

# Big Bend Swamp/Holopaw Ranch

Less-Than-Fee

Osceola County

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2000
<i>Project Acres</i>	54,089
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	22,628
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	31,460
<i>2024 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$171,169,649

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Big Bend Swamp/Holopaw Ranch project is located in Osceola County and will protect and maintain a link of natural lands between the Herky Huffman/Bull Creek and Three Lakes Wildlife Management Areas. Numerous wildlife species live in the project's palmetto prairies, pine flatwoods and cypress swamps such as crested caracara (*Caracara plancus*), red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) and Florida sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis*).

## General Description

The project includes a diverse range of natural environments native to central Florida. Natural communities within the project are in good condition because the uplands have been managed and burned regularly. Mesic flatwoods and dry prairie cover 40 percent of the project area. These communities are interrupted by Big Bend Swamp (a large cypress-dominated strand swamp) and smaller dome swamps, depression marshes, wet prairies and hydric hammocks. Fire-suppressed scrub also occurs in patches throughout the property. Disturbed areas, largely improved pasture or sod farms, cover 18 percent of the project. The project area may be particularly important for up to 30 rare animal species that require large areas of flatwoods, prairie and wetlands, such as red-cockaded woodpecker, Florida sandhill crane, Florida grasshopper sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum floridanus*), southern fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger niger*) and swallow-tailed kite (*Elanoides forficatus*).





FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<b><u>FNAI Elements</u></b>	<b><u>Score</u></b>
Red-cockaded woodpecker	G3/S2
Florida sandhill crane	G5T2/S2
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Crested caracara	G5/S2
<i>Narrowleaf Naiad</i>	G3/S2
Gopher frog	G2G3/S3
Wood stork	G4/S2
Southeastern fox squirrel	G5T5/S3
Little blue heron	G5/S4

**Public Use**

Big Bend Swamp/Holopaw Ranch project is proposed for less-than-fee acquisition and does not provide for public access. As a proposed wildlife management area, the project will provide a variety of multiple-use activities including hunting, fishing, camping, boating, hiking, horseback riding, environmental education and ecotourism. Public use will depend on agreements with landowners. 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.

**Acquisition Planning**

**1999**

On December 9, 1999, the Land Acquisition and Management Advisory Council added the Big Bend Swamp/Holopaw Ranch project to the Less-Than-Fee group of the 2000 Conservation and Recreational Lands (CARL) Priority List.

The less-than-fee project, sponsored by Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI), consisted of approximately 56,710 acres with multiple owners. While primarily a less-than-fee acquisition, full fee will be considered in the subdivision.

The essential parcels were identified as Bronson, Partin, Ridgewood Ranch, Oberry, Gannarelli, Whaley, Lee Ranch and Smith.

**2001**

On July 12, 2001, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) established the first conservation easement of Birchwood Acres Preserve.

**2002**

On April 25, 2002, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) approved a less-than-fee addition of 5,714 acres to the project boundary. The addition, sponsored by Holland and Knight Consulting, consisted of one owner (Birchwood Acres Limited Partnership).

On October 9, 2002, FWC established the second conservation easement of Birchwood Acres Preserve, now totaling 45.07 acres. Approximately 13.97 acres of the preserve are within the project boundary.





**2003**

On July 11, 2003, FWC established a conservation easement named Omni Waste Conservation Area. Approximately 969.22 acres of the total 1,089.42 acres are within the project boundary.

**2007**

On June 28, 2007, Osceola County acquired the 342-acre Camp Lonesome Ranch property through the county's Environmental Lands Conservation Program; the county will manage it.

On November 2, 2007, Osceola County purchased an additional 2,100 acres that will be managed as part of the Camp Lonesome Ranch Conservation Area.

**2010**

On April 16, 2010, ARC voted to remove 7,722 acres from the boundary because they have already been developed with residential and commercial structures.

**2011**

On December 9, 2011, ARC placed this project into the Less-than-Fee category.

**2015**

On October 15, 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established the Camp Lonesome conservation easement (1,285.33 acres).

**2017**

On August 16, 2017, the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund approved a 1,100-acre conservation easement on the Camp Lonesome tract of the project.

In 2017, a total of 1,109.68 acres in the project were acquired using Florida Forever program funding.

