

2021 Florida Forever Five-Year Plan

Wekiva-Ocala Greenway

Summary of Recommendations and Status
as of
December 2020



Division of State Lands
Florida Department of Environmental Protection



Wekiva-Ocala Greenway

Critical Natural Lands Project
Lake, Orange, Seminole, Volusia

Project-at-a-Glance

Year Added to Priority List	1995
Project Acres	81,975
Acquired Acres	59,707
Cost of Acquired Acres	\$184,290,225
Remaining Project Acres	22,268
2019 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres	\$153,012,398

Purpose for State Acquisition

The springs, rivers, lakes, swamps, and uplands stretching north from Orlando to the Ocala National Forest are an important refuge for the Florida black bear, as well as other wildlife such as the bald eagle, swallow-tailed kite, Florida scrub jay, and wading birds. The Wekiva-Ocala Greenway will protect these animals and the Wekiva and St. Johns River basins by protecting natural corridors connecting Wekiwa Springs State Park, Rock Springs Run State Reserve, the Lower Wekiva River State Reserve, and Hontoon Island State Park with the Ocala National Forest. It will also provide the people of the booming Orlando area with a large, nearby natural area in which to enjoy camping, fishing, swimming, hiking, canoeing, and other recreational pursuits. The Florida National Scenic Trail, a cross-Florida hiking and non-motorized trail, is also planned to cross this project. The trail is a congressionally designated national scenic trail.

Manager(s)

Division of Recreation and Parks (BMK Ranch, Seminole Springs, St. Johns River and portions of the Wekiva-Ocala Connector); Florida Forest Service (Seminole Springs and portions of the Wekiva-Ocala Connector).



General Description

This project provides an important link between Ocala National Forest and the extensive state holdings along the Wekiva River. It is habitat for many rare animal species including the Florida black bear, the Florida sandhill crane, bald eagle, Eastern indigo snake, Florida scrub jay, Sherman’s fox squirrel, Florida scrub lizard and gopher tortoise. It incorporates most of the forested wetlands along the St. Johns and Wekiva Rivers between Orlando and the Ocala National Forest. The St. Johns River site consists of three large bottomlands and adjacent uplands between three existing state ownerships. The Seminole Springs/Woods site is reported to have 50-75 springs within its boundary. The Wekiva-Ocala Connector site provides a wildlife movement corridor between the Ocala National Forest and the other portions of the project along the Wekiva River.

FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Florida scrub-jay	G2?/S2
Swallow-tailed kite	G5/S2
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
<i>Okeechobee gourd</i>	G1/S1
Striped newt	G2G3/S2
Red-cockaded woodpecker	G3/S2
Eastern indigo snake	G3/S2?
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Bald eagle	G5/S3
<i>Florida hasteola</i>	G1/S1
Seminole Spring siltsnail	G1/S1
<i>Florida willow</i>	G2/S2

32 rare species are associated with the project

Public Use

The project sites are designated as state reserves or preserves and state forests, offering opportunities for canoeing, hiking, fishing and camping.

Acquisition Planning

1994

On November 18, 1994, the Land Acquisition Advisory Council (LAAC) approved combining the Seminole Springs/Woods, Wekiva-Ocala Connector, St. Johns River, and BMK Ranch projects and renaming the project Wekiva-Ocala Greenway. Based on GIS, the approximate total project acreage was 67,585 acres. Seminole Springs/Woods: Seminole Springs—core tracts include Strawn Tract, M.S. Carter (acquired), and Brumlick parcels (acquired through eminent domain).



