# Forest and Lakes Ecosystem

Critical Natural Lands
Bay and Washington Counties

| | |
|---|---|
| *Year Added to Priority List* | *2019* |
| *Project Acres* | *54,862* |
| *Acquired Acres* | *0* |
| *Cost of Acquired Acres* | *$0* |
| *Remaining Project Acres* | *54,862* |
| *2024 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres* | *$69,443,433* |

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Forest and Lakes Ecosystem project will help to protect significant water and timber resources within a rapidly developing area of Florida. The project would contribute to the creation of a contiguous conservation corridor that would extend from Econfina Creek, westward to Eglin Air Force Base, and north to the Conecuh National Forest. The project will provide public access for a wide variety of recreational uses and provide critical habitat protection for the Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*).

## General Description

The Forest and Lakes Ecosystem project spans portions of Washington and Bay counties in the Florida Panhandle. It is located south of Interstate 10, between the city of Vernon and the town of Ebro. A portion of the southwestern boundary is contiguous with the Pine Log State Forest. Other Florida Forever projects nearby include Sand Mountain, West Bay Preservation Area and Florida's First Magnitude Springs.

The Forest and Lakes Ecosystem has significant hydrological features that make it essential to the protection of the region's water quality. The property provides important surface water protection and a high volume of aquifer recharge. The project area contains more than 50 miles of river and stream corridors and has over 150 lakes, ponds, and depressions; the largest lake on-site is Big Blue Lake, totaling approximately 635 acres. The project also has several miles of direct frontage on Holmes Creek and the Choctawhatchee River.

This area is considered a significant linkage, providing landscape connectivity in the northwest Florida Panhandle. Much of the area remains intact, supporting a variety of habitats sustaining the biodiversity of the region. While there are impacts of commercial pine plantations and other alterations within the uplands, the site's wetlands are in near-pristine condition. These wetlands include rare sandhill lakes, blackwater streams, seepage springs, seepage slopes, springs and spring runs. A variety of species have been reported and are known to occur within the project. More than 40 species of imperiled plants, 21

species of amphibians and a multitude of insect, fish and crustacean species have been identified in the project area.

FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

| FNAI Elements | Score |
|---|---|
| Gulf sturgeon | G3T2T3/S2? |
| Eastern indigo snake | G3/S2? |
| Gopher tortoise | G3/S3 |
| Florida black bear | G5T4/S4 |
| *Crystal Lake nailwort* | G1/S1 |
| Georgia blind salamander | G1G2/S1S2 |
| Purple skimmer | G1G2/S1S2 |
| *Morzenti's spleenwort* | G2/S1 |
| Apalachicolan cave isopod | G1G3/S1S2 |
| *karst pond xyris* | G2/S2 |
| *quillwort yellow-eyed grass* | G2/S2 |
| *smoothbark St. John's wort* | G2/S2 |

## Public Use

Public access for canoeing, kayaking, boating, fishing, bird watching, nature photography, limited camping, hunting, horseback riding, hiking and biking could all be enjoyed within this project acreage. Public recreational uses will be determined during the project's design. Acquisition would also help complete the Florida National Scenic Trail, a statewide non-motorized trail that crosses several Florida Forever project sites. The trail is a congressionally designated national scenic trail.

## Acquisition Planning

**2019**

In October 2019, the Forest and Lakes Ecosystem proposal was approved by the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) as a fee and less-than-fee project.

During the interim between the proposal's submittal and approval by ARC, the owner, Northern Trust Company, sold the property to a consortium of entities. The new owners are willing to include this acreage in the Florida Forever program. Due to the project's size, the Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP), Florida Forest Service (FFS) and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) have all submitted management proposals. Each management prospectus has been provided below.

## Coordination

Because of this project's location and role in ensuring a wildlife linkage and corridor for the Panhandle, conservation of the project area would be done in coordination with the Northwest Florida Water Management District (NWFWMD), FFS, Seven Runs Creek Conservation Easement's management and

U.S. Department of Defense. However, additional entities could assist with management or acquisition going forward.

Management Policy Statement

The protection of the Forest and Lakes Ecosystem project will conserve valuable natural resources, wildlife corridors, native habitats and regionally important waters within an area of renowned biodiversity, rare and imperiled species, and significant hydrological and archaeological resources. The project will conserve portions of the forested floodplain along the Choctawhatchee River and Holmes Creek that provide habitat, recreational opportunities and increase the overall management efficiency of the contiguous managed areas already protected by the state and NWFWMD. These lands protect waters that will help to maintain water supplies, enhance water quality, provide aquifer recharge, protect biodiversity and other crucial ecosystem services for the residents of North Florida.

