

***Abington Ranch***  
**(Okeechobee County)**

Fee simple

***Florida Forever Project Evaluation Report***

*Prepared by:*  
*Division of State Lands*  
*Office of Environmental Services*

*Submitted to the Acquisition and Restoration Council*  
*October 2020*



Proposed Land Manager: DRP  
Acres: 3,656  
Just Value: \$ 8,999,274  
Application Date: May 13, 2020  
Project Sponsor: SVN Saunders Ralston Santzler Real Estate

## ***Executive Summary***

The Abington Ranch is a Florida Forever fee-simple proposal encompassing 3,656 acres in Okeechobee County. It is located approximately six miles southeast of Yeehaw Junction and is adjacent to Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park, which shares its southern and western border. To the north is the Tiger Cattle Company Ranch Conservation Easement. The corner of the southeastern boundary touches the Kissimmee-St. Johns River Connector Florida Forever project. The Pine Island Slough Ecosystem Florida Forever project lies near the eastern border. A larger swath of conservation lands stretching westward exists on the landscape, and this piece provides further ecological connectivity of undeveloped lands.

Local members of the Florida Forever project proposal site assessment team toured the property on Tuesday, August 4, 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic has affected travel restrictions on state office staff who reside in Tallahassee.

Primary management goals and objectives would be restoration of natural hydrological conditions and adherence to optimum fire return intervals. The estimated 276.47 acres of dry prairie would be managed for habitat improvement and potential reintroduction of grasshopper sparrow. Wetlands comprise approximately 40 percent of the property, and all waters on the property drain to the Kissimmee River through Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park. The subject property provides an opportunity to achieve a large-scale infill of conservation lands.

The site is an active cattle ranch, with approximately 500 head of cow, several barn and pen structures and related ranching infrastructure. An approximately 9,000 square foot lodge with pool, airstrip, airboat camp, stocked pond, dock and boat lift, and other structures exists onsite. There are no public utilities connections on the property; electrical power is supplied by generators. Water is gravity-fed from a water tower, which is filled by a large agricultural pump powered by a generator. Stated legal access is by easement along a narrow dirt road bearing west from US 441, south of Yeehaw Junction and north of the Okeechobee County line. Entrance is secured by fence and gate. A network of roads occurs throughout the site. There is a water retention project utilized for aquifer recharge on 104 acres along the western boundary, part of the Lower Kissimmee Basin Water Supply Plan.

The DEP's Division of Recreation and Parks is the proposed manager of Abington Ranch. If approved for addition to the 2021 Priority List, this project could be added to the Kissimmee-St. Johns River Connector project boundary. If acquired, it will be managed as part of Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park. A management prospectus is included in Appendix D. The land would be designated as essential.

## ***Purpose for acquisition***

Abington Ranch project in current condition will provide conservation value as a fee-simple acquisition for the State of Florida. One primary benefit initially is protection of potential habitat of Florida grasshopper sparrow, the most critically endangered bird in North America. Protection of this property would provide great value for wetland wildlife and water resources and would provide the public with recreational opportunities.

If acquired, conservation of the properties would serve to:

- conserve, protect, manage, or restore important ecosystems, landscapes, and forests, in order to enhance or protect significant surface water, coastal, recreational, timber, and fish and wildlife resources;
- conserve and protect significant landscape-scale habitat and provide wildlife corridors for rare and imperiled species and increasing linkages and conservation corridors between public land and private conservation easements in the region;
- conserve, protect, manage or restore coastal habitat in northwest Florida, provide surface and groundwater protection, and protect natural floodplain functions;
- provide opportunities for fish and wildlife resource-based public outdoor recreation.

### ***Location and Proximity to Other Managed Areas***

Abington Ranch consists of one, mostly rectangular, tract covering 3,656 acres in northern Okeechobee County. Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park borders the ranch on the west for two miles and on the south for 3 miles. Tiger Cattle Company Conservation Easement (CE) is contiguous with the proposal's north boundary for 3.2 miles. U.S. Highway 441 runs north-south approximately 5 miles east of the eastern boundary of the proposal. The land is offered for fee simple acquisition, with the intention of creating an addition to the Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park to be managed by the Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP).

The proposal lies within a large landscape of conservation lands and acquisition projects. In addition to lands immediately adjacent, the Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park also shares a contiguous boundary on the west with Kissimmee River (South Florida Water Management District [SFWMD]), which abuts Avon Park Air Force Range and Bombing Range Ridge Florida Forever BOT Project on its western boundary. Pine Island Slough Florida Forever BOT Project is contiguous with the Tiger Cattle Company CE on the north and Kissimmee-St. Johns River Connector Florida Forever BOT Project lies 1 mile to the east. Acquisition of the proposal would contribute to a more contiguous state park boundary that may improve the ability of park staff to conduct prescribed burns and invasive exotic plant removal.

### ***Resource Description***

#### **Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI)**

This evaluation is based on information gathered from the proposal, historic and current aerial imagery, Florida Cooperative Land Cover data version 3.3, and information in the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) database. A field survey was conducted on August 4, 2020, by FNAI biologist Kim Alexander, along with the project sponsor, landowner, and regional state agency staff representing DEP-DRP, FWC, and FFS.

The proposal lies on a flat plain at around 70 feet elevation with natural and ruderal communities typical of this region of central Florida. This area is situated on south end of the Kissimmee Valley Province of the Eastern Flatwoods District, a broad area of swamps and prairie underlain by silty sands, primarily of the Myakka, Valkaria, Floridana, and Immokalee soil series. The proposal is within the Kissimmee

River watershed. There is virtually no topographic relief across the proposal property. Drainage from the property appears to be mainly through artificial ditches, generally to the west and southwest.

On 1944 aerial photographs of the area prior to the extensive ditching and pasture conversion, the landscape was a mosaic of treeless dry and wet prairies and open herbaceous marshes. Mesic hammock development was mostly limited to fire-shadowed patches around the large marsh in the northwestern quarter of the property. There is no evidence of natural cypress domes.

