

# WILSON RANCH

Polk 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*

*April 9, 2021*



Proposed Land Manager: Polk County

Acres: 450

Just Value: \$ 508,930

Application Date: October 29, 2020

Project Sponsor: Mr. Rick Wilson (owner)

## Executive Summary

The Wilson Ranch project is an active cattle ranch and the land was historically altered for water control, including ditching, diking, and water pumping. The property contains the confluence of Saddle and Peace Creeks, which form the headwaters of the Peace River; a regionally important blueway, that leaves the property and flows 75 miles south to Charlotte Harbor. Though much of the surrounding land was formerly mined, this site reportedly has not supported mining operations. A Gulfstream natural gas pipeline easement runs through the site, and several City of Bartow water well sites lie adjacent to the northern boundary; one of which is in active use. The proposed area is being offered for fee simple acquisition to further the restoration of the Peace River headwaters and floodplain and aid in the protection of water quality. According to Polk County tax records, the property is under single ownership and consists of five parcels containing approximately 450 acres with a tax assessed value of \$508,930. The owner is willing to consider less-than-fee acquisition and access to management of natural areas.

The terrain is mostly flat, with poorly drained soils, and little to non-existent slope. Existing roads consist of an unpaved graded private drive and dikes. Most of the property is pasture, and the site supports a cattle grazing lease and rye crops, with some bottomland forested areas and swampland; however, no pine stands exist on the property. Forested upland areas mainly contain live oak (*Quercus virginiana*) and cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*); bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) and red maple (*Acer rubrum*) are present in the swamplands. Invasive exotic plant species are abundant, and the landowner reportedly employs an invasive species management control plan for both coyote and feral hog. The invasive *Hypostomus plecostomus* fish is common in on-site waterways.

Most of the wetlands associated with the property have been drained using agricultural ditching and pumping to de-water the site and create improved pasture for cattle grazing. According to the application, this historic alteration and then subsequent agricultural maintenance of the property have dramatically altered the water levels, water storage capacity and hydroperiod of the on-site wetlands. However, given the soil type and vegetation currently present within portions of the pasture, some areas may still be considered wetlands, despite significant loss of function and would be a priority for restoration if the project were to be acquired.

Despite past alteration, Wilson Ranch provides habitat for bird and reptile species associated with wetland natural communities. Notably, the property lies along the eastern flyway and provides habitat for state and federally listed wading birds. Possible future multiple-use considerations may include water resource restoration for water quality and wildlife habitat improvement, and public outdoor recreation.

Polk County Environmental Lands Program is the recommended manager of this fee simple project. If approved for addition to the 2022 Florida Forever Priority List, it would ideally be considered as a stand-alone project in the Partnerships and Regional Incentives category for ranking purposes.

### **PURPOSE FOR ACQUISITION**

The Wilson Ranch property will provide protection of the Peace River headwaters; provide valuable wildlife habitat; and protect regionally significant wetlands, water resources and natural floodplain function along the Upper Peace River.

If acquired, conservation of the property 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, protect and provide wildlife corridors for rare and imperiled species.

- increase linkages and conservation corridors between public land and private conservation easements in the region;
- provide surface and groundwater protection, and protect natural floodplain functions;
- provide opportunities for resource-based public outdoor recreation.

### **LOCATION AND PROXIMITY TO OTHER MANAGED AREAS**

The Wilson Ranch property encompasses 450 acres (450 per GIS) in essentially one tract at the confluence of Saddle Creek (Canal) and Peace Creek, which merge to form the Peace River. The proposed area is being offered for fee simple acquisition to further the restoration of the Peace River headwaters and floodplain and aid in the protection of water quality. The property is within the City of Bartow and situated between Lake Hancock Conservation Area (SWFWMD) to the northwest and the Laurent/Peace River property (Polk County) just across SR 60 to the south. Clear Springs (FDEP), south of the Laurent/Peace property, continues the protection/restoration of the river corridor to the south.

