

Caloosahatchee Ecoscape

Critical Natural Lands

Glades and Hendry Counties

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	<i>1998</i>
<i>Project Acres</i>	<i>19,624</i>
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	<i>12,514</i>
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	<i>7,110</i>
<i>2024 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	<i>\$48,533,902</i>

Purpose for State Acquisition

The Caloosahatchee Ecoscape project will provide a large landscape link within the citrus groves and cattle ranches of rural Hendry County. The project includes critical habitat within the primary dispersal zone for the Florida panther (*Puma concolor coryi*) and will preserve a connection of natural land between the Okaloacoochee Slough to the south and additional private and public conservation land to the north that is under increasing threat of development.

General Description

The project area contains wet prairies, cypress basin, dome swamp, mesic flatwoods, wet flatwoods, depressional marshes and scrub. Most of the properties' natural communities have been impacted by clearing and drainage from improved pasture development or farming. However, the project still provides important habitat for a variety of listed wildlife species. Most of the land is within the Barron Water Control District, and canals within the project area have altered the natural hydrology to the point where no significant natural water resources remain. Eleven archaeological sites are known from the project area (some with material dating back to the Archaic period).





FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Florida panther	G5T1/S1
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
Florida scrub-jay	G1G2/S1S2
Swallow-tailed kite	G5/S2
Big cypress fox squirrel	G5T2/S2
Florida sandhill crane	G5T2/S2
Crested caracara	G5/S2
Bald eagle	G5/S3
Little blue heron	G5/S4
Tricolored heron	G5/S4

Public Use

This project qualifies as a wildlife management area with uses such as hunting, hiking, camping, picnicking and other resource-based recreation activities.

Acquisition Planning

1998

The initial proposal is 16,055-acres. The three largest ownerships, IMC Agrico, Floriland Dairy (Milicevic) and Atlantic Gulf Communities, are designated essential. The owners of the Floriland Dairy tract (Milicevic) have indicated they would consider negotiating a less-than-fee sale.

1999

On March 26, 1999, the Land Acquisition Advisory Council added 2,400 acres to the project.

2002

In 2002, a 2,994-acre conservation easement was placed on the LaBelle Ranch for \$2,320,700.

2003

In 2003, 161 acres of land were acquired fee-simple by the state for \$290,000.

2006

On May 30, 2006, the South Florida Water Management District established the Verandah West conservation easement (304.78 acres).

2008

On June 13, 2008, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) moved the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape project to the A List of Florida Forever projects to expedite acquisition.

2009

On November 4, 2009, the 1,292-acre Panther Passage Conservation Bank conservation easement was purchased and managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC).





2010

On April 28, 2010, Florida Panther Conservation Bank Endowment Fund Trust established the Florida Panther Conservation Bank II conservation easement (472.44 acres).

2011

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

2012

On May 16, 2012, the U.S. Department of Agriculture established a 718-acre conservation easement as part of its Natural Resources Conservation Service Wetlands Reserve Program.

On May 17, 2012, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) established two Lone Ranger Ranch conservation easements, totaling 538.46 acres.

2013

On June 28, 2013, TNC established an additional Lone Ranger Ranch conservation easement (20.16 acres).

2015

On May 21, 2015, TNC established the Black Boar Ranch conservation easement (1,527.83 acres).

2020

On June 12, 2020, ARC approved the Amtel Farms addition of 2,207 acres in Glades and Hendry counties to the project boundary.

On December 11, 2020, ARC approved the removal of 2,213 acres in Glades and Hendry counties from the project boundary at the request of the owner (Amtel Farms).

2022

On October 14, 2022, ARC approved the Goodno Ranch (1,185 acres) project proposal and added it to the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape project boundary.

2024

In May 2024, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) acquired a 1,130.59-acre conservation easement in Glades County from Dwayne A. House Revocable Trust, an 836.31-acre conservation easement in Glades County from Dwayne A. House Revocable Trust, and a 1,428.3-acre conservation easement in Hendry County from Ferguson-House Farms Inc.

Coordination

TNC is considered an acquisition partner.





Management Policy Statement

The project area has been highly impacted by timbering and other clearing for farming and grazing. Management goals include the restoration and maintenance of native plant and animal communities to the extent feasible and the provision of compatible, nature-based recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, camping, hiking and nature study.

For less-than-fee acquisitions, the property would be managed by the landowner as outlined in the conservation easement.

Manager(s)

FWC is the managing agency for this project.

If the property is acquired less-than-fee, management responsibility 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 DEP's Division of State Lands.

Management Prospectus

Qualifications for State Designation

The project will provide refuge for imperiled species like the Florida panther, Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*), sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis*), wood stork (*Mycteria americana*) and crested caracara (*Caracara plancus*). The project is also within an area where the FWC has conducted significant panther and bear research. Additionally, it will protect habitat for game species and provide natural recreation opportunities for the public.

Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management

Hydrologic manipulation and conversion of native range to improved pastures will require habitat restoration. Urbanization within and adjacent to the proposed project boundary will require that any large-scale controlled burning efforts be coordinated between appropriate state and federal agencies and the local affected residents.