Currently, a large percentage of the upland matrix communities of the proposal has been converted to improved pasture, with these lands now accounting for over a third of the total acreage. These pastures are mainly planted in bahiagrass (*Paspalum notatum*), although some fields are limpgrass (*Hemarthria altissima*). The pastures have scattered small patches of live oak (*Quercus virginiana*), cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*), and saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*), mostly at the edges of depression marshes. There are numerous, shallow drainage ditches across many of the pastures, these often lined with small oaks and palms.

Within the current pasture matrix are several large depression/basin marshes, 200 to 400 plus acres, that dominate the center of the property, and many smaller marshes are scattered over the rest of the site. These marshes contain a mix of hydrophytic herbs such as sawgrass (*Cladium jamaicense*) and bulltongue arrowhead (*Sagittaria lancifolia*), as well as some woody species like southern bayberry (*Morella cerifera*). In 1988, a previous owner planted some marsh edges with bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*). In the areas observed, these trees appeared to be stunted, but otherwise healthy. There are some wet prairie communities associated with the marshes. Although not observed closely, these appeared to contain peelbark St. John's wort (*Hypericum fasciculatum*). The marshes are the primary locations for invasive exotic plant infestations. The FLEPPC Category I species West Indian marsh grass (*Hymenachne amplexicaulis*) and Peruvian primrosewillow (*Ludwigia peruviana*) were both observed in marshes on the property and according to DEP-DRP staff familiar with the species, Wright's nutrush (*Scleria lacustris*) is also a common pest plant.

Perhaps the best quality natural areas on the property are the large patches of mesic hammock that border marshes and make up around eight percent of the property. While there is considerable understory disturbance from grazing, these hammocks retain a closed canopy of live oak and cabbage palm, with abundant epiphytes including golden polypody (*Phlebodium aureum*), resurrection fern (*Pleopeltis michauxiana*), southern needleleaf (*Tillandsia setacea*), and Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*). The large lodge on the property is located in a hammock bordering the largest of the marshes. Live oaks in this area were observed to have the epiphytic Florida butterfly orchid (*Encyclia tampensis*), listed as commercially exploited by the state, in addition to the more common epiphytes.

There are patches of remnant dry prairie and mesic flatwoods totaling just under ten percent of the acreage, but these have been long unburned and could only marginally be considered in a natural state. The few areas seen during the site visit are heavily overgrown with tall saw palmetto and southern bayberry. Some slash pine (*Pinus elliottii*) are present, but also weedy live oaks and dahoon (*Ilex cassine*). The herbaceous groundcover has mostly been lost, with only a few thin clumps of wiregrass

(*Aristida stricta*) and some weedy broomsedge bluestem (*Andropogon virginicus*) seen around the edges of the community.

Numerous drainage ditches are evident in and between wetland areas. A narrow, elevated road runs along spoil created by the digging of some of these ditches. These ditches may contain native marsh plants such as yellow pondlily (*Nuphar advena*), but invasive exotic plants are also common, including the FLEPPC Category I species water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) and West Indian marsh grass (*Hymenachne amplexicaulis*). Roads on the property are all unimproved vehicle trails.

An abandoned tomato field (ca. 106 acres) was converted to a wetland conservation area through the SFWMD as part of the multi-agency Dispersed Water Management Program. It is managed as a flow-through reservoir to increase water storage on the property. This area was not visited due to a heavy rainstorm during the site visit. Buildings and other features include a large lodge, airstrip, dock and boat lift, and numerous structures associated with ranching. There is currently about 500 head of cattle on the ranch.

The following table lists, in approximate order of estimated areal extent, natural communities and other land cover types within the site's boundaries.

#### Natural communities and landcover types within the Abington Ranch Florida Forever proposal

Community or Landcover	Acres	Percent of Proposal
depression/basin marsh	1363	37
dry prairie	325	9
mesic hammock	300	8
wet prairie	136	4
mesic flatwoods	8	<1
pasture - improved	1282	35
water retention project	106	3
unimproved - woodland pasture	47	1
ditch/canal	42	1
planted cypress	40	1

#### Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)

Approximately one third of the ranch is improved pasture (36%), another third is wetland marshes (32%), and the remaining third is other natural areas including dry and wet prairie, hammock, and flatwoods. Unfortunately, most of the tour occurred in heavy rains so the opportunity to see wildlife was limited. In the first 20 minutes, however, many sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis pratensis*) were observed as well as large herds of deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*). No exotic plants were seen.

All of the natural areas appeared unaltered. Canals and culverts keep the pasture drained as this area occurs on old tomato fields. Timber sales have never occurred. Hunting is limited to 1-2 deer per year taken by staff. Prescribed fire has not been applied to the area. Infrastructure includes various barns and pens constructed in the 1970s. A large, luxurious lodge was built in the 1980s.

Habitat for game species, such as white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) and wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo osceola*), and common non-game species is adequate. The Florida Natural Areas Inventory

(FNAI) Element Occurrence database shows no records for rare wildlife or plant species. The GIS model shows the property as Potential Habitat for Florida grasshopper sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum floridanus*), crested caracara (*Caracara cheriway*), and Florida sandhill crane.

**Goals, Measures and Criteria**

**Goal A:**

*Enhance the coordination and completion of land acquisition projects*

**Measure A1:**

*The number of acres acquired through the state’s land acquisition programs that contribute to the enhancement of essential natural resources, ecosystem service parcels, and connecting linkage corridors as identified and developed by the best available scientific data.*

Approximately 3,656 acres (100%) provides for the protection of ecological greenways, as noted in Appendix A.

**Goal B:**

*Increase the protection of Florida’s biodiversity at the species, natural community, and landscape levels*

**Measure B1:**

*The number of acres acquired of significant Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas.*

Approximately 3,085 acres (84%) provides for the protection of Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas, as noted in the FFME table (see Appendix A).

**Measure B2:**

*The number of acres acquired of highest priority conservation areas for Florida's rarest species.*

An analysis of priority conservation areas based on Florida Forever Conservation Needs Assessment data may be found in the Florida Forever Measures table. Habitat conservation priorities for 281 of Florida’s rarest species were mapped and divided into six priority classes. The Florida Forever Measures table shows the acres for each priority class found on the Abington Ranch proposal. Overall, the site contains approximately 1,561 acres (43% of site) of rare species habitat. The habitat is mostly Priority 5 (40% of site), with the remainder in Priorities 4 and 3 (2% and <1%, respectively).