Manager(s)

DRP, FWC and FFS each submitted a management prospectus for this project. The understanding was that the project would work best if divided among these managers, depending on natural resources, opportunities, protection and restoration needs; however, division and changes have not been settled. The agreement was that recommended management would be resolved prior to pursuit. The Nature Conservancy identified FFS as a logical manager for the site's timber resources.

Management Prospectus: Division of Recreation and Parks

**Qualifications for State Designation**

DRP proposes to manage the entirety of the acquisition as a new state park given the distribution of significant natural features that offer conservation and recreation values.

**Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management**

Wetland resources on the property are in near-pristine condition. These resources include rare sandhill lakes, blackwater streams seepage streams, springs and spring runs require protection, but not restoration. The existing network of roads, bridges, culverts and utility easement provides the necessary access infrastructure and compartmentalization for restoration zones. The site's industrial forests will be converted to their former natural communities using the Torreya (Sweetwater Tract) model, emphasizing native groundcover reintroduction.

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

Provision would be made to ensure the protection and security of the project's resources and infrastructure. A complete inventory of the site would occur once the property was assigned to DRP for management. Any areas requiring immediate management attention, security or protection will be identified and addressed. A complete survey and subsequent fencing of critical property boundaries would be a top priority. Initial focus would be on the development of low-intensity passive recreation such as hiking and fishing. "Starter kits" would be installed at strategically located points within the

property and provide access to a preliminary system of hiking trails. DRP starter kits also include a composting restroom, picnic pavilion and trailhead kiosk.

**Revenue-generating Potential**

Park entrance fees, other fees and charges associated with enhancement of resource recreational experiences and timber harvest profits are potential revenue sources.

**Cooperators in Management Activities**

Cooperators will include other regional park management, as well as FFS, FWC and the Department of State's Division of Historical Resources. These other state agencies would assist in the development of wildfire emergency plans, enforcement of state wildlife laws, implementation of wildlife management programs and protection and interpretation of archaeological and historical sites.

**Management costs and sources of revenue**

It is anticipated that management funding will come from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund. Estimated budget needs for interim management are as follows:

Management Cost Summary

| DRP | Startup | Recurring |
|---|---|---|
| Source of funds | State of Florida Visitor entrance fees and charges | |
| Salary | $293,300 (# 7 FTE) | $293,300 |
| Expense | $100,000 | |
| OCO | $50,000 | $50,000 |
| FCO | $1,000,000 | $200,000 |
| TOTAL | $1,643,300 | |
| $543,300 | | |

*Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted*

Management Prospectus: Florida Forest Service

**Qualifications for State Designation**

FFS management will allow for restoration and sustainable management of the vast timber resources, provide protection to the Choctawhatchee River basin and surrounding waterbodies and provide for a diverse array of dispersed, resource-based recreational opportunities.

**Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management**

The property should not require intensive management in the short term. Over the long term, the intensity of management and related costs will significantly increase as management emphasis shifts from protection and planning to restoration efforts and broader public use (with more use of the infrastructure already present).

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

Once the property is acquired and assigned to FFS, short term management efforts will concentrate on site security, control of vehicle access and management planning. Consideration will be given during the management planning process to accommodate a variety of recreational developments. The magnitude and diversity of future resource-based recreation opportunities offered will depend on establishment of a management plan for the property, funding for positions and using established infrastructure. FFS will expedite short-term management on portions of the property that are near existing FFS-managed lands including Pine Log State Forest, Blackwater River State Forest and Point Washington State Forest by utilizing existing resources. Additional equipment required to manage the property includes, but is not limited to, two 4x4 pickups, one tractor plow/transport, one farm tractor with implements, one road grader and two UTVs.

**Revenue-generating Potential**

FFS predicts that the property will generate revenue. The amount of future revenue generated from silviculture will depend on the acreage that is managed as such. Due to the high recreational potential of the property, revenue generated by visitor fees will increase as time progresses and opportunities are established.

**Cooperators in Management Activities**

FFS will work with DRP and FWC as cooperating managers, as well as other federal, state and local agencies, to further resource management and public use opportunities.

