

West Bay Preservation Area

Climate Change Lands

Bay County

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2012
<i>Project Acres</i>	4,598
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	36
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	4,562
<i>2024 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$3,607,220

Purpose for State Acquisition

The West Bay Preservation Area project will protect, restore and maintain the quality and natural functions of the land, water and wetlands systems and increase natural resource-based public recreational and educational opportunities. The project will contribute to the protection of the natural shoreline, water quality and aquatic resources of West Bay as well as Crooked Creek and Burnt Mill Creek.

General Description

The West Bay Preservation Area project is in southwestern Bay County and borders the 9,600-acre Panama City Airport Conservation Easement (monitored by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP)). It is bounded on the north by County Road 388, on the south by West Bay and County Road 2300, on the west by Crooked Creek, and on the east by North Bay and the west boundary of the Fanning Creek Water Basin. The entire project area is undeveloped.

The West Bay Preservation Area project encompasses about six miles of frontage on West Bay and 1.7 miles on North Bay. It includes 6.1 miles of the creek bank of Crooked and Burnt Mill creeks. Both creeks are major sources of fresh water draining into West Bay. Protection of the project lands, when added to the Panama City Airport Conservation Easement and Breakfast Point Mitigation Bank lands, would preserve in natural condition a total of roughly 14.4 miles of the 30-mile West Bay shorefront.

About 40 percent of the project is in natural condition, concentrated near the coast and along the creek shores. The remainder is in inland freshwater wetlands and embedded pine plantation. Of the natural communities, salt marsh makes up the largest acreage. Extensive tidal flats are found in the upper portion of the salt marshes, and an approximately 100-foot-wide band of seagrasses was observed in 2011 between Burnt Mill Creek and Crooked Creek.





Archaeologically, there are 17 sites on the Florida Master Site File located within the project boundary.

Approximately 96 percent of the proposal is habitat for imperiled species and approximately 60 percent of the West Bay Preservation Area project lies within a designated Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Species Habitat Conservation Area for the swallow-tailed kite (*Elanoides forficatus*), Cooper’s hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) and Gulf salt marsh snake (*Nerodia clarkii*).

There are hunting leases and timbering agreements on the property. Gulf Power owns the entire 200-foot-wide utility corridor extending in a westerly direction from their nearby power plant. It divides the three portions of the project and establishes the northerly boundaries for several of the project parcels. These lands have been designated by Bay County to have a Future Land Use of Conservation and are bound by a Stipulated Settlement Agreement requiring St. Joe Company to make the properties available for purchase for preservation and to assist Bay County with the acquisition for preservation. This project overlaps with the military’s need to protect lands, water and habitat to ensure the sustainability of military missions, protecting areas underlying low-level military operating areas as described in section 259.105(2)(h), Florida Statutes.

FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Bald eagle	G5/S3
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
Florida clapper rail	G5T3?/S3?
Royal tern	G5/S3
Osprey	G5/S3S4
Little blue heron	G5/S4
Tricolored heron	G5/S4

Public Use

If the property is acquired in fee, the primary management purpose will be the protection of West Bay and the restoration of natural communities, while encouraging natural resource-based recreation that does not detract or interfere with that purpose. The resource-based recreation activities that were identified to be most suitable for the project would be hiking, off-road bicycling, picnicking, primitive camping, nature study, canoe/kayaking, geocaching and horseback riding.





Acquisition Planning

2011

On December 9, 2011, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) added this project to the Florida Forever Priority List in the Less-than-Fee category. This is a one-ownership project and the owner is anticipating selling it in one transaction. When this project was approved in 2011, it had a tax-assessed value of \$6,300,000.

2022

On August 12, 2022, ARC approved a boundary amendment that adds 87.9 acres to the project boundary.

Coordination

There could be matching funds for the acquisition through a Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) grant from the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD). Bay County has also expressed interest in partnering with the Gulf Coast State College for the management and use of the easternmost segment of the property for natural resource appreciation, education and restoration.

Management Policy Statement

This project will be managed to buffer and enhance West Bay while providing compatible recreational and educational opportunities.

Manager(s)

Bay County would manage the project if acquired in fee. If acquired as less-than-fee, management responsibility of the West Bay Preservation Area would remain with the landowner. Periodic monitoring of the site's management to confirm continued compliance with the conditions of the conservation easement would be coordinated by DEP's Division of State Lands.