The Strawn tract is the largest and most significant ownership remaining to be acquired. Wekiva-Ocala Connector: Core Tracts West—Maxwell and Holman (acquired), Shockley (acquired), Harper (acquired by SJRWMD 2,228 acres/2.1 million), Alger Enterprises (acquired), Fisch (acquired by SJRWMD), Southland Gardens (contingent upon the acquisition of Harper and Fisch), Clemmons (acquired), Blaskovic (acquired), Kittridge (acquired). Core Tracts East—Stetson University (acquired), Stein, Lenholt Farms, Francolino (acquired), Jung (acquired), and Hollywood Pines, Inc. St. Johns River: New Garden Coal, the largest ownership, was acquired in 2005. The BMK Ranch parcel has been acquired. On October 30, 1995, the LAAC approved a fee-simple, ± 5,616-acre addition to the project boundary. It was sponsored by Eastern Marketing Inc., representative for several owners and consisted of multiple landowners and parcels. All tracts were designated as essential. In addition, the project phasing was removed. On October 30, 1996, the LAAC approved a fee-simple, 425-acre addition to the project boundary. It was sponsored by the Division of State Lands, consisted of seven landowners (Jung, Hollywood Pines, Miranda Trust, Overstreet, New Garden Coal, Seminole Springs, and Fisch) and 12 parcels. Other acquisitions in the Wekiva Basin are Wekiva Buffers, Wekiva Springs State Park, Rock Springs Run, Lower Wekiva River State Park, Hontoon Island State Recreation Area, and Blue Spring State Park. These acquisitions total 18,400 acres.

1997

On July 18, 1997, the LAAC approved a fee-simple, 128-acre addition to the project boundary. It was sponsored by the landowner, Conway Kittredge, who already has 20 acres in the current project boundary. Any portion of the addition that is not needed for resource protection or management will be surplus.

1998

On December 3, 1998, the Land Acquisition and Management Advisory Council (LAMAC) approved a fee-simple, 1,507-acre addition to the project boundary. It was sponsored by the Division of Recreation and Parks and consisted of 20 parcels. At the time of the boundary addition, the parcels were owned by Neighborhood Lakes LTD and Lake Lerla LTD Partnership and were designated as essential parcels. They were subsequently purchased by BARN, LLC. These parcels were acquired in a transaction approved by the Board of Trustees on 12/19/2006. The total acquisition area contained 1,584 acres.

2001

On December 6, 2001, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) approved a fee-simple, 5,455-acre addition to the project boundary. It was sponsored by the Wekiva Basin Working Group, consisted of 14 sites, multiple landowners and parcels, and 13 tracts.



2004

On June 4, 2004, the ARC approved a less-than-fee, 572-acre addition to the project boundary. The property was owned by Robert Maxwell and consisted of two parcels. The boundary amendment was sponsored by the owner's representative, Roland Pacetti Realty.

2006

On August 15, 2006, the Board of Trustees approved the purchase of a conservation easement covering these two parcels.

On December 8, 2006, the ARC approved a fee-simple 77-acre addition in Lake County (a.k.a. the Ellis and Windsor tracts) to the project boundary. It was sponsored by The Nature Conservancy (TNC), consisted of two parcels with two owners (Natalie Windsor and Jerry Ellis). The Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) will manage the 17-acre Windsor tract as part of the Lower Wekiva River Preserve State park. The 60-acre Ellis tract will be managed by the FFS as part of the Seminole State Forest.

2007

On December 14, 2007, ARC approved a fee-simple 675-acre addition, known as the Pine Plantation Addition, to the project boundary. It was sponsored by Henry Dean Esq. and consisted of five parcels and four landowners. The Division of Recreation and Parks agreed to manage the parcels. The parcels have been designated essential. Approximately 421 acres of this addition have been purchased and are being managed as part of the Greenway.

2008

On September 30, 2008, the Board of Trustees approved the purchase of 385 acres from Project Orlando LLC; Pinestraw Partners LLC; and Herscho Properties, Inc. This acquisition was for a portion of the Pine Plantation property.

On November 20, 2008, the Board of Trustees approved a 36-acre purchase from Project Orlando LLC which was part of the boundary amendment that included the Pine Plantation property.

On October 3, 2008, from the Division of State Lands (DSL) Florida Forever funds a 345-acre parcel was purchased from Palmer ownership in Pine Plantation for \$24,930,304 (About 40 acres in the SE corner of the Palmer parcel was acquired by the Orlando-Orange County Expressway Authority for a future conveyance to Orange County for a park).

In November 2008, DSL Florida Forever funds were used to buy 35.7 acres of the Project Orlando, LLC ownership. DRP will manage this site.



2009

On March 27, 2009, 307.17 acres were purchased from the OOCEA for BARN, LLP parcel (reimbursement of \$10M paid by the Authority—Neighborhood Lakes, Phase II).

2011

On December 9, 2011, ARC placed this project in the category of Critical Natural Lands.