**2019**

On June 14, 2019, ARC voted to remove 4,255 acres from the project boundary after receiving a certified letter from the owner(s) requesting its removal.

**2023**

The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) acquired a 4,196-acre conservation easement in Osceola County from Bronsons LLP.

**2024**

On April 12, 2024, ARC approved the addition of the Lytal Conservation Area project proposal (1,579 acres) in Osceola County to the project boundary.

Coordination

Osceola County is an acquisition partner in this project.

Management Policy Statement

As a less-than-fee acquisition, the Big Bend Swamp/Holopaw Ranch would be managed by the landowner as outlined in the conservation easement. The Big Bend Swamp/Holopaw Ranch proposal has





the resource diversity to qualify as a wildlife management area. FWC is recommended as lead manager with the Florida Forest Service (FFS) as a cooperating manager.

### Manager(s)

If acquired as less-than-fee, management responsibility would remain with the landowner. Periodic monitoring of the site's management would be coordinated by the Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Division of State Lands.

### Management Prospectus

DEP's Division of State Lands will periodically monitor the conservation easement, while the management will be conducted by the property owner.

### **Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management**

The lands within this proposal are low-need tracts, requiring basic resource management (including the use of prescribed fire). However, special precautions and frequent coordination will be necessary for any restoration projects or prescribed burns since ranchers and other landowners will continue to maintain a presence on many of these properties. If negotiated provisions allow, some low-level public-use activities may be allowed on lands acquired under conservation easements.

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

During the first year after acquisition, emphasis will be placed on securing and posting boundaries, assuring public access to the tract, surveying wildlife and plant communities, using prescribed fire and establishing relationships with adjacent landowners. A management plan for the tract will be prepared, including the formation of an appropriate Management Advisory Group with stakeholders in the management of these lands. Long-range activities on the property will include securing and stabilizing roads for public access, developing hiking and horseback riding trails, and developing camping and nature interpretive programs.

Infrastructure development will be kept to the minimum required to allow public access, provide facilities and manage the property. For the long-term, FWC will try to maintain and establish rapport with landowners adjacent to the wildlife management area, provide technical assistance and advice to assure the welfare of such ecosystem components as wetlands, and establish working relationships with local representatives of regulatory agencies such as the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD), South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), DEP, Osceola County and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. This will ensure solutions if conflicts arise.

An all-season prescribed burning program will be established. Whenever possible, existing roads, trails and firebreaks will be used to control both prescribed and natural fires. Species inventories will be continually updated by FWC biologists with observations and systematic surveys. Inventory data will be supplemented as available with data from other sources which may include, but not be limited to, FWC, DEP's Division of Recreation and Parks, FFS, FNAI, The Nature Conservancy, SJRWMD, SFWMD and other private contractors.





Over the long-term, some previously disturbed sites will be restored or managed to specifically benefit wildlife species that thrive in early-successional plant communities. Selected sites may be planted with native or non-invasive agronomic plants to provide dove hunting opportunities; provide high-quality forage for quail, dove, deer and wild turkey; and enhance wildlife viewing opportunities.

**Revenue-generating potential**

Much of the proposed area is current or former ranch lands and mesic flatwoods with scattered longleaf or slash pine. Some revenue might be generated on fee-simple portions of the acquisition by stocking cattle, or with timber management by means of a wildlife-oriented forest management plan developed with the assistance of FFS. Also, fees could be established for touring the area to view plant and animal communities through ecotourism programs being developed on the adjacent wildlife management area. A \$25 wildlife management area stamp would be required to hunt on those portions of the area acquired in fee-simple. For areas where only conservation easements are acquired, FWC will be bound by negotiations between landowners and DEP. However, if negotiated provisions allow, there may be some opportunities on these lands for generating revenues from low-level hunting activities such as quota hunts or special-opportunity hunts.

Funding of requisite positions, Other Personal Services positions, expenses and Operating Capital Outlay would come from the CARL Trust Fund, and the State Game Trust Fund as needed. Since these lands are adjacent to an existing land complex managed by FWC, initial staffing would be limited to one Biological Scientist III and one Fish and Wildlife Technician.