The following table lists the acres of habitat for each species that may be found on the site, based on the FNAI Habitat Conservation Priorities. Please note that habitats for these species overlap, so that the sum total of habitat for all species is more than the total acreage of the priority conservation areas.

**Rare species habitat based on FNAI Habitat Conservation Priorities for 281 species with the greatest conservation need.**

Scientific Name	Common Name	Global Rank	Acres
<i>Ammodramus savannarum floridanus</i>	Florida grasshopper sparrow	G5T1	2%
<i>Caracara cheriway</i>	crested caracara	G5	40%

The FWC Florida Landscape Assessment Model (FLAM) is a GIS model that determines the landscape value based on natural resources and fish and wildlife habitat. The FLAM ranks habitat from a 0-10; a rank of 10 being of greatest value. The mean FLAM score for this property is 7.9. The entire project is identified as Priority 1 (of 5) for the Critical Lands and Waters Identification Project. Approximately 85% lies within a designated FWC Strategic Habitat Conservation Area (SHCA) for species including

the Florida snail kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*), short-tailed hawk (*Buteo brachyurus*), and Florida burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia floridana*).

The application of prescribed fire is necessary to improve the current condition of the prairie on the ranch; however, the protection of dry prairie is a priority. The absence of habitat maintenance historically should not detract from the value of this acquisition.

**Measure B4:**

*The number of acres acquired of under-represented native ecosystems.*

The Florida Forever natural community analysis includes only those communities that are under-represented on existing conservation lands. This analysis provides a conservative estimate of the extent of these communities, because it identifies only relatively undisturbed portions of these communities that occur within their historic range. The Florida Forever Measures table lists the acreages of under-represented natural communities found on the site. Based on this analysis, the Abington Ranch proposal contains 325 acres of dry prairie (9% of site) and 8 acres of mesic flatwoods (<1% of site).

**Measure B5:**

*The number of landscape-sized protection areas of at least 50,000 acres that exhibit a mosaic of predominantly intact or restorable natural communities established through new acquisition projects, or augmentations to previous projects.*

The Abington Ranch proposal, along with adjacent conservation lands that include Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park and Tiger Cattle Company Ranch CE, would contribute to a contiguous landscape-sized protection area of greater than 418,000 acres.

**Measure B6:**

*The percentage increase in the number of occurrences of imperiled species on publicly managed conservation areas.*

The proposal reports several animal species of conservation concern, including American alligator, crested caracara, and southeastern fox squirrel. A group of at least six Florida sandhill cranes were observed during the site visit in open pastureland. The Florida grasshopper sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum floridanus*; G5T1, S1, E, FE\*), a federally Endangered subspecies endemic to the prairie and pasture region of south-central Florida, has undergone a precipitous population decline and is unlikely to be present on the property currently. Preservation and restoration of dry prairie and possibly some pastureland remains an important goal in an effort to enhance the habitat available to the bird.

Florida burrowing owls (*Athene cunicularia floridana*; G4T3, S3, N, ST) and Bachman's sparrow (*Peucaea aestivalis*; G3, S3, N, N) have been documented nearby and may occur on the property. The large acreage of herbaceous marshes is significant to the cranes as well as to a host of wading birds including the federally Threatened wood stork (*Mycteria americana*; G4, S2, T, FT), which is not reported from the site but is likely to be present periodically.

There are several mesic hammocks on the property with the potential to harbor numerous epiphytes, including several state-listed endangered or threatened species. During the site visit, Florida butterfly orchid was seen growing in live oaks, and the site application also reports two airplants of concern, Balbis' airplant and common wild-pine, as occurring on the property. Additional rare animals and plants are possible, especially given the site's proximity to the state park. Rarity rankings listed above are in

the following order: FNAI global (G, T) and state (S) ranks, federal status, state status. Species ranks and conservation status are described at <https://www.fnai.org/ranks.cfm>.

The Florida Forever Measures table lists the number of Element Occurrences by Global Rank (G-rank) that are found on the proposal. Note that the number of occurrences does not necessarily match the number of species in the following table because a) some species may have more than one occurrence on the proposal site, or b) some species observed on site lack sufficient data to justify addition to the FNAI database at this time. The table below contains species falling into any of these observational categories, as well as species gleaned from other sources (e.g., Florida Breeding Bird Atlas) with different degrees of locational precision.

**Rare plants and animals documented or reported to occur within the Abington Ranch Florida Forever proposal.**

Scientific Name	Common Name	Global Rank	State Rank	Federal Status	State Status
Rare plants documented on site					
<i>Encyclia tampensis</i>	Florida butterfly orchid	G4	SNR	N	CE
Additional rare plants reported on site by applicant					
<i>Tillandsia balbisiana</i>	Balbis' airplant	G4G5	S3	N	T
<i>Tillandsia fasciculata</i>	common wild-pine	G5	SNR	N	E
Rare animals documented on site					
<i>Antigone canadensis pratensis</i>	Florida sandhill crane	G5T2	S2	N	ST
Additional rare animals reported on site by applicant					
<i>Alligator mississippiensis</i>	American alligator	G5	S4	SAT	FT(S/A)
<i>Caracara cheriway</i>	crested caracara	G5	S2	T	FT
<i>Sciurus niger</i>	southeastern fox squirrel	G5T5	S3	N	N

**Goal C:**

*Protect, restore and maintain the quality of natural functions of land, water, and wetland systems of the state*

**Measure C1:**

*The number of acres of publicly-owned land identified as needing restoration; enhancement, and management, acres undergoing restoration or enhancement; acres with restoration activities completed, and acres managed to maintain such restored or enhanced conditions; the number of acres which represent actual or potential imperiled species habitat; the number of acres which are available pursuant to a management plan to restore, enhance, repopulate, and manage imperiled species habitat; and the number of acres of imperiled species habitat managed, restored, and enhanced, repopulated, or acquired.*

The property is offered for fee simple acquisition. The approximately 333 acres of remnant mesic flatwoods and dry prairie communities on the property are in poor ecological condition due to fragmentation, ditching, grazing, and long-term fire exclusion. However, with prescribed burning and exotics removal, these areas could likely be improved to increase natural function. The remaining converted pasture lands and planted pine stands over old fields would be impractical to restore to a historic natural community. The property has extensive hydrology alteration that impacts most of the wetlands on the site.



