

# Watermelon Pond

Partnerships and Regional Incentives

Alachua and Levy Counties

|   |              |
|---|--------------|
| <i>Year Added to Priority List</i>            | 1994         |
| <i>Project Acres</i>                          | 12,820       |
| <i>Acquired Acres</i>                         | 7,621        |
| <i>Remaining Project Acres</i>                | 5,199        |
| <i>2024 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i> | \$42,440,287 |

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Watermelon Pond project will conserve one of the best remaining landscapes of longleaf pine sandhill pocked with marshes and lakes. The project will conserve critical habitat for imperiled species such as the southern fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger niger*), Florida sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis*) and Florida scrub-jay (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*). The project will also protect groundwater supply and provide the public with natural resource-based recreation opportunities.

## General Description

Conservation of the project is important for its xeric uplands (sandhill and scrub natural communities) and seasonally interconnected wetlands of the Brooksville Ridge physiographic province. The complex of these uplands with their marshes and lakes is regionally significant to vertebrate fauna in an area of the state subject to extensive development pressures. No comparable complex is protected in north-central Florida. The project is also the major aquifer recharge area in Alachua County. No archaeological sites are known from the project. The uplands are threatened by subdivision for agriculture and ranchette developments.

### FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

| <b><u>FNAI Elements</u></b>        | <b><u>Score</u></b> |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Florida sandhill crane             | G5T2/S2             |
| Striped newt                       | G2G3/S2             |
| Eastern indigo snake               | G3/S2?              |
| Gopher tortoise                    | G3/S3               |
| Florida mouse                      | G3/S3               |
| Southeastern fox squirrel          | G5T5/S3             |
| North Florida spider cave crayfish | G1G2/S1S2           |
| <i>sand butterfly pea</i>          | G2Q/S2              |
| Gopher tortoise copris beetle      | G2/S2               |
| Skelley's june beetle              | G2/S2               |
| Southern hognose snake             | G2/S2S3             |
| <i>incised groove-bur</i>          | G3/S2               |



## Public Use

This project will be designated as a state forest with such public uses as hiking, fishing, horseback riding and camping.

## Acquisition Planning

Phase I (essential): Loncala (acquired) and other large sandhill and xeric tracts including Gladman, Burch, Matson, Hart, Barry, O'Steen and Outler. Phase II: remaining tracts.

### **1996**

In 1996, Ashton Biological Preserve (100 acres) was acquired by Ray Ashton.

### **1998**

On October 15, 1998, the Land Acquisition Advisory Council designated the non-subdivided portion of section 36 and 11 other "corridor" parcels as essential.

### **2003**

On February 7, 2003, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) added 250 acres in Alachua County to the project boundaries.

On December 5, 2003, ARC moved this project to Group B of the Florida Forever Priority List.

### **2007**

In April 2007, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) acquired 1,288 acres, identified as Barry Ranch. Of these acres, 607 are within the project boundary.

### **2010**

On August 13, 2010, ARC approved a 3,161-acre reduction in the project boundary due to residential/commercial/infrastructure development.

### **2011**

On December 9, 2011, the project was placed in the Partnerships and Regional Incentives category.

### **2012**

On April 11, 2012, Watermelon Pond Preserve – Metzger (640 acres) was acquired by Alachua County Forever Program, of which approximately 234 acres are within the project boundary.

### **2021**

On June 4, 2021, Alachua County acquired Watermelon Pond Preserve – Warny (79.4 acres).

### **2024**

In April 2024, ARC approved the addition of 279 acres in Levy County.

On April 18, 2024, the Department of Environmental Protection acquired, in fee, 292.76 acres in Levy County from Forrest Path, LLC.

## Coordination

FWC and Alachua County are acquisition partners for this project.





## **Management Policy Statement**

The primary goals of management are to: conserve and protect significant habitat for native species or endangered and threatened species; conserve, protect, manage or restore important ecosystems to enhance or protect significant natural resources; and provide areas, including recreational trails, for natural resource-based recreation.

## **Manager(s)**

The Florida Forest Service (FFS) is the recommended manager.

## **Management Prospectus**

### **Qualifications for State Designation**

The natural pine forests and the restorable pine plantations of the project make it desirable for management as a state forest.

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

The areas of pine plantation and agricultural land in the project will require reforestation and restoration efforts beyond the level typically expected on a state forest. Consequently, management intensity and related management costs might be slightly higher than would normally occur on a state forest.

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

Once the core area is acquired, FFS will provide public access for low-intensity, non-facilities-related outdoor recreation. Initial activities will include securing the site, providing public and fire management access, inventorying resources and removing trash. FFS will provide access to the public while protecting sensitive resources. The project's natural resources and imperiled species will be inventoried to provide the basis for a management plan.

Long-range plans for this project will generally be directed toward restoring disturbed areas to their original conditions (as much as possible) as well as protecting threatened and endangered species. Some of the pinelands have been degraded by timbering and require restoration.