### **RESOURCE DESCRIPTION**

#### **Florida Natural Areas Inventory**

This evaluation is based on information gathered from the proposal, high resolution aerial imagery, U.S. Geologic Survey (USGS) 7.5' topographic maps, Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) Cooperative Land Cover data (FNAI, Florida Cooperative Land Cover Map, version 3.4), and information in the FNAI database. A field survey was conducted on January 26, 2021, by FNAI biologists Katy NeSmith and Kim Alexander, along with the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) liaison staff. The site lies within the Bartow Embayment Province of the Central Lake District, which is a large erosion basin filled with Pliocene era phosphatic sand and clay sand over limestone with high input into the Floridan aquifer. Land use in the vicinity is primarily phosphate extraction, citrus, and cattle farms. According to the owner, about 500 cattle grazes on a complex of lands that includes the Wilson Ranch property.

About two thirds of Wilson Ranch is improved pasture developed along the east side of the Peace River in a former forested floodplain and some adjacent flatwoods. This land has been drained for many decades by extensive ditching and the channelization of the Peace River, Peace Creek, and Saddle Creek on the property. Dredged material forms berms along the channels and prevents flooding. A pump moves water from the ditch system into the Peace River.

The drier portions of the pastures are primarily planted Bermudagrass (*Cynodon dactylon*) and bahiagrass (*Paspalum notatum*), with a host of typical pasture weeds such as amaranth (*Amaranthus* sp.), big carpetgrass (*Axonopus furcatus*), flatsedge (*Cyperus* sp.), turkey tangle fogfruit (*Phylla nodiflora*), licoriceweed (*Scoparia dulcis*), septicweed (*Senna occidentalis*), and smutgrass (*Sporobolus indicus*). Scattered clumps of the FLEPPC Category I invasive exotic tropical soda apple occur throughout the pastures. A few remnant longleaf pines (*Pinus palustris*) are located in pasture on the south side of the property in an area of former flatwoods.

Much of the pasture lands is low and marshy, and this is an almost solid stand of two invasive exotic grasses that often infest southwest Florida pastures, West Indian marsh grass and para grass, both FLEPPC Category I. The deepest centers have patches of alligatorflag (*Thalia geniculata*). Other marsh species such as swamp rosemallow (*Hibiscus grandiflorus*), soft rush (*Juncus effusus* ssp. *solutus*), and dotted smartweed (*Persicaria punctata*) are also occasional.

Saddle Creek is channelized within the last 2,500 meters (1.5 miles) including the 300-meter portion on Wilson Ranch. Peace Creek and the Peace River appear to have been dredged to form a berm along portions of the creek/river. Other small ditches drain the pastures. The flooded ditches and channelized streams often have invasive West Indian marsh grass and para grass along their shores and occasionally floating patches of water-lettuce (*Pistia stratiotes*) or parrot feather water milfoil

(*Myriophyllum aquaticum*). Water-lettuce is considered a FLEPPC Category I invasive exotic, but its nativity is in question. Invasive plecostomus fish are abundant.

Spoil areas on the property are mostly high to low berms along the streams and canals. Some are open and weedy with pasture grasses, big carpetgrass, Mexican pricklypoppy (*Argemone mexicana*), beggarticks (*Bidens alba*), purple thistle (*Cirsium horridulum*), West Indian chickweed (*Drymaria cordata*), dogfennel (*Eupatorium capillifolium*), moonflowers (*Ipomoea alba*), lion's ear (*Leonotis nepetifolia*), Florida pellitory (*Parietaria floridana*), elderberry (*Sambucus nigra ssp. canadensis*), fanpetals (*Sida sp.*), maiden fern (*Thelypteris sp.*), and heartleaf nettle (*Urtica chamaedryoides*).

The numerous ditches and associated berms on the property create fire shadows and higher areas for successional hardwood forests to develop. Although some patches of hardwood forest resemble mesic hammock with a live oak and cabbage palm composition, these clearly developed as a result of past disturbance and fire exclusion on the property. Remnant pines are often found throughout, and weedy laurel oaks (*Quercus hemisphaerica*) are usually the dominant canopy component. FLEPPC Category I invasive exotic plants such as camphor tree (*Cinnamomum camphora*), lead tree (*Leucaena leucocephala*), Japanese climbing fern, skunk vine (*Paederia foetida*), Caesar's weed, and Brazilian pepper are common on spoil areas and in successional forests.