Management Prospectus

Qualifications for State Designation

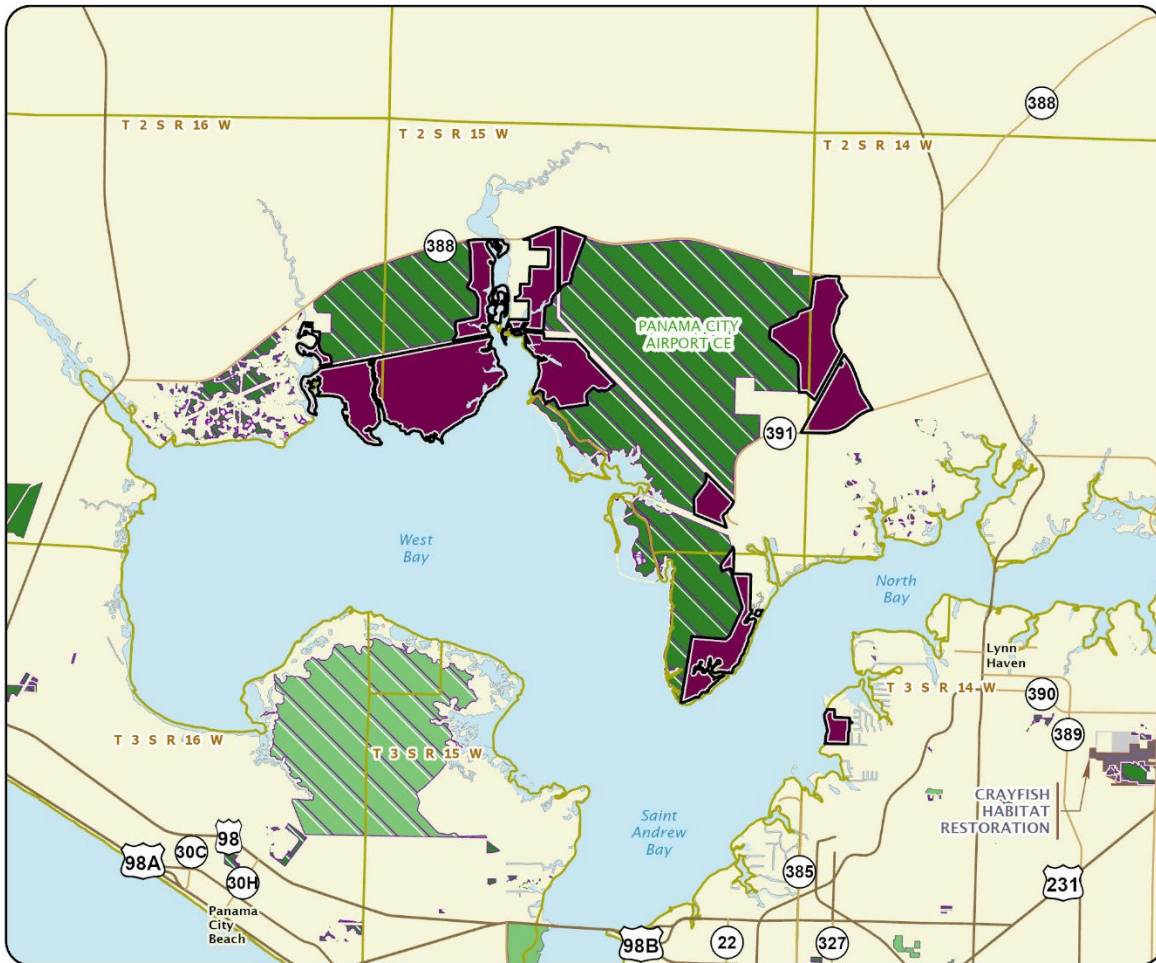
This project meets the following goals for Florida Forever projects as required in statute: enhance the coordination and completion of land acquisition projects; increase the protection of Florida's biodiversity at the species, natural community and landscape level; protect, restore and maintain the quality of natural functions of land, water and wetland systems of the state; ensure that sufficient quantities of water are available to meet the current and future needs of natural systems and the citizens of the state; increase natural resource-based public recreational and educational opportunities; preserve significant archaeological or historic sites; and increase the amount of forestland available for sustainable management of natural resources.





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