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

During the first year after acquisition, posting the boundary, erecting entrance signs and resource inventory will be a priority. A conceptual management plan will also be written. Location and control of exotic plant species will be ongoing. The long-term management goals shall be to restore and maintain native plant and animal communities to the extent feasible, with a secondary goal of providing compatible nature-based recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, camping, hiking and nature study. Establishment of access and other facilities





necessary for approved nature-based recreational activities will be developed as funding permits.

Revenue-generating Potential

This property has historically provided timber and cattle production. Potential revenue sources may include hunting, fishing, ecotourism, cattle grazing and sustainable timber production.

Cooperators in Management Activities

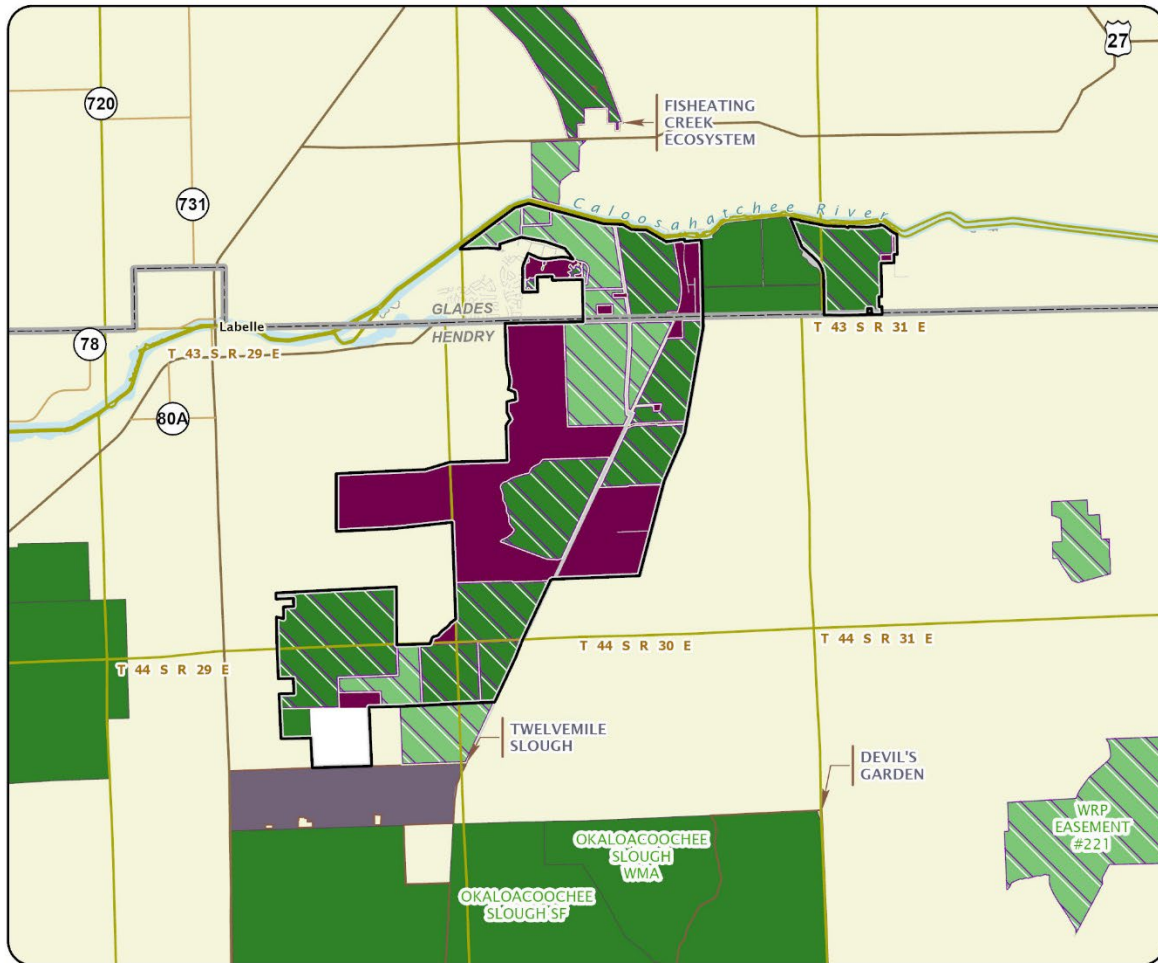
FWC will cooperate with other federal, state and local governmental agencies and non-profit organizations in managing the area. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers presently maintains a campground and the locks at Ortona, along the northeastern corner of the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape project boundary.

Management Cost Summary

<u>FWC</u>	<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Source of Funds	LATF & State Game Trust Fund	
Salary	\$136,392	\$140,483
OPS	\$7,912	\$8,149
Expense	\$49,730	\$49,730
OCO	\$81,527	\$1,000
FCO	\$0	\$0
TOTAL	\$275,561	\$199,362

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted





CALOOSAHATCHEE ECOSCAPE

GLADES AND HENDRY COUNTIES