Floodplain swamp and possibly bottomland forest associated with the Peace River represent most of the natural acreage on the property, covering 29% of the proposal area. Access to the swamp requires crossing the channelized Peace River, so most observations were made from a distance. The swamp is a stand of mostly bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) draped in abundant Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*), with a smaller component of red maple (*Acer rubrum*) and cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*). According to the owner, there was some selective cypress cutting 25 to 30 years ago, but the swamp appears to retain a healthy cypress canopy. Although the groundcover has some native species like maiden fern (*Thelypteris sp.*), there are also large monospecific stands of the invasive exotic West Indian marsh grass and wetland nightshade (*Solanum tampicense*; FLEPPC Category I), and Japanese climbing fern was observed climbing up trees in the floodplain.

Two smaller isolated depressions were seen on the property, both dug out decades ago. The first was an inundated, artificial pond created by the owner's father to provide fill for a homesite located adjacent to the proposal property. A successional hardwood forest surrounds this former family fishing hole. The pond is now green with floating dotted duckweed (*Landoltia punctata*; FLEPPC Category II) and water spangles (*Salvinia minima*; FLEPPC Category I), and the invasive exotic Brazilian pepper is occasional around the edge. A second borrow area was seen on the south end of the property in open pasture. This pit has filled in with wetland species such as red maple, southern bayberry (*Morella cerifera*), sugarcane plumegrass (*Saccharum giganteum*), and broadleaf cattail (*Typha latifolia*). Weedy bluestems (*Andropogon sp.*) surround the pit, and the invasive exotic Peruvian primrosewillow (*Ludwigia peruviana*; FLEPPC Category I) appears to be invading it.

Several barns, pens, and other structures associated with the cattle farm are situated in a small developed area on the south side of the proposal. A few longleaf pines remain from the former flatwoods community that once occupied this land. Table 1 includes a breakdown of FNAI natural community and landcover types identified within the proposal.

**Table 1. Natural communities and landcover types within Florida Forever proposal**

Community or Landcover	Acres	Percent of Proposal
floodplain swamp	129.3	29%
blackwater stream	9.8	2%
pasture-improved	282.8	63%
successional hardwood forest	12.3	3%
spoil area	10.1	2%
developed	2.7	1%

Community or Landcover	Acres	Percent of Proposal
ditch/canal	2.3	<1%
artificial pond	0.6	<1%
borrow area	0.5	<1%
Total	450	100

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

This summary provides a resource assessment of the Wilson Ranch Florida Forever proposal based on field observations during the January 26, 2021 site tour and results of the GIS analysis. The project area consists of 450 acres in Polk County, in the City of Bartow, between State Road 60 and US-17. The property is part of the Peace River basin and contains the confluence of Peace Creek and Saddle Creek, which form the headwaters of the Peace River. The ranch also connects to other conservation lands.

Wilson Ranch is located between the Lake Hancock Conservation Area managed by the SWFWMD to the northwest and the Lauren/Peace River property managed by Polk County to the south. Just south of the Lauren/Peace River property is Clear Springs, managed by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP). Wilson Ranch is also part of the Florida Wildlife Corridor, through the portion that connects the Everglades Headwaters and the Green Swamp.

The Florida Cooperative Land Cover version 3.3 lists numerous natural communities occurring on Wilson Ranch including pasture (56%), mixed wetland hardwoods (25%), wet prairie (7%), mixed hardwood-coniferous (5%), and natural rivers and streams (4%).

Wading birds like the wood stork (*Mycteria americana*; Federally Threatened) and roseate spoonbill (*Platalea ajaja*; State-designated Threatened) are examples of species that will benefit from the acquisition of Wilson Ranch. This is evidenced by historic usage of the site by various wading bird species. A historic wading bird rookery (unconfirmed) is believed to exist within the property boundary to the west of Peace Creek. On the site tour, one wood stork was observed flying over the pastures and several roseate spoonbills were seen in the forested wetlands. It is likely that the forested wetlands are also used by other wading birds such as limpkins (*Aramus guarauna*), snowy egrets (*Egretta thula*), and white ibis (*Eudocimus albus*).