Invasive exotic plant infestation appears to be minor in the uplands on the property. However, many marshes on the property have large populations of Wright's nutrush, according to DEP-DRP staff present on the site visit who are familiar with the species. Control of this species would be challenging but would also present an opportunity to buffer the more pristine marshes on the adjacent Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park by aggressively treating infestations on the ranch land before they spread to the park. A baseline assessment to determine the full extent of invasive plant species is warranted if acquisition of the easement occurs.

**Measure C3:**

*The percentage completion of targeted capital improvements in surface water improvement and management plans created under s. 373.453 (2), regional or master stormwater management system plans, or other adopted restoration plans.*

The parcels are in the Lake Okeechobee Basin Management Action Plan and also located adjacent to the Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park.

**Measure C4:**

*The number of acres acquired that protect natural floodplain functions.*

Approximately 3,446 acres (94%) provides for the protection of natural floodplain functions, as noted in the FFME table (see Appendix A).

**Measure C5:**

*The number of acres acquired that protect surface waters of the State.*

Approximately 3,631 acres (99%) provides for the protection of surface waters, as noted in Appendix A.

**Measure C8:**

*The number of acres of functional wetland systems protected.*

Approximately 1,668 acres (46%) provides for the protection of natural floodplain functions, as noted in Appendix A.

**Goal D:**

*Ensure that sufficient quantities of water are available to meet the current and future needs of natural systems and the citizens of the state*

**Measure D3:**

*The number of acres acquired of groundwater recharge areas critical to springs, sinks, aquifers, other natural systems, or water supply.*

Approximately 3,656 acres (100%) provides for aquifer recharge, as noted in Appendix A.

**Spatial Analysis for Potential Water Quality Benefits**

Categories	Scoring Criteria	Project Score
FDEP High Profile Springs (In 1,2,3 or > spring sheds)	12,24,36	0
FDEP Select Agricultural Land Use (0-30%, >30-65%, >65%)	4,8,12	8
FDEP Florida Aquifer Vulnerability (FAVA)	4,7,10	7
FDEP Special Nutrient Impaired WBIDs	9	0
FDEP Distance to Major Lakes (100, 500, 1000 meters)	8,7,6	0
FDEP Springsheds or within 5 miles	10,7	0
FDEP BMAPs	10	10
FDEP Distance to Major Rivers (100, 500, 1000 meters)	6,5,4	0
Total Possible	101	16

GIS Evaluation score is converted to a 1 to 5 value (low to high)

**FINAL DEAR SCORE = 2** (low to medium Water Quality Protection Benefits)

**Goal E:**

*Increase natural resource-based public recreational and educational opportunities*

**Measure E1:**

*The number of acres acquired that are available for natural resource-based public recreation or education.*

Approximately 3,656 acres (100%) will provide for natural resource-based public recreation or education.

**Goal F:**

*Preserve significant archaeological or historic sites*

A professional archaeological survey has not been conducted and the tract contains no recorded archaeological or historic sites; therefore, it does not meet GOAL F of preserving significant archaeological or historical sites. Based on GIS analysis, Abington Ranch has a low-medium estimated potential of holding significant archaeological sites.

**Measure F2:**

*The increase in the number and percentage of historic and archaeological properties that are in state ownership.*

**CULTURAL RESOURCES:**

This tract holds no historical sites currently listed in the Florida Master Site File. The applicant has stated that they are unaware of any historical structures or archaeological sites on the property. No portion of this property has been professionally surveyed for archaeological and historical sites. The site file shows 5 historic structures, 16 archaeological sites, and 6 resource groups as being located within a five-mile radius of this property. The tract's location, topography, and proximity to freshwater suggests low - medium probability of holding any potentially significant archaeological or historical sites.

**FIELD OBSERVATIONS:**

Due to restrictions imposed by Covid-19, DHR did not participate in a field review for this project.

**Goal G:**

*Increase the amount of forestland available for sustainable management of natural resources*

**Measure G1:**

*The number of acres acquired that are available for sustainable forest management.*

Approximately 37 acres (1%) provides for sustainable forestry, as noted in Appendix A.

***Management***

DEP's Division of Recreation and Parks is the recommended manager of this property should it be acquired. It will be managed as part of Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park which borders the project on 3 sides.

## ***Government Planning and Development***

### **Contribution to Recreation and Open Space Needs**

The proposal has a moderate to high potential for contributing to recreation and open space needs. The proposal is for fee simple acquisition. The property could function as a wildlife corridor, and various recreational activities could include bicycling, camping, dog walking, environmental education and interpretation, fishing, hiking/jogging, horseback riding, and wildlife observation and photography. The application reports that there is no limit on public hunting currently in place on the property, and thus, the property could be acquired without a limitation on public hunting. These recreational uses would likely be compatible with the future land use designation of Agriculture.

### **Potential for Losing Significant Natural Attributes or Recreational Open Spaces**

Much of the subject property is improved pasture (1,342.3 acres), unimproved pasture (346.5 acres), woodland pasture (199.1 acres), dry prairie 210.7 acres), freshwater marshes (1,297.2 acres), and a variety of other natural communities (scrub and brushland 20.7 acres; palmetto prairies 70.4 acres; upland hardwood forest 6.1 acres; oak – cabbage palm forest 22.2 acres; cabbage palm 73.7 acres; upland mixed coniferous/hardwood 5.3 acres; channelized waterways, canals 9.5 acres; mixed wetland hardwoods 4.4 acres; mixed shrubs 12.8 acres; wet prairie 24.2 acres; and mixed scrub-shrub wetland 9.6 acres). The application reports that the following listed species have been observed on the property: American alligator, Crested Caracara, butterfly orchid, Florida sandhill crane, Sherman's fox squirrel, northern needleleaf and cardinal airplant. The application reports that a large variety of other listed species have the potential to occur on or near the property. Wetlands comprise approximately 40 percent of the property, and all waters on the property drain to the Kissimmee River through the adjacent Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park.