**Management costs and sources of revenue**

It is anticipated that management funding will come from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund. Estimated budget needs for interim management are as follows:

Management Cost Summary

| FFS | Startup | Recurring |
|---|---|---|
| Salary | $165,000 (#3 FTE) | $165,000 |
| Expense | $120,000 | $120,000 |
| OCO | $693,250 | |
| Outsourcing | $25,000 | |
| TOTAL | $1,003,250 | |
| $285,000 | | |

*Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted*

Management Prospectus: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

**Qualifications for State Designation**

This project would serve to: conserve, protect, manage or restore important ecosystems, landscapes and forests to enhance or protect significant surface water, recreational, timber and fish and wildlife

resources; conserve and protect significant landscape-scale habitat and provide wildlife corridors for rare and imperiled species and increase linkages and conservation corridors between public land and private conservation easements in the region; conserve, protect manage or restore coastal habitat in Northwest Florida; provide surface and groundwater protection protect natural floodplain functions; and provide opportunities for fish and wildlife resource-based public outdoor recreation.

**Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management**

Resources described in this management prospectus indicate conditions affecting management intensity. These include natural community types, topography and soils, surface and ground water conditions, extent of historic disturbance and already existing improvements. Environmentally sensitive areas, such as erosion-prone sites, important habitats, outstanding natural areas and wetlands, shall be identified, managed and protected.

FWC conducts analysis of historic vegetation of natural community types when necessary to determine desired future conditions. Upland wildlife management concentrates on appropriate vegetative manipulations guided by FWC's Objective Based Vegetative Management program, which includes the application of prescribed fire to achieve conditions acceptable to a broad range of wildlife species within the area's fire-adapted natural communities. Some areas may require ecological restoration of ground cover, control of invasive and exotic species and thinning or reforestation. Such resource management projects may be necessary to accomplish restoration objectives. This is especially important for the conservation of habitats and populations of imperiled or rare species. Landscape ecology is also important as land use changes in the vicinity of the area.

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

If acquired and leased to FWC for management, FWC will develop a management plan describing the management goals and objectives necessary to implement future resource management programs on the property. The management plan will also establish the current and future roles of cooperating entities including DRP, FFS and other governmental and non-governmental parties.

Long-range plans would stress ecosystem management and the protection and management of locally important, rare and imperiled species. If acquired, historic analysis of natural communities and vegetation types may be conducted, and quantified vegetation management objectives will be developed. FWC will also assess the condition of wildlife resources and provide planning support to enhance management of locally important species and recovery of imperiled species in the area. Use of prescribed fire and other essential resource management activities will be implemented to maintain and restore natural communities and vegetation types to benefit native wildlife resources.

Programs providing multiple fish and wildlife-based public outdoor recreational uses will be considered for implementation following acquisition. These potential uses will enhance the public's opportunities for outdoor recreational enjoyment. Essential roads will be maintained to provide all-weather public

access and management operations. Unnecessary roads, fire lanes and hydrological disturbances will be abandoned or restored as practical. Infrastructure development will be limited to only that which is necessary to allow public access and to provide for the necessary facilities, security and management of the property. Archaeological and historical sites will be managed in coordination with DHR.

**Revenue-generating Potential**

If feasible, revenue from conservation lands could include permit sales, recreational user fees and ecotourism activities. Area regulations would be developed to identify the necessary and required permits, fees and regulations. Timber sales from thinning operations may also yield additional revenue. Apiary leases will be considered as a revenue source depending on whether the area meets the criteria of FWC's Apiary Policy. In addition, the Florida Legislature appropriates funds for land management. The long-term values of ecosystem services to local and regional land and water resources are expected to be significant.

**Cooperators in Management Activities**

FWC will work with DRPs and FFS, along with other federal, state and local agencies, as cooperating managers to further resource management, and recreational and educational opportunities.