Other species of note include Florida sandhill cranes with young (*Grus canadensis*; State-designated Threatened), striped crayfish snake (*Liodytes alleni*), and one inactive osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) nest was seen on property. These species are consistent with wetland natural communities. The Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) Element Occurrence database did not include any records; however, approximately 184 acres of potential Florida sandhill crane habitat were identified.

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 FLAM score for this property is 5.7. All the area is identified as either Priority 1 or 2 of the Critical Lands and Waters Identification Project (CLIP). Approximately 99.6% of the area is identified as Priority 3 (of 5) for the CLIP Landscape Category.

Approximately 61% of the area lies within a designated FWC Strategic Habitat Conservation Area for species including Florida snail kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*), Cooper’s hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*), and American swallow-tailed kite (*Elanoides forficatus*). In summary, the proposal offers an opportunity to protect the headwaters of the Peace River and provide connectivity to existing conservation lands that will benefit numerous fish and wildlife species. Wilson Ranch would be a significant addition to the multi-agency conserved lands surrounding the property. The management of the property by Polk County would provide for water quality protection, and the potential to restore historic hydrology that would improve wildlife habitat and allow for the expansion of listed species in the area.

**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.*

The 450-acre project is proposed for fee simple acquisition and will contribute to the enhancement of essential natural resources, ecosystem services and connecting linkage corridors.

**Measure A3:**

*The number of shared acquisition projects among Florida Forever funding partners and partners with other funding sources, including local governments and the federal government.*

The SWFWMD previously considered acquisition of Wilson Ranch as part of the larger Lake Hancock acquisition project and, at that time declined to proceed. However, there may be a potential opportunity for the SWFWMD to partner on acquisition and/or management depending on funding availability and priorities.

**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.*

The proposed project would protect approximately 278 acres within SHCAs.

**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 Evaluation (FFME) table in Appendix A. Habitat conservation priorities for 281 of Florida’s rarest species were mapped and divided into six priority classes. The FFME table shows the acres for each priority class found on the Wilson Ranch proposal. Overall, the site contains approximately 318 acres (71% of site) of rare species habitat. The habitat is mostly divided between Priority 6 (44% of site) and Priority 5 (24% of site), with the remainder in Priority 4 (3%).

Table 2 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.

**Table 2. Rare species habitat based on FNAI Habitat Conservation Priorities**

Scientific Name	Common Name	Global Rank	Acres
<i>Drymarchon couperi</i>	eastern indigo snake	G3	208
<i>Mycteria americana</i>	wood stork	G4	122

**Measure B3:**

*The number of acres acquired of significant landscapes, landscape linkages, and conservation corridors, giving priority to completing linkages.*

Approximately 448 acres within the proposed project will contribute to ecological greenways.

**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 FFME lists the acreages of under-represented natural communities found on the site. Based on this analysis, no under-represented natural communities were identified on the Wilson Ranch proposal.

**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 Wilson Ranch proposal, although adjacent to conservation lands that include Lake Hancock and Laurent/Peace River, would not contribute to a contiguous landscape-sized protection area of >50,000 acres.

**Measure B6:**

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

The proposal reports no animal or plant species of conservation concern. Several sandhill cranes were observed during the site visit in open pastureland. Fifteen white ibis, four glossy ibis, one little blue heron, and one great egret were seen in a shallow depression in the pasture. Other species observed included about 12 roseate spoonbills flying up the Peace Creek corridor, and a wood stork (G4, S2, T, FT) and a bald eagle (G5, S3, N, N) passing over the pastureland. The large acreage of pasture and a partly open, partly forested river system, although degraded, is attractive to the cranes and wading birds. The birds that were observed, as well as additional wading birds, are likely to be present periodically. The Lake Hancock (SWFWMD) property abuts the proposal to the north and has an old wading bird rookery reported from the lake edge. Although no longer active, the Lake Hancock property borders the lake as does Circle B Bar Reserve on the northwest side and provides foraging habitat and possible alternate breeding areas for wading birds. There may be considerable back and forth movement between all the properties.