An all-season burning program will utilize existing roads, black lines, foam lines and natural breaks to contain fires. Timber management will mostly involve improvement thinning and regeneration harvests. Plantations will be thinned and reforested as appropriate with native species. Stands will not have a targeted rotation age. Infrastructure will primarily be in disturbed areas and will be the minimum required for management and public access. FFS will promote environmental education.

### **Revenue-generating Potential**

FFS will sell timber as needed to improve or maintain desirable ecosystem conditions. These sales will provide a variable source of revenue, but the revenue-generating potential for this project is expected to be low to moderate.





### Cooperators in Management Activities

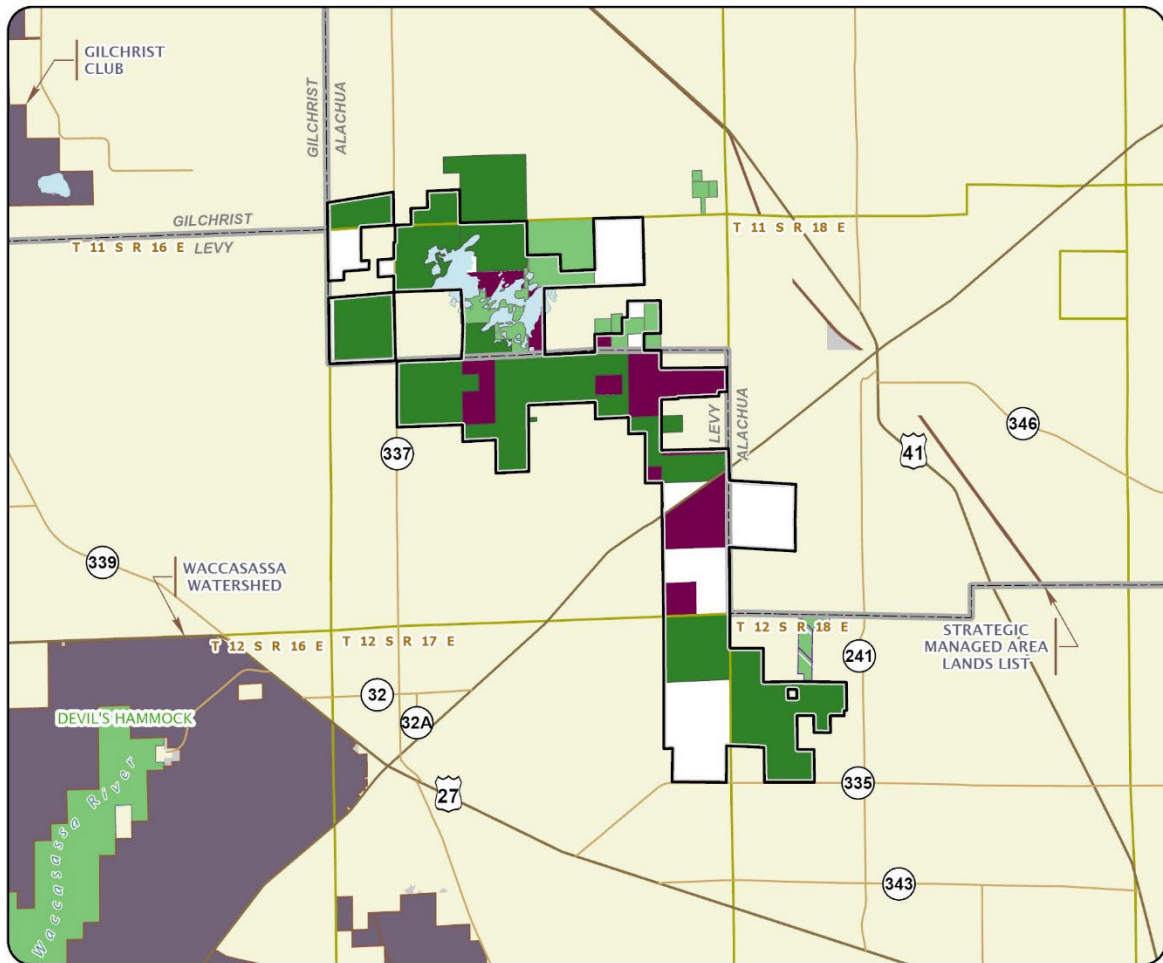
FFS will cooperate with and seek the assistance of other state agencies, local government entities and other interested parties as appropriate.

#### Management Cost Summary

| <u>FFS</u>      | <u>Startup</u> | <u>Recurring</u> |
|-----------------|----------------|------------------|
| Source of Funds | CARL           | CARL             |
| Salary          | \$80,530       | \$80,530         |
| OPS             | \$0            | \$0              |
| Expense         | \$30,000       | \$20,000         |
| OCO             | \$112,500      | \$6,000          |
| TOTAL           | \$223,030      | \$106,530        |

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted





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