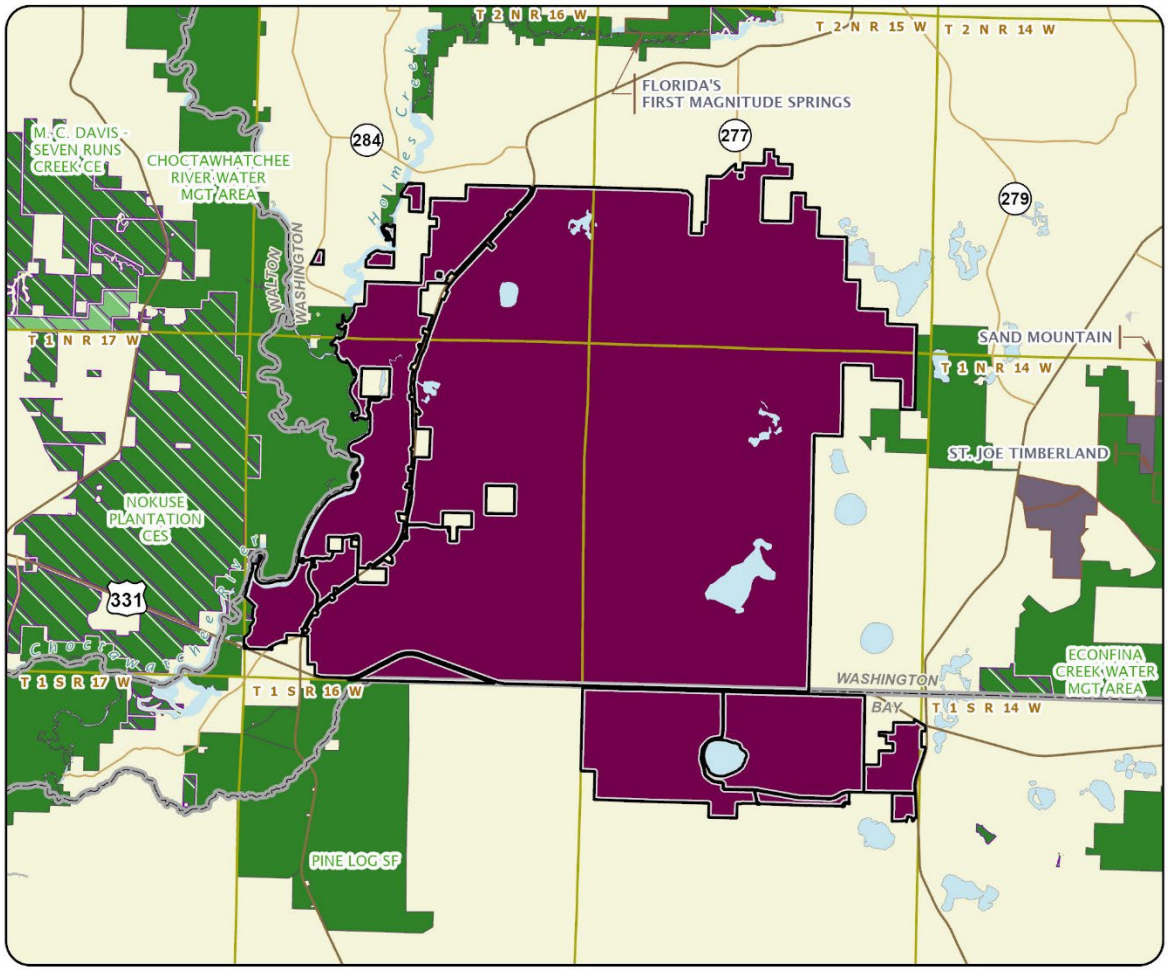
**Management costs and sources of revenue**

The initial non-recurring start-up cost for the Forest and Lakes Ecosystem project is estimated to be $8,751,840, which includes public access and infrastructure and fixed capital outlays necessary for management of the area. Optimal management of the area would require 11 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions. 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 cost estimate below. All land management funding is dependent upon annual legislative appropriations.

Management Cost Summary

| FWC | Startup | Recurring |
|---|---|---|
| Resource Management | $2,090,596 | $2,090,596 |
| Administration | $45,400 | $45,400 |
| Support | $45,400 | $45,400 |
| Capital Improvements | $318,348 | $318,348 |
| Visitor Services/Recreation | $200,745 | $200,745 |
| Law Enforcement | $42,118 | $42,118 |
| TOTAL | $3,281,939 | $3,281,939 |

*Source: Legislative appropriations*




# FOREST AND LAKES ECOSYSTEM

## BAY AND WASHINGTON COUNTIES

- Florida Forever Project Boundary
- Essential Parcels Remaining
- Other Florida Forever Projects
- State Conservation Lands
- Other Conservation Lands
- Other Public Lands
- Less-Than-Fee Acquisition

0 4 8 Miles

N