

# Myakka Ranchlands

Less-Than-Fee

DeSoto, Hardee, Manatee and Sarasota Counties

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2007
<i>Project Acres</i>	55,392
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	29,765
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	25,627
<i>2024 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$399,959,799

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Myakka Ranchlands project contains land areas on opposite sides of the Myakka River State Park, creating a corridor of conservation lands in southwest Florida. Acquiring these lands will add significant acreage to the conservation lands already protecting the Myakka River watershed and Charlotte Harbor Estuary. Additionally, the project will protect lands known to support habitat for numerous rare and imperiled species including the Florida burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*), Florida sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis*) and gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*).

## General Description

The original Myakka Ranchlands project contained 18,739 acres consisting of three ownerships in two disjunct tracts: Hi Hat Ranch in the northwest (10,770 acres) and the combined Walton and Longino Ranches in the southeast (7,969 acres).

The Hi Hat tract is in northern Sarasota County, about five miles east of the city of Sarasota. The Longino/Walton tract is in eastern Sarasota County, about 13 miles southeast of Hi Hat Ranch, between State Road 72 and Interstate 75. The eastern edge of the tract abuts the Lewis Longino Preserve, a 3,895-acre conservation easement purchased by Sarasota County and the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) to protect regional water supplies.

The Hi Hat tract includes 2,500 acres of wastewater spray field, owned by the city of Sarasota, for which the owners have rights to purchase back from the city. The Hi Hat owners also retain a permit from SWFWMD for the withdrawal of 6-7 million gallons of groundwater per day at the ranch. The properties are crisscrossed with internal roads, accessways and ditches associated with ranch and farming operations. Approximately half of the Hi Hat, Longino and Walton ranches have been converted to pasture, agriculture or various uses such as impoundments, canals, roads and buildings. Most of these areas are improved pasture. The remaining natural areas support a mosaic of mesic flatwoods, depression and basin marshes, prairie and hydric hammocks. Approximately 70 percent of the Myakka-Peace River Watershed Connector ranches are in natural condition. The quality of these natural communities is variable, depending upon the fire history and levels of physical disturbances or invasive



exotic plant encroachments. The Myakka Island Conservation Corridor consists of three ranches: Triangle Ranch (1,067 acres) and Sheps Island Ranch (723 acres) are along the Manatee River where Sarasota and Manatee counties join; Orange Hammock Ranch (5,774 acres) borders existing conservation lands on the DeSoto County line. The working ranches have cattle operations, sod farms, row crops, citrus groves, pine and cabbage palm harvesting, and hunting. About 90 percent of the land for the Myakka Island Conservation Corridor parcels is in various degrees of natural condition, with some improved pasture.

FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<b><u>FNAI Elements</u></b>	<b><u>Score</u></b>
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Swallow-tailed kite	G5/S2
<i>Manasota pawpaw</i>	G1/S1
<i>large-plumed beaksedge</i>	G2/S2
Florida sandhill crane	G5T2/S2
<i>many-flowered grass-pink</i>	G2G3/S2S3
<i>lowland loosestrife</i>	G3/S3
Wood stork	G4/S2
<i>nodding pinweed</i>	G3/S3
Florida burrowing owl	G4T3/S3
Bachman's sparrow	G3/S3

**Public Use**

Within the 802 acres comprising the Hi Hat Ranch (to be managed by Sarasota County), some existing roads and trails may become multi-use trails for hiking and horseback riding. Uses such as camping, picnicking, hiking and boating will be compatible with the protection of the area. Longino Ranch, Walton Ranch, the remainder of Hi Hat Ranch, and the ranches of the Myakka-Peace River Watershed Connector and the Myakka Island Conservation Corridor are proposed for less-than-fee acquisition and do not provide for public access.

**Acquisition Planning**

**2007**

On December 14, 2007, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) voted to add the Myakka Ranchlands to Group A of the Florida Forever Priority List. The application proposes a combination of full-fee and less-than-fee acquisition. Longino Ranch is less-than-fee; Hi-Hat is fee-simple and/or less-than-fee; and Walton Ranch was proposed as fee-simple, but the owner is willing to consider it as a less-than-fee acquisition.

**2010**

On July 15, 2010, Sarasota County and SWFWMD purchased 3,760 acres in partnership. Known as Walton Ranch, the properties were purchased as both fee and less-than-fee; lands purchased as less-than-fee are held jointly by SWFWMD and Sarasota County.





On August 19, 2010, SWFWMD and Sarasota County acquired 3,981 acres in partnership. Known as Longino Ranch, the property was acquired less-than-fee and the easement is held jointly by SWFWMD and Sarasota County. This easement has a provision for public access to a recreational trail along the southern property boundary that if developed would connect public ownerships from the Myakka River to the Peace River.

**2011**

On September 27, 2011, SWFWMD and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service purchased 1,237 acres in partnership known as Horton Ranch for \$2,230,000.

On December 9, 2011, ARC placed this project in the Less-Than-Fee category.

**2014**

On June 27, 2014, ARC approved the proposed Myakka-Peace River Watershed Connector and voted to combine it with the Myakka Ranchlands project.

On December 12, 2014, ARC added the proposed Myakka Island Conservation Corridor as an addition to the Myakka Ranchlands, bringing the project to a total of 31,853 acres.

**2015**

On August 21, 2015, ARC approved a boundary amendment to add the 543-acre Murphy Marsh parcel to the Myakka Ranchlands Florida Forever project.

On October 16, 2015, ARC added the 1,356-acre Myakka Addition Lands project in Sarasota County and the 2,659-acre Upper Myakka Watershed project in Manatee County to the Florida Forever Priority List. ARC then combined the two projects into the existing Myakka Ranchlands project.

**2016**

On May 16, 2016, SWFWMD established the Upper Myakka River Watershed – Triangle Ranch conservation easement (1,142.31 acres).

On October 21, 2016, ARC approved the 4,530-acre Blackbeard's Ranch project in southern Manatee County, then added it to the existing Myakka Ranchlands project.

**2019**

On April 19, 2019, ARC approved adding the 4,044-acre BR Ranch project in DeSoto County to the 2020 Florida Forever Priority List. BR Ranch was proposed as a less-than-fee acquisition and had a tax-assessed value of \$11,700,000. After its approval, ARC added it to the existing Myakka Ranchlands project.

On October 18, 2019, ARC approved adding the 2,393-acre MJ Ranch project in Manatee County to the 2020 Florida Forever Priority List. ARC then moved to incorporate the lands within the MJ Ranch into the Myakka Ranchlands project boundary. MJ Ranch was proposed as a less-than-fee acquisition and had a tax-assessed value of \$5,800,632.





## 2020

On May 4, 2020, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) acquired a 559.1-acre conservation easement in Manatee County from Matthew Pallardy.

On May 29, 2020, DEP acquired, in fee, 5,776.3 acres in Sarasota County from B Becker Partners, LTD., TCC Partners, L.P. and Michael George. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission manages the property as Orange Hammock Ranch Wildlife Management Area.

## 2021

In 2021, DEP acquired a 380.2-acre conservation easement in DeSoto County from the Rawls family.

On August 13, 2021, ARC approved the addition of J Bar C Ranch - East (996 acres) in Manatee County to the project boundary.

On December 10, 2021, ARC approved the addition of J Bar C Ranch- West (576.05 acres) in Manatee County to the project boundary.

## 2022

On October 14, 2022, ARC approved the addition of the Keen Ranch project proposal (995 acres) to the project boundary.

On December 9, 2022, ARC approved the addition of three parcels totaling approximately 748 acres in DeSoto and Manatee counties with a tax-assessed value of \$1,314,040 (Flint Ranch).

## 2023

On April 14, 2023, ARC approved the addition of the Quail Creek Ranch project proposal (2,698 acres) in Hardee County to the project boundary.

On October 13, 2023, ARC approved the addition of the Myakka Ranch project proposal (998 acres) in Manatee County to the project boundary.

In December of 2023, ARC approved the addition of 34 parcels totaling approximately 433.87 acres in Manatee County.

DEP acquired a 557-acre conservation easement in Manatee County from Big Slough Ranch, LLC. DEP also acquired a 1,045-acre conservation easement in Manatee County from Land South Manatee, LLC.

## 2024

In April 2024, DEP acquired a 402.38-acre conservation easement in Manatee County from Flint Properties II, a 324.1-acre conservation easement in DeSoto County from Gwen Flint Trust and a 1,515.7-acre conservation easement in DeSoto County from 4L's Ranch.

On November 25, 2024, DEP acquired a 2,646.45-acre conservation easement in Hardee County from Quail Creek Farms, Inc.

In December of 2024, ARC approved the addition of one parcel totaling approximately 546.71 acres in Manatee County.





### Coordination

Acquisition of the Myakka Ranchlands would be a shared acquisition along with Sarasota County and SWFWMD. It is already part of SWFWMD's Work Plan and abuts Myakka River State Park. The rest of the project is recommended for less-than-fee acquisition and would be monitored through DEP's Division of State Lands.

### Management Policy Statement

Principal purposes of the project include the protection of biodiversity; protection of the quality and natural functions of the land and water systems; availability of sufficient quantities of water; and, within the portion to be managed by Sarasota County, provision of resource-based public recreational and educational opportunities. Programs would be oriented towards conservation and protection of wildlife species with careful control of public uses. The primary land management goals are to restore, maintain and protect native ecosystems; to integrate compatible human use; and to ensure long-term viability of populations and species considered rare. This ecosystem and multiple-use approach will guide the management activities for this project.

The proposed less-than-fee acquisitions of Myakka Ranchlands would be managed by the landowner as outlined in the conservation easement.

### Manager(s)

Sarasota County's Natural Resources division is the recommended manager of fee-simple acquisitions, with assistance and cooperation from SWFWMD and DEP's Division of Recreation and Parks. The remainder of Myakka Ranchlands is proposed for less-than-fee acquisitions; management responsibility 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

Lands acquired fee-simple will be managed by Sarasota County. DEP's Division of State Lands will periodically monitor the conservation easement, while the management will be conducted by the property owner for the less-than-fee tracts.

### **Qualifications for State Designation**

The project's size, diversity and location make it desirable for use and management compatible with the adjacent state park. Most of the acreage of this project consists of isolated wetlands in oak hammock and improved pasture supporting an active cattle operation. Approximately 20 percent of the proposal has been converted to cattle operations and spray irrigation. The improved pastures total approximately 160 acres with multiple grass species planted in them. Hi Hat Ranch has been managed for cattle for over 40 years and its pastures are devoid of most native groundcover and understory species.

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

Much of the project's former dry prairie and pine flatwoods have been altered by cattle operations and spray-irrigation fields. Hi Hat Ranch will be fenced and the above-ground spray-irrigation equipment will





be removed by the landowner. Hydrological alterations in the form of ditches will be analyzed for potential restoration. Such areas may be restored with native ground cover and canopy. The level of management intensity and related management costs is expected to be minimal to obtain the necessary information and resources required to restore and manage this system compatible with Myakka River State Park. Long-term management costs are expected to be low.

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

Once the fee-simple portion of the project is acquired and assigned to Sarasota County for management, existing trails will be evaluated for nature-based recreational use. After the installation of the fence and removal of the above-ground irrigation equipment by Hi Hat Ranch, primitive trails will be opened to hikers. Initial and intermediate management efforts will concentrate on resource inventory, providing site security, assessing public and fire management access, and hydrological restoration potential. Inventories of the site's natural resources and rare and imperiled species will be conducted to provide a basis for the formulation of a management plan. The numerous roads throughout the property necessitate the development of a road plan to identify which roads will continue to be used for vehicular access by the public, which are required for administrative use, and which are unnecessary for management or access and should be closed. Steps will be taken to ensure that the public is provided appropriate access while simultaneously affording protection of sensitive resources.