The floodplain swamp and scattered pockets of live oaks on the property have the potential to harbor epiphytes, including several state-listed endangered or threatened species, although none were reported in the site application and none were seen during the site visit. Conditions during the site visit did not allow access into the more likely areas of the swamp; more extensive surveys may reveal these additional species. 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 FFME 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. Table 3 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.

**Table 3. Rare plants and animals documented or reported to occur within the Wilson Ranch Florida Forever proposal.**

Scientific Name	Common Name	Global Rank	State Rank	Federal Status	State Status
<b>Rare plants documented on site</b>					
none					
<b>Additional rare plants reported on site by applicant</b>					
none					
<b>Rare animals documented on site</b>					
<i>Egretta caerulea</i>	little blue heron	G5	S4	N	ST
<i>Eudocimus albus</i>	white ibis	G5	S4	N	N
<i>Platalea ajaja</i>	roseate spoonbill	G5	S2	N	ST
<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	glossy ibis	G5	S3	N	N
<b>Additional rare animals reported on site by applicant</b>					
none					

**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.*

Hydrological restoration of the headwaters of the Peace River and its floodplain would involve most of the acreage of the property. According to the applicant the removal of the berm on the south side of Peace Creek and eastern bank of Peace River and the elimination of the large drainage ditch/water pump system are possible goals of restoration. Restoration activities would require close coordination with Lake Hancock (SWFWMD) to the north and the properties to the south (Laurent/Peace River – Polk County and Clear Springs – DEP). An adjacent solar farm on the east side of the property, while significantly higher in elevation, would also need to be involved. Hydrologic restoration would also benefit the forested wetlands on the west side of Peace River running north-south through the property.

The need for invasive exotic plant control may be reduced if extensive hydrological restoration takes place. Exotic pasture grasses are abundant in the ditches and pastures, and in low pockets along the bank of Peace Creek. Brazilian pepper is present along the berms and in the successional hardwood forest in the northwestern part of the property. Wetland nightshade appears to be abundant along the west bank of the Peace River in the floodplain swamp. Cogongrass (*Imperata cylindrica*) was seen on the fence line just north of the barns. Japanese climbing fern, Caesar’s weed, skunk vine, water-lettuce, Peruvian primrose willow are among other invasive plants observed during the site visit. A baseline assessment to determine the full extent of invasive plant species, particularly wetland nightshade, West Indian marsh grass (especially along water ways), and para grass in the swamp is warranted if acquisition of the easement occurs.

**Measure C2:**

*The percentage of water segments that fully meet, partially meet, or do not meet their designated uses as reported in the Department of Environmental Protection’s State Water Quality Assessment 305(b) report.* The proposed project is in an impaired waterbody segment that has an adopted Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) .The proposed project would provide surface and ground water protection for the region.

**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 proposed project is not within an adopted restoration plan area.

**Measure C4:**

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

According to the FFME, 417 acres within the proposed project site would help protect natural floodplain functions. Most of these acres are categorized as priorities 4 and 5.

**Measure C5:**

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

According to the FFME, all of the acres within the proposed project would contribute to the protection of surface waters, with the majority of acres categorized as priority 4.

**Measure C8:**

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

According to the FFME, 147 acres within the proposed project would contribute to protecting functional wetland systems.

**Measure C10:**

*The percentage of public lakes and rivers in which invasive, non-native aquatic plants are under maintenance control.*

The proposed project includes approximately 2 miles of frontage along the Peace River. Control of invasive, non-native aquatic plants would be beneficial should this project be acquired.

**Measure C11:**

*The number of acres of public conservation lands in which upland invasive, exotic plants are under maintenance control.*

Upland invasive, exotic plants occur throughout the proposed project site. Therefore, all of the 450 acres would benefit from an active invasive plant species control program.