In calendar year 2017, a total of 236.26 acres in this project were acquired using Florida Forever program funding.

2020

On December 11, 2020, the ARC approved an addition of 9 acres (Wekiva River Islands) in Seminole County and a 170-acre parcel (St. Johns Riverbend) in Volusia County to the project boundary.

The 4.6-acre “Arnold” parcel was acquired in September 2020 at a cost of \$253,300 and will be managed by the FFS as part of Seminole State Forest.

Coordination

Florida Communities Trust (FCT), Lake County Water Authority, SJRWMD, DOT, Orlando-Orange County Expressway Authority, and TNC are all acquisition partners in this project.

Management Policy Statement

The primary goals of management of the Wekiva-Ocala Greenway 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, recreational, timber, fish or wildlife resources which local or state regulatory programs cannot adequately protect; to provide areas, including recreational trails, for natural-resource-based recreation; and to preserve significant archaeological or historical sites.

Management Prospectus

Qualifications for state designation

The large size, variety of forest resources, and diversity of the former Seminole Springs project and the western Wekiva-Ocala Connector make them highly desirable for management as a

state forest. The quality of resources on the remainder of the project make them suitable for state preserves.

Manager

The FFS proposes to manage the Seminole Springs and western connector portions of the project. The remainder will be managed by the DRP. The DRP may elect to assume management of the western portion of the Strawn property later if it is purchased.

Conditions affecting intensity of management

On the portion to be managed by the FFS, there are no known disturbances that will require extraordinary attention, so the level of management intensity is expected to be typical for a state forest. The portion to be managed by the DRP, the BMK Ranch (acquired), is a high-need management area, while the Eastern Connector of the former Wekiva-Ocala Connector project and the former St. Johns River project are low-need management areas. The BMK Ranch is expected to have a higher level of recreational use and development compatible with resource management than the other properties.

Timetable for implementing management and provisions for security and protection of infrastructure

About 8,000 acres have been purchased by the State of Florida and the SJRWMD and have been assigned to the FFS for management as the Seminole State Forest (SSF). The FFS is currently providing for public access for low-intensity, non-facilities-related outdoor recreation. Initial activities include securing the site, providing public and fire management access, 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 property will generally be directed toward restoring disturbed areas to their original conditions, as far as possible, as well as protecting threatened and endangered species. An all-season burning program will use, wherever possible, existing roads, black lines foam lines and natural breaks to contain fires. Timber management will mostly involve improvement thinning 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 in disturbed areas and will be the minimum required for management and public access. The DRP will promote recreation and environmental education. For the DRP, within the first year after acquisition, management activities will concentrate on site security, natural and cultural resource protection, and the development of a plan for long-term public use and resource management.



Revenue-generating potential

The FFS will sell timber as needed to improve or maintain desirable ecosystem conditions. These sales will provide a variable source of revenue, but the revenue-generating potential for this project is expected to be low. The DRP expects no significant revenue to be generated initially. After acquisition, it will probably be several years before any significant public facilities are developed on the BMK Ranch properties, and public facilities will probably not be a major emphasis on the eastern connector properties. The amount of any future revenue will depend on the nature and extent of public use and facilities.

Cooperators in management activities

The FFS will cooperate with and seek the assistance of other state agencies, local government entities and interested parties as appropriate. The DRP recommends no local governments or others for management of its project area.

Management Cost Summary

<u>DRP</u>	<u>1996/97</u>	<u>1997/98</u>
Source of Funds	SPTF/LATF/CARL	SPTF/LATF/CARL
Salary	\$0	\$0
OPS	\$425	\$425
Expense	\$5,739	\$5,739
OCO	\$0	\$0
FCO	\$38,798	\$0
TOTAL	\$44,962	\$6,164

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted

Management Cost Summary

<u>FFS (Seminole State Forest)</u>	<u>1995/96</u>	<u>1996/97</u>
Source of Funds	CARL	CARL
Salary	\$35,440	\$64,440
OPS	\$0	\$4,500
Expense	\$22,600	\$40,225
OCO	\$0	\$29,270
FCO	\$0	\$0
TOTAL	\$58,040	\$138,435

