in management activities

FFS will cooperate with and seek the assistance of other state agencies, local governments and interested parties as appropriate.

DRP does not recommend that any local governments or others assist in management of the Deer Lake, Grayton Beach or Topsail Hill tracts.

Management Cost Summary

<u>DRP</u>	<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Source of Funds	CARL	CARL
Salary	\$47,711	\$47,711
OPS	\$24,500	\$24,500
Expense	\$6,000	\$6,000
OCO	\$15,000	\$1,000
FCO	\$44,000	\$0
TOTAL	\$137,271	\$195,277

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted