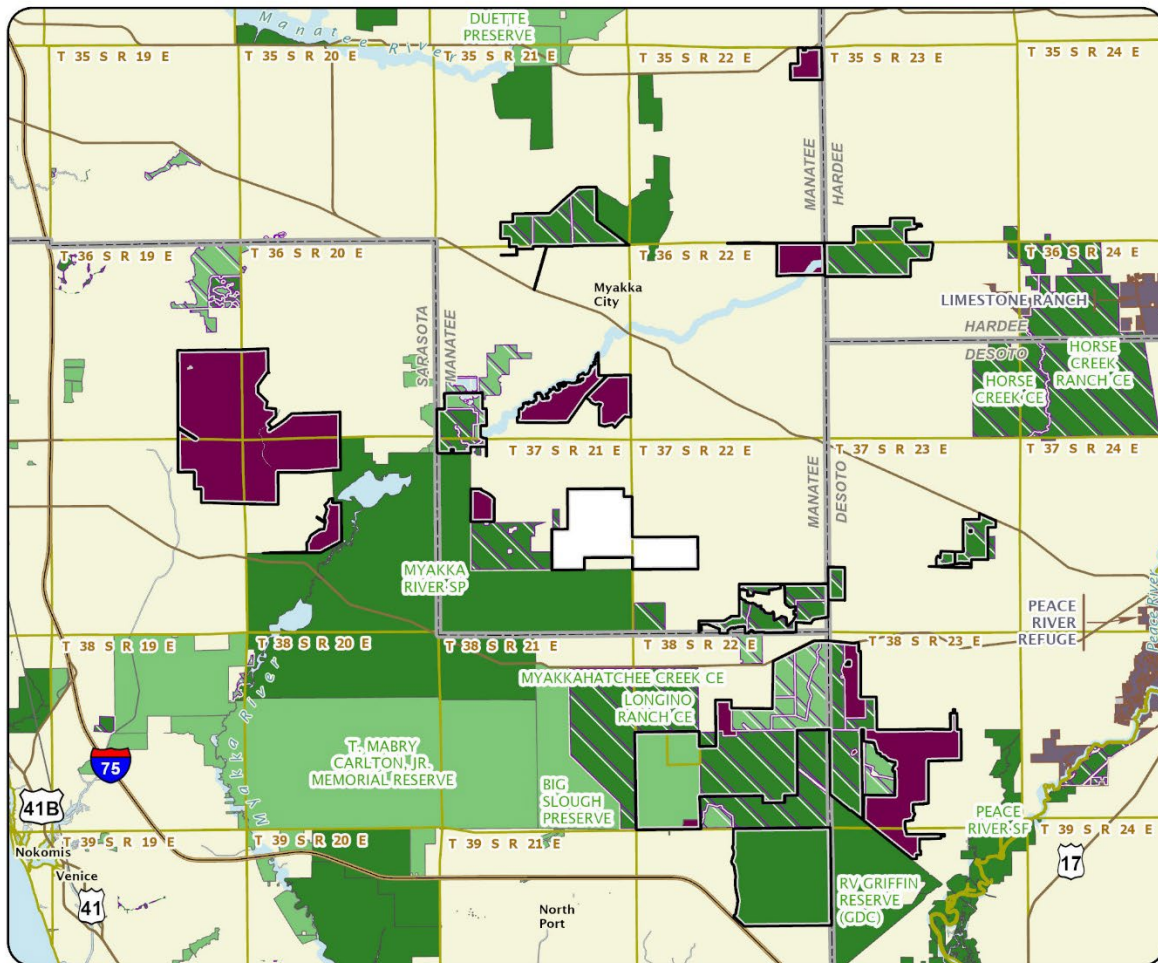
### **Revenue-generating Potential**

The revenue-generating potential of the portion managed by Sarasota County is expected to be moderately low. Some future revenues might come from recreational user fees and ecotourism activities if such projects could be economically developed. No capital project expenditures will be needed on the full-fee parcel managed by Sarasota County, but land management activities such as prescribed fire, vegetative restoration and primitive public access/use will need to be funded. As more information is gathered and an analysis of the site is completed, Sarasota County intends to include project funds contingent on availability.

### **Cooperators in Management Activities**

Sarasota County proposes to manage the 802-acre section of the project (adjacent to Myakka River State Park) and will carry out management activities and coordinate public access and use. Sarasota County will cooperate with and seek the assistance of DEP's Division of Recreation and Parks, SWFWMD and interested parties as appropriate.





### MYAKKA RANGLANDS

DESOTO, HARDEE, MANATEE, AND SARASOTA 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