**Cooperators in management activities**

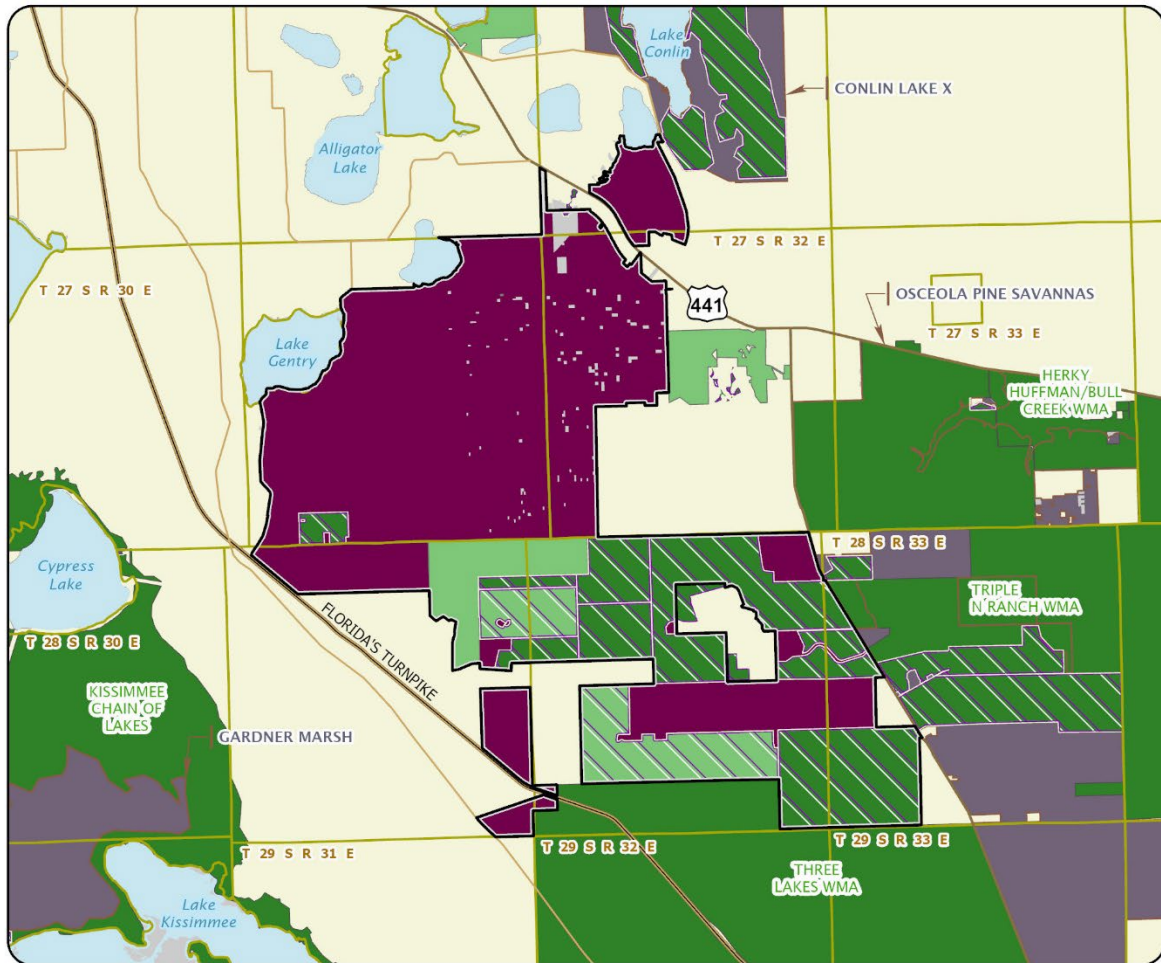
FWC will cooperate with other state and local governmental agencies in managing the area but will seek special assistance from FFS in managing forest resources and implementing prescribed burning programs.

Management Cost Summary

<u>FWC</u>	<u>2000/01</u>	<u>2001/02</u>
Source of Funds	CARL	CARL
Salaries	\$72,311	\$74,480
OPS	\$5,500	\$5,500
Expense	\$32,424	\$32,424
OCO	\$72,500	\$0
FCO	\$0	\$0
TOTAL	\$182,735	\$112,404

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted





### BIG BEND SWAMP/HOLOPAW RANCH

#### OSCEOLA COUNTY

