

# Kissimmee-St. Johns River Connector

Less-Than-Fee

Indian River and Okeechobee Counties

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2001
<i>Project Acres</i>	44,400
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	15,110
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	29,290
<i>2024 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$181,363,235

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The purpose of the Kissimmee-St. Johns River Connector is to provide an ecological and hydrological connection between the Fort Drum Marsh Conservation Area, Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park and Ordway-Whittell Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary. The project will protect strategic habitat for numerous rare species such as the Florida grasshopper sparrow (*Aimophila aestivalis*). Acquisition of this project will meet the Florida Forever goals of increasing protection of Florida's biodiversity, protecting and restoring the natural functions of land and increasing natural resource-based public recreation.

## General Description

The project consists of a landscape mosaic primarily comprised of improved pasture. It also contains mesic flatwoods, scrub, scrubby flatwoods, and dry and wet prairie. The bottomland forest and blackwater stream communities appear intact and are generally located on the eastern portion of the project. The dry and wet prairie communities are confined to the southwestern portion of the proposal and are impacted by several ditches. The remaining natural communities are fragmented across the proposal.

## FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<b><u>FNAI Elements</u></b>	<b><u>Score</u></b>
Florida sandhill crane	G5T2/S2
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Wood stork	G4/S2
Crested caracara	G5/S2
<i>cutthroatgrass</i>	G3/S3
<i>large-flowered rosemary</i>	G3/S3
Florida burrowing owl	G4T3/S3
Bachman's sparrow	G3/S3
<i>hand fern</i>	G4/S3
Bald eagle	G5/S3
Limpkin	G5/S3
Little blue heron	G5/S4



## Public Use

The project is proposed for less-than-fee acquisition and does not provide for public access. However, recreational activities could be possible upon coordination with the landowner. This project has the potential to support the completion of the Florida National Scenic Trail, a statewide non-motorized trail that crosses several Florida Forever project sites.

## Acquisition Planning

### **2001**

On December 6, 2001, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) voted to add the Kissimmee-St. Johns Connector project to Group A of the 2002 Florida Forever Priority List. The project consisted of 91 parcels under 11 owners. The essential parcels were identified as the Okeechobee Partnership, Oliver, Callaway, LOR, Russakis Ranch, Wedgeworth, Padgett Creek LLC and the Triple S Cattle Company ownerships.

### **2007**

In December 2007, Indian River County closed on two easements on two adjacent ranches (Triple S Cattle Company and Padgett Creek LLC). The combined purchases, known as the Padgett Branch Conservation Easement, totaled 1,585 acres for \$11,095,000.

### **2011**

On August 16, 2011, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) established Phase I of the Russakis Ranch Gopher Tortoise Long-term Recipient Site (640.05 acres).

On December 9, 2011, this project was placed in the Less-than-Fee category.

### **2013**

On May 7, 2013, FWC established Phase II of the Russakis Ranch Gopher Tortoise Long-term Recipient Site (694.04 acres).

### **2016**

On April 22, 2016, ARC voted to add the Lewis Friend Farm (1,088 acres) proposal into the boundary of the Kissimmee-St. Johns River Connector project.

### **2020**

On October 9, 2020, ARC approved adding the Abington Ranch addition of 3,656 acres in Okeechobee County to the project boundary.

### **2021**

The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) acquired a perpetual conservation easement of over 6,670.20 acres known as Osowaw Ranch from Wedgeworth Farms, Inc.

### **2022**

On October 14, 2022, ARC voted to add the CNC Ranch project proposal (3,557 acres) to the project boundary.





DEP acquired a perpetual conservation easement over 615.34 acres known as Crippen Ranch from Crippen Properties, LLC.

DEP acquired a perpetual conservation easement over 3.637 acres known as Abington Preserve from Abington Preserve, LLC

## **2024**

On June 26, 2024, DEP acquired a 385.25-acre conservation easement in Okeechobee County from Double K Ranch LLC.

On September 18, 2024, DEP acquired a 647.22-acre conservation easement in Okeechobee County from Padgett Creek LLC.

### Coordination

The Nature Conservancy is partnering with DEP's Division of State Lands on this project.

