

# Heather Island/Ocklawaha River

Partnerships and Regional Incentives

Marion County

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2002
<i>Project Acres</i>	20,513
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	10,261
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	10,252
<i>2024 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$53,423,905

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Heather Island/Ocklawaha River project will support connectivity with existing public conservation lands, preserve habitat for rare species such as the Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*) and gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*), and create corridors for wildlife dispersal and floodplain protection. Given its diversity of wildlife species, quality of plant communities and strategic location, this project has substantial conservation attributes.

## General Description

The Heather Island/Ocklawaha River project is in Marion County and consists of a mosaic of upland and wetland communities (with the majority being forested wetlands). Several conservation areas, including the Ocala National Forest and the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway State Recreation and Conservation Area (MHCCFG), border the project. The project will protect and restore the floodplain and adjacent upland forests along the Ocklawaha River. The project area provides suitable habitat for the Florida black bear and the rare pinkroot plant (*Spigelia loganioides*). The Heather Island/Ocklawaha River project was previously on the Conservation and Recreational Lands (CARL) acquisition list but was removed due to an impasse reached with unwilling sellers in 2000. Recently, the landowners have expressed an interest in selling to the state and/or the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD). To date, SJRWMD has acquired approximately 4,465 acres within the original CARL project boundaries.

## FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<b><u>FNAI Elements</u></b>	<b><u>Score</u></b>
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
<i>pinkroot</i>	G2/S2
Sand skink	G3/S3





## Public Use

The Heather Island/Ocklawaha River project can accommodate a diversity of resource-based recreation opportunities such as hiking, environmental education, picnicking, camping, horseback riding and bicycling. Depending on management emphasis, the property will also support hunting. The project abuts the Ocklawaha River and public lands adjacent to the river that could accommodate shoreline freshwater fishing and/or boat launching sites. The project may 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

### **2002**

On December 5, 2002, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) added the Heather Island/Ocklawaha River project to Group A of the Florida Forever 2003 Priority List. This fee-simple project, sponsored by the Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Office of Greenways and Trails and SJRWMD, consisted of approximately 19,949 acres, two landowners (Rayonier Timberland Corp. and Alawest-AI LLC) and had a taxable value of \$32,234,776. The essential parcels were identified as the Rayonier ownership; these should be mapped and appraised first.

### **2005**

On January 25, 2005, ARC moved this project to Group B of the 2005 Florida Forever Priority List.

### **2011**

On December 9, 2011, ARC placed this project in the Partnerships and Regional Initiatives category.

On January 11, 2011, approximately 400 acres (The Nature Conservancy/Rayonier Forest Resources LP – \$1,165,000) were purchased by DEP's Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) as the Silver River Addition. This purchase is to be managed by DRP.

### **2023**

In December 2023, ARC approved the addition of two parcels totaling approximately 149.54 acres in Marion County.

### **2024**

In September 2024, ARC approved the addition of one parcel totaling approximately 409.62 acres in Marion County.

## Coordination

This project will be acquired in partnership with SJRWMD, with a mixture of state and water management district funding. Contribution percentages have not been determined.





### Management Policy Statement

Priority will be given to conserving and protecting environmentally unique native habitats and threatened and endangered species. Management programs will be designed to conserve, protect, manage and/or restore important landscapes and natural resources. The tract will also be managed to provide opportunities for biking, camping, canoeing, environmental education, fishing, hiking, hunting and wildlife viewing.

The connection and proximity of this project to other conservation lands, as well as its landscape diversity and high-quality wetlands, provide important habitats for wildlife populations and a unique environment for outdoor recreation in Florida. Since the principal purpose of the project is to protect habitat for wildlife, management goals will be oriented to conserving and protecting these species and carefully managing public access.

### Manager(s)

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) is the lead manager for most of the southern two parcels: Marshall Swamp and Cow Hammock, approximately 5,200 acres. The remaining parcels (approximately 12,700 acres) will be managed by DRP (portions between Sharpes Ferry Road and the Silver River) and the Florida Forest Service (FFS).

### Management Prospectus

#### **Qualifications for State Designation**

The project will increase nature-based recreation; enhance the coordination and completion of land acquisition projects; increase the protection of Florida's biodiversity at the species, natural community and landscape levels; protect, restore and maintain the quality and natural functions of land, water and wetland systems of the state; and increase the amount of forestland available for sustainable management of natural resources.

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

Some portions of the project include lands that are low-need tracts, requiring basic resource management (including the frequent use of prescribed fire where appropriate). However, since more than half of the project area has been disturbed for silviculture or other purposes, significant restoration activities are possible for acreage acquired fee simple. FWC will use restoration techniques recommended by specialists in the field of ecological restoration, including the most recent advancements identified by on-going research and lessons learned on the ground through adaptive management. The primary management needed to preserve the less disturbed natural communities will involve introducing prescribed fire and carefully managing public use. Biotic surveys will be a priority as many rare and listed species are expected to be present.

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

During the first year after acquisition, emphasis will be on site security, posting boundaries, public access, fire management, resource inventory and removing refuse. A conceptual management plan will





be developed by FWC describing management goals and specific objectives to implement future resource management. Long-range plans will emphasize restoring and maintaining ecosystem functions; restoring native wildlife populations and wildlife diversity, including protecting and managing threatened and endangered species; and management for sustainable public use of game wildlife populations balanced with other wildlife oriented recreational activities. Multiple use principles will be practiced where compatible with resource management goals and acquisition.

