

Natural Bridge Creek

Critical Natural Lands

Walton County

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2012
<i>Project Acres</i>	1,967
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	1,925
<i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i>	\$0
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	42
<i>2023 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$89,049

Purpose for State Acquisition

The Natural Bridge Creek project will provide a buffer for Natural Bridge Creek, to protect surface water, functional wetlands and aquifer recharge for the benefit of the natural systems and citizens of the state. The project will protect significant archeological and historic sites located on the property and provide opportunities for natural resource-based recreation.

General Description

The project is in northern Walton County, along the Alabama state line, and is situated roughly mid-way between the Yellow and Choctawhatchee rivers. Natural Bridge Creek, a sand-bottomed seepage stream, flows northeastward across the property before entering Alabama. Much of its tributary seepage arises within the property, although two streams drain from uplands just to the south. The stream temporarily sinks at Natural Bridge in the northeastern disjunct tract, and then rises as a small “spring” reported to be the westernmost sink/rise formation in the Floridan Aquifer. The rise, a popular local recreational site that is currently closed for safety reasons, was used by both Native American and 19th-century historical cultures.

FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3

Public Use

Walton County has provided a management prospectus for 62 acres of the site to be used for recreation if acquired fee-simple. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has prepared a management prospectus for the more than 1,700 acres in pinelands.

Acquisition Planning

The project was submitted for fee-simple or less-than-fee acquisition by the landowners, Mr. Benton Hester and Ms. Judith Hester. Their family has managed the site as pinelands since World War II.



2012

On August 17, 2012, the Natural Bridge Creek project was presented to the Acquisition and Restoration Council and accepted for review.

On December 14, 2012, the Acquisition and Restoration Council placed the project in the Critical Natural Lands category.

2020

On June 12, 2020, the Acquisition and Restoration Council approved an addition of 170 acres in Walton County to the project boundary.

Coordination

Walton County may provide some of the funding toward the acquisition of the Natural Bridge Creek Park. At the time of the project's approval however, the Walton County Board of County Commissioners committed only to using revenue set aside for the park's development once acquired. There has also been discussion of participation from the federally funded Forest Legacy Program.

Management Policy Statement

The primary management goals for the portion managed by Walton County as Natural Bridge Creek Park include restoring and protecting the spring and creek, providing public access and limited facilities for recreation, managing and controlling exotic invasive species, protecting any existing cultural or historical resources, and protecting habitat for imperiled species. Other recreational activities that could take place are hiking, nature studies, picnicking and interpretation of archaeological and historic sites. Evidence of an old creekside grist mill and historic turpentine activities are present on-site.

Manager(s)

Walton County would manage the Natural Bridge Creek area. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission would manage the remaining acreage.

Management Prospectus

Qualifications for State Designation

Much of the site retains the "park-like" characteristic of longleaf pine forest with an abundance of native ground cover. Many imperiled species have been documented on-site, including gopher tortoise and bluenose shiner. While species densities are unknown, the property could potentially serve as a gopher tortoise recipient or mitigation site due to its high-quality habitat.

Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management

Most of the property has never been converted to cropland or undergone commercial forestry-type rotations with clear-cut, site preparation and herbicide applications. The sink/rise formation of Natural Bridge Creek has been disturbed for many years due to its popularity as a local swimming hole and the road that crosses the natural bridge itself. In 2008, the Northwest Florida Water Management District released a spring stabilization report stating that previous agricultural practices and road erosion were sources of sediment in the creek system.





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

A management plan would be developed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission describing the management goals and objectives necessary to implement future resource management. The management plan would establish the current and future roles of cooperating entities including governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders. Long-range plans would emphasize ecosystem management and the protection of focal and imperiled species. Historic analysis of natural communities and vegetation types may be conducted if deemed necessary. Quantified vegetation management objectives shall be developed. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will assess the condition of wildlife resources and provide planning support to enhance management of focal species and recovery of imperiled species on-site. Use of prescribed fire and other resource management activities have been implemented by the landowner to restore and maintain natural communities and vegetation types.

Revenue-generating Potential

Revenue from conservation lands could include ecotourism activities and the sales of various permits and recreational user fees. If needed, thinning operations within the longleaf pine forests to improve or reset the basal area consistent with the target for this forest community type and the species that occur there may generate additional revenues. Area regulations would be developed to identify the necessary and required permits, fees and regulations. The initial non-recurring startup costs for the site's pinelands are estimated to be \$289,920 (including public access, infrastructure and necessary fixed capital outlays). Optimal management of the area would require one full-time equivalent position to manage the area. Salary requirements for this position, as well as those of other needed Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission staff and costs to operate and manage the project, are reflected in the management cost summary. All land management funding is dependent upon annual legislative appropriations.

Cooperators in Management Activities

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will cooperate with other federal, state and local governmental agencies including Walton County, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Florida Forest Service, DEP, Northwest Florida Water Management District and others in management of the property.