Low/Moderate Potential: The potential for losing significant natural attributes located on the property due to urban development is low. The potential for converting the upland natural communities (e.g., dry prairie) to a more intensive agricultural use is moderate. Therefore, there is a moderate potential for losing the natural attributes due to potential future agricultural conversion.

### **Potential for Being Subdivided**

Low Potential: The subject property has a low potential for being subdivided. The future land use designation is Agriculture, which allows residential use at a density of one dwelling unit per ten gross acres. Okeechobee County has a relatively low rate of population growth, and the County is generally rural in character with an abundance of undeveloped land. According to the application, the property owners do not have plans in place to subdivide for sale and there are no known threats of development that could harm or diminish the value of the property.

### **Existing Land Uses and Future Land Use Designations**

#### **Development Potential**

Based on the Okeechobee County Comprehensive Plan future land use designation (Agriculture), the subject property has a development potential of 365 residential dwelling units.

## **Existing Land Uses and Future Land Use Designations**

Existing Land Uses: The subject property is classified with the following land use/land cover with a variety of natural communities: improved pasture (1,342.3 acres); unimproved pasture (346.5 acres); woodland pasture (199.1 acres); dry prairie 210.7 acres); scrub and brushland (20.7 acres); palmetto prairies (70.4 acres); upland hardwood forest (6.1 acres); oak – cabbage palm forest (22.2 acres); cabbage palm (73.7 acres); upland mixed coniferous/hardwood (5.3 acres); channelized waterways, canals (9.5 acres); mixed wetland hardwoods (4.4 acres); mixed shrubs (12.8 acres); freshwater marshes (1,297.2 acres); wet prairie (24.2 acres); and mixed scrub-shrub wetland (9.6 acres). The current use of the property includes beef cattle ranching, recreation (lodge, dock, small cabin) and water storage.

Future Land Uses: The subject property is designated as “Agriculture” on the Okeechobee County Comprehensive Plan Future Land Use Map. The Agriculture future land use category allows the following: agriculture use; residential density of one dwelling unit per ten gross acres; limited commercial uses that allow for recreational activities or use of public lands; educational uses; institutional uses, recreational and other public uses. Thus, the subject property has a residential development potential of 365 dwelling units (3,656 acres with a density of one dwelling unit per ten gross acres).

## **Transportation Issues**

Located in FDOT’s District 1 in Okeechobee County, the proposed project would protect by fee simple acquisition approximately 3,600 acres adjacent to Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park. The property is located approximately 5 miles west of US 441/SR 15, 6 miles south of SR 60, and 6 miles west of SR 91/Florida’s Turnpike. All of these facilities are Strategic Intermodal System facilities and evacuation routes.

While FDOT anticipates no impact to transportation facilities should the project move forward, there should be coordination with the appropriate FDOT District staff during the acquisition process to ensure that any issues related to the transportation facilities are addressed and incorporated into the management plan as appropriate.

## ***ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS***

Staff in DEP’s Division of State Lands (DSL) and the Florida Natural Areas Inventory determined the final project recommendations. Deborah Burr in DSL’s Office of Environmental Services was responsible for the overall coordination of this report, with contributions from the following:

Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources - Joshua Goodwin

Florida Forest Service - Cat Ingram and Calin Ionita

Department of Economic Opportunity - Dan Evans

DEP Division of Recreation and Parks – Daniel Alsentzer and Larry Fooks

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission – Larame Ferry and Carol Rizcalla

Florida Natural Areas Inventory – Kimberly Alexander and Dan Hipes

DEP Division of Environmental Assessment and Restoration - Kevin Coyne and Janis Morrow

Florida Department of Transportation - Jennifer Carver

**APPENDICES**

**Appendix A:**

Final FF measures table: Report requirement 259.105 (15)d, prepared by Florida Natural Areas Inventory

**Abington Ranch: Florida Forever Measure Evaluation 20200819**

GIS ACRES = 3,656

MEASURES	Resource Acres <sup>a</sup>	% of project
<b>B1: Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	3,057	84%
Priority 3	28	< 1%
Priority 4	0	0%
Priority 5	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>3,085</b>	<b>84%</b>
<b>B2: FNAI Habitat Conservation Priorities</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	1	< 1%
Priority 4	86	2%
Priority 5	1,475	40%
Priority 6	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>1,561</b>	<b>43%</b>
<b>B3: Ecological Greenways</b>		
Priority 1	3,656	100%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	0	0%
Priority 4	0	0%
Priority 5	0	0%
Priority 6	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>3,656</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>B4: Under-represented Natural Communities</b>		
Upland Glade (G1)	0	0%
Pine Rockland (G1)	0	0%
Scrub and Scrubby Flatwoods (G2)	0	0%
Rockland Hammock (G2)	0	0%
Dry Prairie (G2)	325	9%
Seepage Slope (G2)	0	0%
Sandhill (G3)	0	0%
Sandhill Upland Lake (G3)	0	0%
Upland Pine (G3)	0	0%
Mesic/Wet Flatwoods (G4)	8	<1%
Upland Hardwood Forest (G5)	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>333</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>B6: Occurrences of FNAI Tracked Species</b>		
G1	0	
G2	0	
G3	0	
G4	0	
G5	0	
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	
<b>C4: Natural Floodplain Function</b>		
Priority 1	31	< 1%
Priority 2	204	6%
Priority 3	664	18%
Priority 4	2,535	69%
Priority 5	12	< 1%
Priority 6	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>3,446</b>	<b>94%</b>