**Revenue-generating Potential**

The harvest and sale of forest products should continue to provide revenues under state management, where silvicultural activities are consistent with wildlife habitat management objectives. FWC, however, will seek to expand and enhance the revenue-generating potential of the property, improving wildlife diversity and providing a broad spectrum of resource-based recreational opportunities.

Additional revenue will be generated from sales of hunting licenses, fishing licenses, wildlife management area stamps and other special hunting stamps. Some revenues might be realized in the future from recreational user fees and ecotourism and wildlife viewing activities. When acquired by the state, the project will require one full-time position to manage the site. However, if certain activities are privatized, it would reduce the number of positions required. Funding for natural resource management and public use administration would come from the CARL Trust Fund. See the anticipated costs below. Revenue sources would likely include public use fees and timber harvests.

**Cooperators in Management Activities**

FWC should cooperate with other state and local governmental agencies, including DEP, FFS and SJRWMD, in managing the area.

Management Cost Summary

<u>FWC</u>	<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Salary	not provided	not provided
OPS	not provided	not provided
Expense	\$1,130,236	not provided
OCO	\$512,154	not provided
TOTAL	\$1,642,390	not provided

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted





Management Cost Summary

<u>FFS</u>	<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Salary (2 FTE)	\$80,870	not provided
OPS	\$0	not provided
Expense	\$117,500	not provided
OCO	\$225,600	not provided
TOTAL	\$423,970	not provided

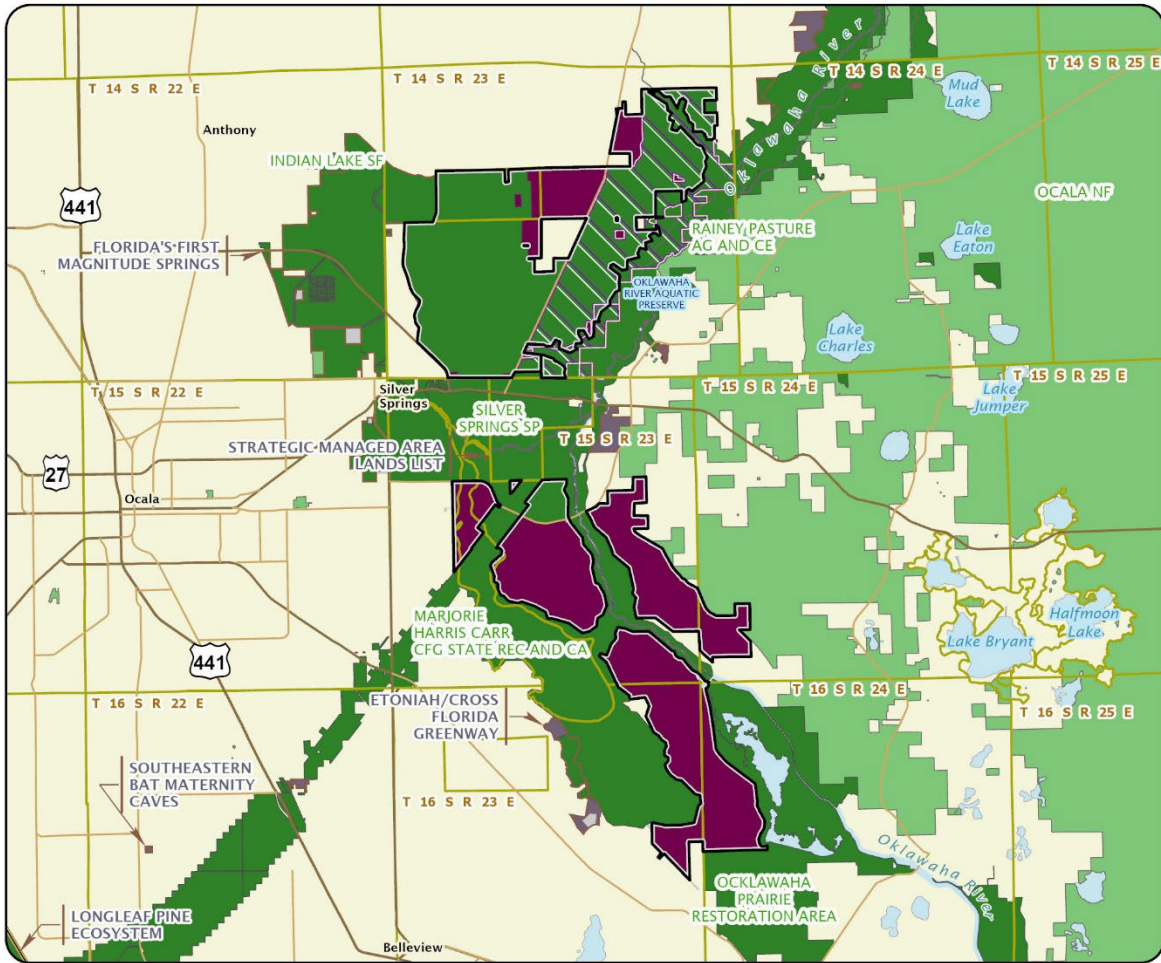
Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted

Management Cost Summary

<u>DRP</u>	<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Salary	\$0	not provided
OPS	\$0	not provided
Expense	\$0	not provided
FCO	\$268,000	not provided
TOTAL	\$268,000	not provided

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted





### HEATHER ISLAND/OCKLAWAHA RIVER

#### MARION COUNTY