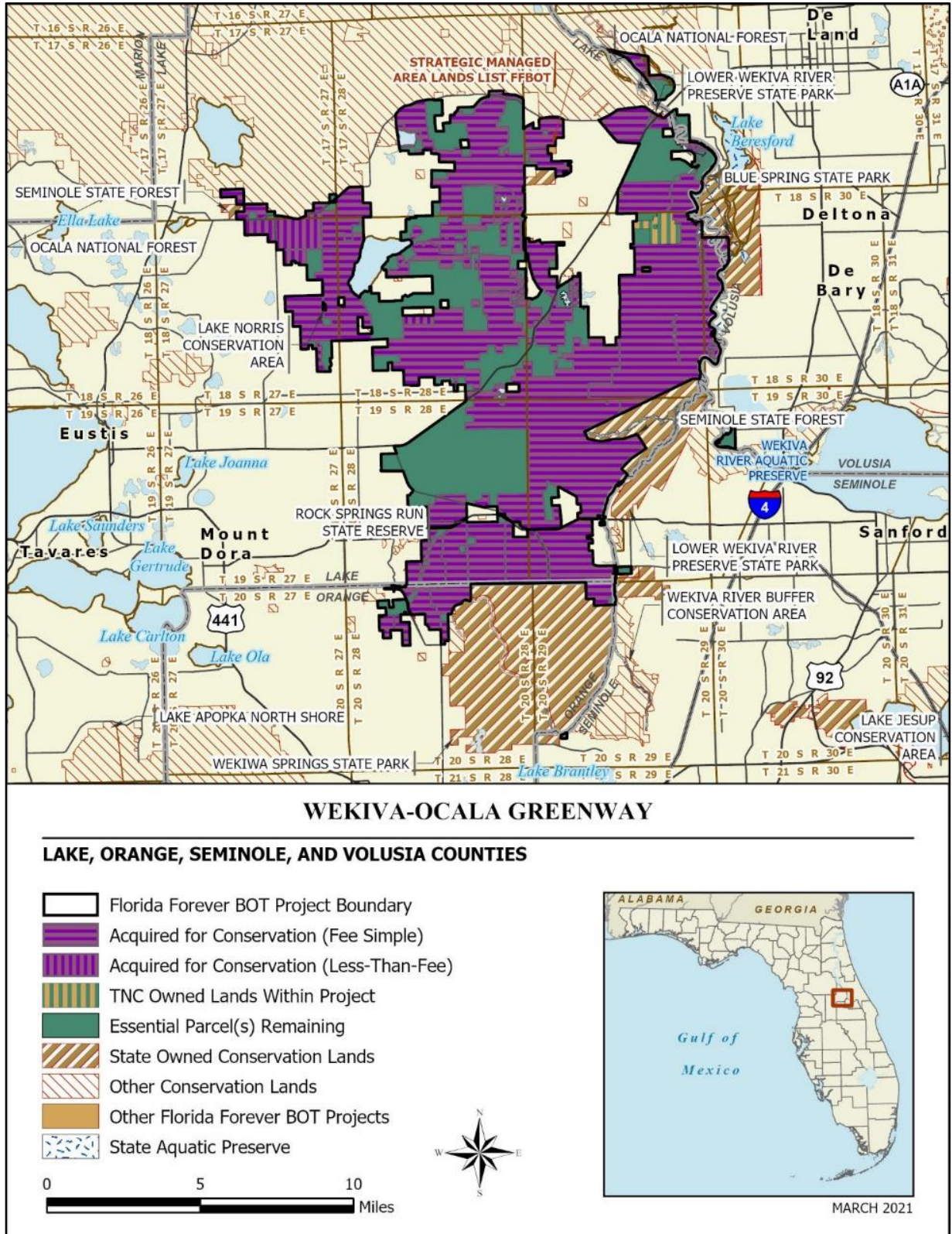
Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted



Management Cost Summary

<u>FFS (Wekiva-Ocala Connector: West Corridor)</u>	<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Source of Funds	CARL	CARL
Salary	\$28,140	\$28,140
OPS	\$0	\$0
Expense	\$20,000	\$15,000
OCO	\$90,400	\$4,500
FCO	\$0	\$0
TOTAL	\$138,540	\$47,640

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted



Map 1: FNAI, January 2021