### Management Policy Statement

As a less-than-fee acquisition, the Kissimmee-St. Johns River Connector project would be managed by the landowner as outlined in the conservation easement.

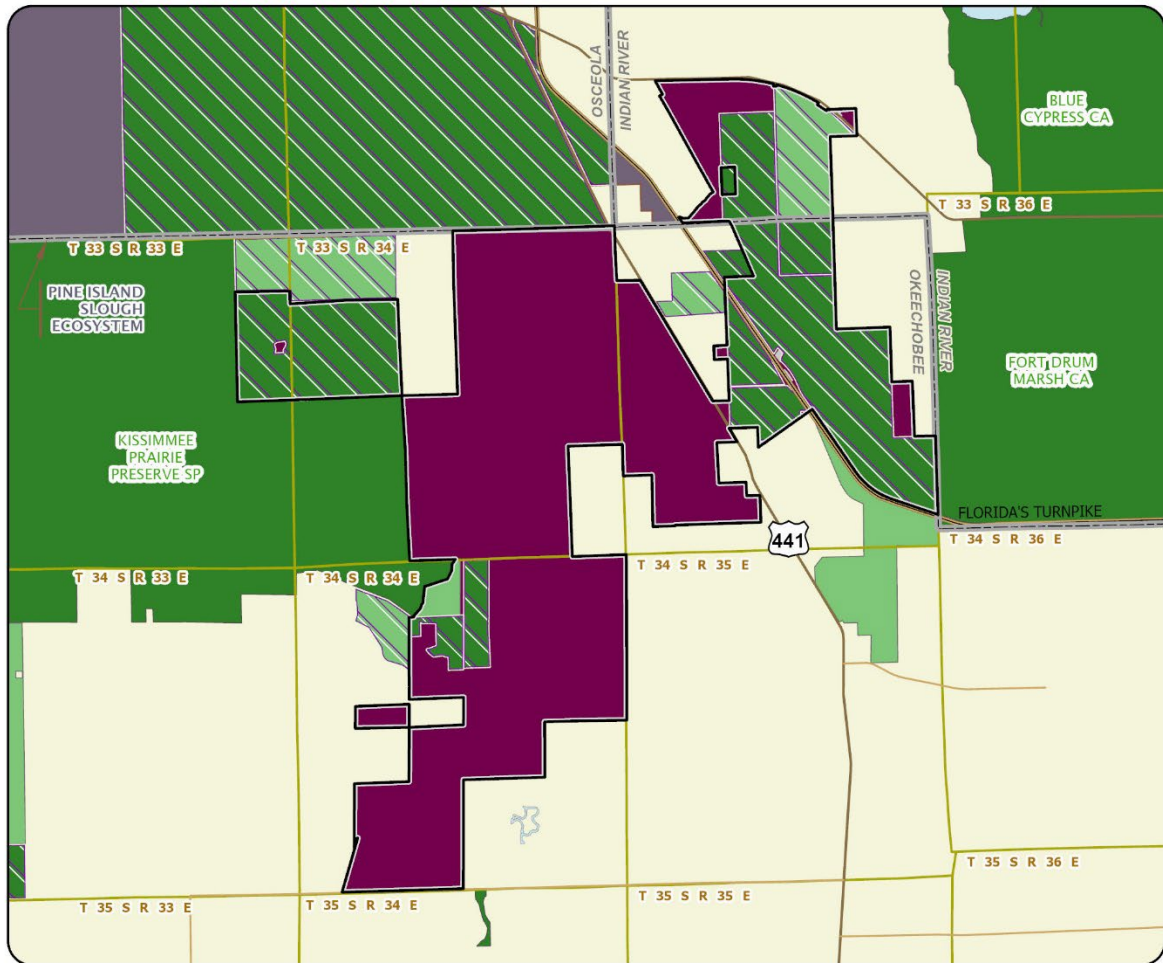
### Manager(s)

If acquired as less-than-fee, management responsibility of the Kissimmee-St. Johns River Connector project would remain with the landowner. Periodic monitoring of the site's management to confirm continued conservation easement compliance would be coordinated by DEP's 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.





### KISSIMMEE-ST. JOHNS RIVER CONNECTOR

#### INDIAN RIVER AND OKEECHOBEE COUNTIES