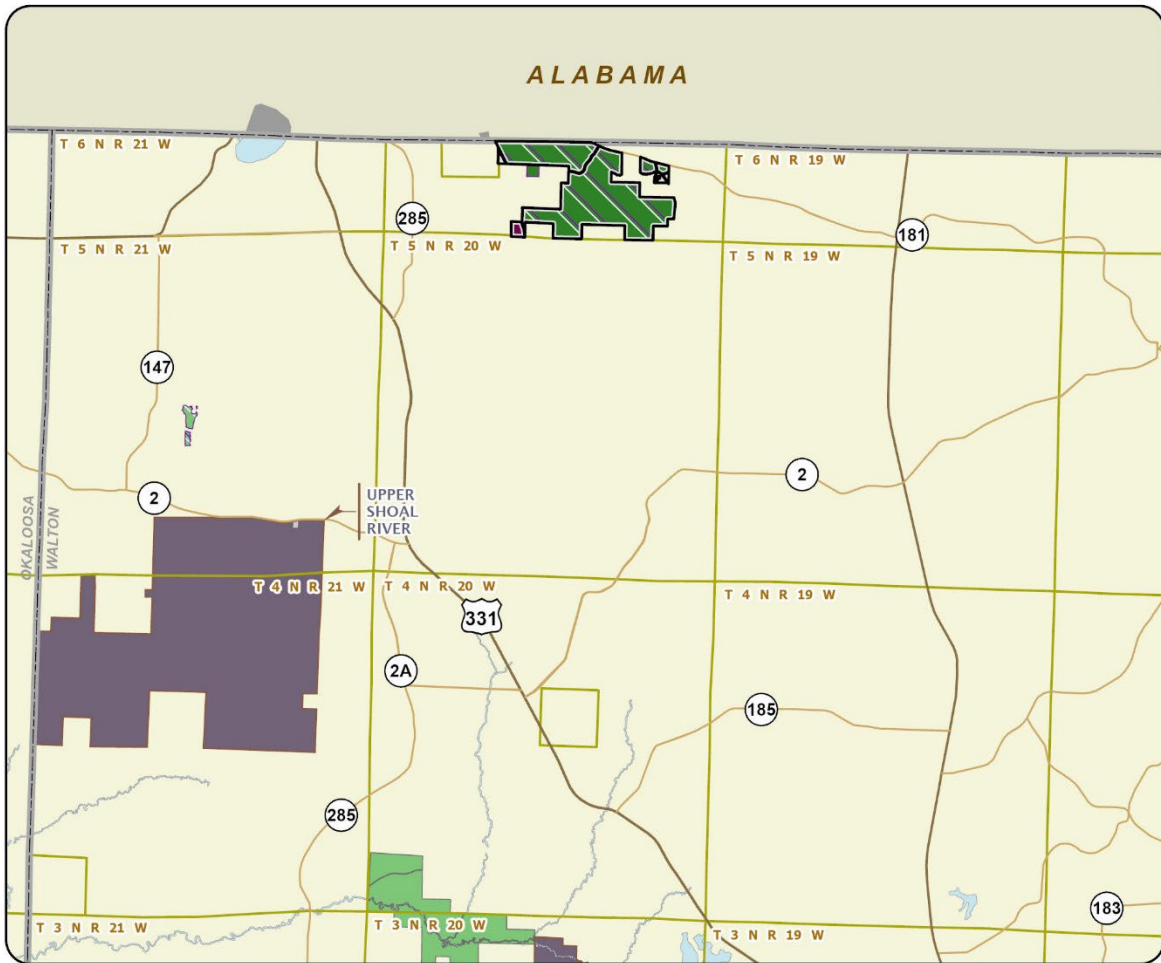


Management Cost Summary

<u>FWC</u>	<u>Expenditure</u>	<u>Priority</u>
<u>Resource Management:</u>		
Exotic Species Control	\$4,476	(1)
Prescribed Burning	\$9,585	(1)
Cultural Resource Management	\$399	(1)
Timber Management	\$616	(1)
Hydrological Management	\$4,059	(1)
Other (Restoration, Enhancement, Surveys, Monitoring, etc.)	\$50,120	(1)
Subtotal	\$69,255	
<u>Administration:</u>		
General Administration	\$1,504	(1)
Subtotal	\$1,504	
<u>Support:</u>		
Land Management Planning	\$2,446	(1)
Land Management Reviews	\$362	(3)
Training/Staff Development	\$435	(1)
Vehicle Purchase	\$7,556	(2)
Vehicle Operation and Maintenance	\$4,458	(1)
Other (Technical Reports, Data Management, etc.)	\$4,113	(1)
Subtotal	\$19,370	
<u>Capital Improvements:</u>		
Facility Maintenance	\$10,546	(1)
Subtotal	\$10,546	
<u>Visitor Services/Recreation:</u>		
Information/Education/Operations	\$6,650	(1)
Subtotal	\$6,650	
<u>Law Enforcement:</u>		
Resource Protection	\$1,395	(1)
Subtotal	\$1,395	
TOTAL	\$108,720	

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted





NATURAL BRIDGE CREEK

WALTON COUNTY