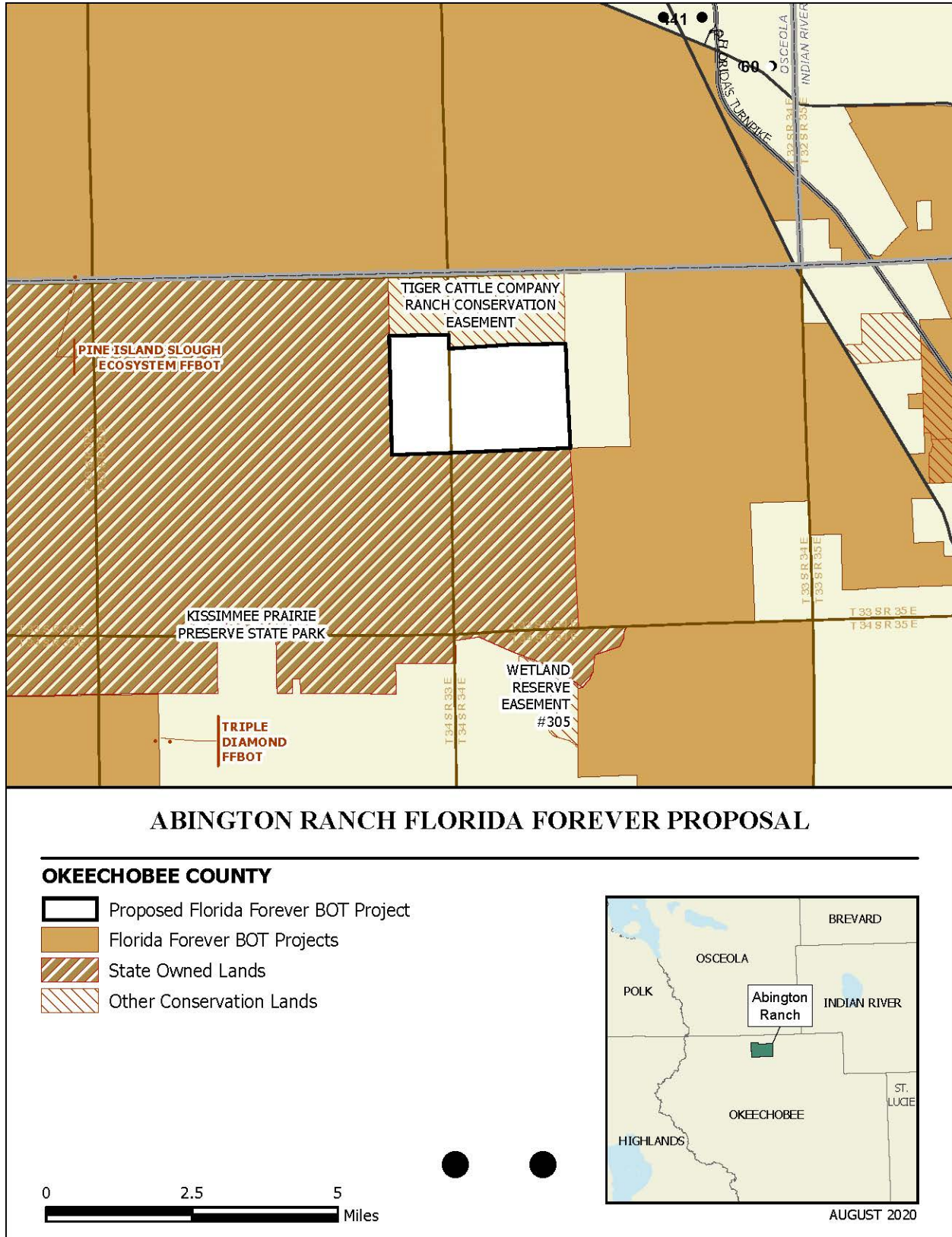
MEASURES (continued)	Resource Acres <sup>a</sup>	% of project
<b>C5: Surface Water Protection</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	768	21%
Priority 3	0	0%
Priority 4	2,853	78%
Priority 5	0	0%
Priority 6	10	< 1%
Priority 7	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>3,631</b>	<b>99%</b>
<b>C7: Fragile Coastal Resources</b>		
Fragile Coastal Uplands	0	0%
Imperiled Coastal Lakes	0	0%
Coastal Wetlands	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>C8: Functional Wetlands</b>		
Priority 1	30	< 1%
Priority 2	182	5%
Priority 3	499	14%
Priority 4	956	26%
Priority 5	0	0%
Priority 6	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>1,668</b>	<b>46%</b>
<b>D3: Aquifer Recharge</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	73	2%
Priority 4	416	11%
Priority 5	1,388	38%
Priority 6	1,778	49%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>3,656</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>E2: Recreational Trails (miles)</b>		
<small>(prioritized trail opportunities from Office of Greenways and Trails &amp; Univ. Florida)</small>		
Land Trail Priorities	0.0	
Land Trail Opportunities	0.0	
<b>Total Miles</b>	<b>0.0</b>	
<b>F2: Arch. &amp; Historical Sites (number)</b>		
	0 sites	
<b>G1: Sustainable Forestry</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	33	< 1%
Priority 4	0	0%
Priority 5 - Potential Pinelands	3	< 1%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>1%</b>
<b>G3: Forestland for Recharge</b>		
	0	0%

<sup>a</sup>Acres of each resource in the project and percentage of project represented by each resource are listed except where noted. This analysis converts site boundary into pixels, which causes slight differences from GIS acres; this effect is greatest on small sites.

**Appendix B:**

Final FF proposal boundary maps prepared by Florida Natural Areas Inventory (report requirement 259.105 (15)k)

**B1: Florida Forever map**



**B2: Aerial map**

### Abington Ranch Florida Forever Proposal

FLORIDA FOREVER BOARD OF TRUSTEES PROJECT PROPOSAL BOUNDARY AS OF AUGUST 2020

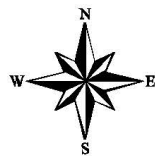


Map Produced by: N. Pasco, August 2020

Background: World Imagery Resolution = 0.3 meter



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	Florida Forever Proposal Boundary
	Florida Forever BOT Projects
	Existing State Conservation Lands
	Existing Private Conservation Lands





**Appendix C:**

**Summary of property tax I.D. owner, size and value.**

<b>Parcel ID</b>	<b>Owner</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>Just (Market) Value</b>
1-07-33-34-0A00-00001-0000	ABINGTON HOLDINGS LTD	484.45	\$1,111,789
1-08-33-34-0A00-00001-0000	ABINGTON HOLDINGS LTD	458.2	\$1,040,702
1-12-33-33-0A00-00001-0000	ABINGTON HOLDINGS LTD	643.97	\$1,505,878
1-13-33-33-0A00-00001-0000	ABINGTON HOLDINGS LTD	660.16	\$1,406,247
1-13-33-33-0A00-00002-0000	BANYAN LODGE LIMITED	21.51	\$543,241
1-17-33-34-0A00-00001-0000	ABINGTON HOLDINGS LTD	687.74	\$1,773,871
1-18-33-34-0A00-00001-0000	ABINGTON HOLDINGS LTD	688.26	\$1,617,546
		3,644.29	\$8,999,274

**Appendix D:** *Management Prospectus for Abington Ranch, a fee simple proposal.*

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**Overview**

Adjacent to Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park on three sides, the 3,655.72-acre Abington Ranch would provide considerable conservation benefits to the existing park and broader mission of the Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP). If acquired through the Florida Forever program, the DRP proposes to manage the entirety of the acquisition, recognizing the distribution of significant natural features that offer conservation and recreation values. The extensive upland and wetland protection opportunities on this prospective acquisition would fulfill a large management and access gap in the northeast portion Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park.

Given the extensive shared boundaries and direct connectivity, Abington Ranch would be recommended as an addition to Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park.

**Natural Resource Management**

Given the full acquisition of Abington Ranch, the DRP would merge the three adjacent sides with Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park. Linear distances of contiguous boundary within Abington Ranch are estimated as:

- 3.2 miles of contiguous north boundary
- 2 miles of contiguous west boundary
- 3 miles of contiguous south boundary

Primary management goals and objectives would be restoration of natural hydrological conditions and adherence to optimum fire return intervals. The estimated 276.47 acres of dry prairie would be managed for habitat improvement and potential reintroduction of grasshopper sparrow. The estimated 937.30 acres of isolated freshwater marsh would be studied for potential water quality and connectivity improvements. Sheetflow and hydroperiods of the estimated 300.54 acres of wet prairie would be also be studied for potential improvement. Densities of vegetation throughout the upland areas of the acquisition would be evaluated for reduction. The estimated 1,306.45 acres of altered pasture would be gradually restored to natural conditions. Considerable study may be needed to determine the original natural communities of the complex mosaic that characterizes Abington Ranch.

**Cultural Resource Management**

At the time of evaluation for addition to the Florida Forever Boundary, the DRP has not yet identified known cultural sites or determined probabilities of cultural features. 1940s-era agricultural canals may constitute linear cultural resources in the southwestern and central portions of Abington Ranch. Abundant freshwater marshes and hammocks throughout the ranch are likely to have supported some prehistoric habitation sites where pottery scatter may be found.

Cultural resource surveys were most recently conducted west and north of Abington Ranch in 2002 and 2007 respectively. Known cultural resources within the vicinity indicate probability of historic agricultural remnants and Glades-period archaeological sites, however, surveys would need to be completed as an early resource management priority.

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### **Public Access Potential**

The natural landscape of Abington Ranch resembles much of the open dry and wet prairie of the existing Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park. Uplands and seasonally dry tracts are sufficient to provide opportunity for public recreational and interpretive access. Similar to the eastern portion of Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park, scenery in the new addition may be diversified by a higher concentration of marshes and flooded sloughs than found in the western portion of the park. Wildlife viewing throughout the diverse habitats of the acquisition, particularly as habitat and natural systems restoration is implemented, would be an attraction. The acquisition is, however, remotely located, several miles east of the park headquarters and campground. Public access would occur by shared use and/or hiking trails. Existing trails currently pass and terminate nearby the south and west boundaries of Abington Ranch, such that trail extensions would be feasible.

### **Revenue Generating Potential**

As an addition to Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park, the acquisition would be managed for single use. Multiple use potentials would be low and generally incompatible throughout the sparsely forested and sensitive terrain. The potential of the park to accommodate secondary management purposes would be analyzed. These secondary purposes would be considered within the context of DRP's statutory responsibilities and the resource needs and values of the park. This analysis would consider the park's natural and cultural resources, management needs, aesthetic values, visitation, and visitor experiences. Although cattle ranching and rangeland/pasture management are existing land uses, the DRP would prioritize resource-based recreation and interpretation for generating revenue.

### **Land Use Development Potential**

Given the remote location of the Abington Ranch acquisition, both the potential and need for land use development are limited. Demand for public access would primarily be served via shared use and/or hiking trails. Multiple structures could potentially be used for either public use or operational support. Best practices in park planning encourage separation of recreation and support facilities. Considerable land use planning would be needed to determine optimal uses of these structures. Detailed descriptions of the structures are provided for reference in the interim.

- Large woodframe lodge with metal roof and swimming pool is situated in the west-central portion of the acquisition. Constructed of heavy timbers. Floorplan includes a single expansive open living area with a kitchen and multiple bed/bath. Pool is large and adjacent to rear of house. Wraparound porch surrounds the house. Three outbuildings, including a barn with corral, bunkhouse and storage building, are located approximately 100 yards away. Due to access challenges, lack of utilities, design features atypical of Florida state parks, and high cost of facilities maintenance, the lodge would be unlikely to support viable rental use.
- Rustic cabin is located in the southeast portion of the acquisition. This cabin is reportedly located on a channelized slough, which provided airboat access through Seven-mile Slough to the Kissimmee River prior to state ownership and hydrological restoration.
- Construction barn and corral are located in the northeast portion of the acquisition.
- No public utilities connections. Generators supply electrical power. Water is gravity-fed from a water tower, which is filled by a large agricultural pump powered by a generator.
- Stated legal access is by easement along a narrow dirt road bearing west from US 441, south of Yeehaw Junction and north of the Okeechobee County line. Entrance is secured by fence and gate. Interior access is by single-lane dirt/grass road constructed by excavating the roadside. If acquired by the DRP, public access would likely be facilitated from within Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park to maintain singular access and connectivity from the park headquarters. Ecological impacts, feasibilities, and maintenance costs of an interior road would need to be evaluated.

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- 100,000 cypress trees were reportedly planted in the mid-1980s largely in double rows across wetland areas.
- Currently supports roughly 500 cattle often largely occupying wetlands and adjacent open spaces. Wire boundary fencing and cross fencing is widely present with cattle gates/cattle guards separating pasture areas.
- Wildlife commonly observed include sandhill crane, turkey, squirrel, whitetailed deer, egret, and herons.
- Soil disturbance from hogs observed only in southeast portion.
- Hydrological alterations result from extensive drainage ditching and impoundments for tomato fields and pasture. Cattle ponds exist in addition to wetland areas. Restoration would require significant funding and effort and may not be entirely possible due to potential offsite impacts.
- 40% of the property is reportedly some form of wetland.
- Approximately 1,800 acres are grazed as either improved or unimproved pasture, which would be a subject of restoration efforts. Observed pasture areas contain fairly low groundcover density of palmetto and wiregrass with some dense palmetto islands scattered occasionally throughout.
- Mesic hammocks are present and appear to be in good condition. Some hammock areas are inhabited by cattle.
- Small area of flatwoods observed in the southeast portion. Absence of prescribed fire is noted.
- Absence of fire on the dry prairie may impair habitat for grasshopper sparrow, due largely to predation perches.
- Summer hydroperiod poses access challenges to the exterior and within the interior.
- Hydrology is significantly altered by drainage channels and roads constructed to accommodate cattle ranching, tomato fields, and vehicular access.
- Restoration of groundcover diversity in the pasture areas would require a substantial amount of tree removal and reintroduction of prescribed fire in the proper frequency and seasonality.
- Exotic invasive plant species observed on the property included Caesar's weed, cogongrass, scleria lacustris, and natal grass. Scleria lacustris is a major nuisance throughout the eastern portion of Kissimmee Prairie Preserve especially in the wetlands near and bordering Abington Ranch.

### **Benefits of DRP Acquisition/Management**

Acquisition and management of Abington Ranch would expand the state park boundary, allowing the DRP to restore and protect a considerable additional portion of the original range of the endangered Florida prairie ecosystem matrix; a biodiverse and scenic ecosystem that used to cover this portion of the state. Depending on land use planning determinations, the acquisition could provide a secondary access point to some portions of the preserve that are otherwise difficult or altogether inaccessible during wet seasons. Access to Abington Ranch, and secondarily enhanced access to portions of the existing park, would be advantageous for treating the problematic scleria lacustris infestation. Abington Ranch is currently a suspected seed source for this exotic invasive plant species. Access would likewise facilitate application of prescribed fire in areas of the preserve that border Abington Ranch.

Among the aesthetic benefits to the visitor experience, DRP acquisition and management would protect the dark sky and natural soundscape attributes of Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park, which require broad buffering from incompatible land uses. Such wilderness attributes distinguish the park statewide.

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The hydrological alterations of Abington Ranch perform functions of water conveyance and impoundment. If the DRP is to restore the natural hydrology of the acquisition and reintegrate it with the water regime of the existing park, offsite water discharges may be a challenge. Infrastructurally, the existing buildings and onsite utilities are of limited value to the DRP due to poor accessibility and predicted costs of maintenance.

### Minimum Operational Needs

Management and restoration of Abington Ranch to its natural condition is well within the capabilities of the DRP given the appropriate operational support and timeframe. To achieve the identified resource management and public access goals and objectives, the existing staff, equipment, infrastructure, and expense budget may require the following additions:

Anticipated Need	Quantity	Category	Total Cost
park services specialist	2	staff	\$79,000
various operational expenses	n.a.	budget	\$50,000
heavy duty pickup trucks (4x4)	2	equipment	\$70,000
heavy duty tractor with implements/attachments	1	equipment	\$200,000
solar panels and/or commercial generator for support facilities	1	utilities	\$40,000
potable water well/pump for support facilities	1	utilities	\$10,000

Equipping the DRP with commensurate operational support would allow the agency to promptly address short-term management priorities on Abington Ranch without diverting staff and detracting funds from standing management priorities within the existing portions of Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park.

### Statutory Responsibility and Application of DRP Management Philosophy

In accordance with Chapter 258, Florida Statutes and Chapter 62D-2, Florida Administrative Code, DRP is charged with the responsibility of developing and operating Florida's recreation and parks system. These are administered in accordance with the following policy:

*It shall be the policy of the Division of Recreation and Parks to promote the state park system for the use, enjoyment, and benefit of the people of Florida and visitors; to acquire typical portions of the original domain of the state which will be accessible to all of the people, and of such character as to emblemize the state's natural values; conserve these natural values for all time; administer the development, use and maintenance of these lands and render such public service in so doing, in such a manner as to enable the people of Florida and visitors to enjoy these values without depleting them; to contribute materially to the development of a strong mental, moral, and physical fiber in the people; to provide for perpetual preservation of historic sites and memorials of statewide significance and interpretation of their history to the people; to contribute to the tourist appeal of Florida.*

Consistent with the parkwide unit classification for Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park, Abington Ranch would also be managed as a preserve. Under the DRP unit classification system, a preserve is acquired and managed for preservation and enhancement of natural conditions. Resource considerations are given priority over user considerations and development is restricted to the minimum necessary for ensuring its protection and maintenance, limited access, user safety and convenience, and appropriate interpretation. Permitted uses are primarily of a passive nature, related to the aesthetic, interpretive, educational, and recreational values of the preserve, although other compatible uses may be permitted within preservation-oriented limitations. Guided and facilitated program emphasis is placed on interpretation of the natural and cultural attributes of the preserve.

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DRP philosophies of resource management entail natural systems management. Primary emphasis is placed on restoring and maintaining, to the degree possible, the natural processes that shaped the structure, function, and species composition of Florida's diverse natural communities as they occurred in the original domain.

DRP management goals for cultural resources entail preservation of sites and objects that represent Florida's cultural periods, significant historic events, or persons. Associated objectives often require in-depth studies and active measures to stabilize, reconstruct or restore resources, or to rehabilitate them for appropriate public interpretation.