**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 D1:**

*The number of acres acquired which provide retention and storage of surface water in naturally occurring storage areas, such as lakes and wetlands, consistent with the maintenance of water resources or water supplies and consistent with district water supply plans.*

The Wilson Ranch property is the headwater of the Peace River beginning at the confluence of the Peace Creek and Saddle Creek. Approximately 80 percent of the property is wetlands and subject to frequent flooding. The Peace River is important to the local water supply and to communities to the south all the way to Charlotte Harbor.

**Measure D3:**

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

According to the FFME, all of the 450 acres proposed for acquisition would contribute to aquifer recharge, with the majority of acres categorized as priorities 1-3.

**Table 4. 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	4
FDEP Florida Aquifer Vulnerability (FAVA)	4,7,10	7
FDEP Special Nutrient Impaired WBIDs	9	9
FDEP Distance to Major Lakes (100, 500, 1000 meters)	8,7,6	0
FDEP Springsheds or within 5 miles	10, 7	7
FDEP BMAPs	10	0
FDEP Distance to Major Rivers (100, 500, 1000 meters)	6,5,4	6
Total Possible	101	33

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

FINAL DEAR SCORE = 2 (medium low 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.*  
As a fee simple acquisition, 450 acres would be available for natural resource-based public recreation or education.

**Measure E2:**

*The miles of trails that would be available for public recreation, giving priority to those that provide significant connections including those that will assist in completing the Florida National Scenic Trail.*  
Approximately 1.8 miles of trail would be available for public recreation within the proposed project. The project is within the Florida Greenways and Trails Priority Network; adjacent to the Peace River Greenway Corridor; the Bartow Winter Haven Trail Corridor and the Bartow to Lake Wales Corridor. It is also near the Peace River Greenway Opportunity Corridor. This project also falls within Priority 3 of the 2013 Florida Ecological Greenways Network. See maps in Appendix F.

**Measure E3:**

*The number of new resource-based recreation facilities, by type, made available on public land.*  
The [Peace River Paddling Trail](#) starts at the south tip of the Wilson Ranch property, at SR 60. If acquired fee simple, Wilson Ranch could provide a public launch site where none currently exists and approximately 1.5 additional miles of paddling trail.

**GOAL F:  
PRESERVE SIGNIFICANT ARCHAEOLOGICAL OR HISTORIC SITES**

**Measure F1:**

*The increase in the number of and percentage of historic and archaeological properties listed in the Florida Master Site File or National Register of Historic Places which are protected or preserved for public use.*  
If acquired, three archaeological sites and two linear resource groups listed in the Florida Master Site File would be protected and preserved for public use. While some cultural resource survey has been undertaken on the property, it has not been subject to a comprehensive survey. Given the physical characteristics of the property, it is likely that additional as-yet-unrecorded resources do exist. See map in Appendix E.

**Measure F2:**

*The increase in the number and percentage of historic and archaeological properties that are in state ownership. Fee-simple acquisition would increase the number of historic and archaeological properties in state ownership.*

**CULTURAL RESOURCES:**

The Wilson Ranch proposal contains three archaeological sites (8PO6110, 8PO6111, and 8PO4695) and two Linear Resource Groups (8PO6205 and 8PO7244). Site JR7 (8PO6110) is a single component Prehistoric site consisting of non-diagnostic lithic flakes. Based on the recovered artifact assemblage here has been no cultural or temporal affiliation assigned to the site. It has been evaluated by the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) as Ineligible for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP).

Site JR8 (8PO6111) has subject to four separate cultural resource assessment surveys in response to proposed natural gas pipeline and road projects. The site has been categorized as intermittently occupied encampment and lithic workshop dating to the Middle Archaic through Weeden Island cultural periods (roughly 5,000 B.C – A.D. 1,000). Although JR8 has been subject to intensive survey including Phase I and Phase II testing, it has been evaluated by SHPO as having Insufficient Information for listing in the NRHP.

The George's Sherd site (8PO4695) was recorded during a cultural resource assessment survey ahead of the Gulfstream Natural Gas System Pipeline. The site consists of a lithic scatter and has been suggested to represent a prehistoric campsite. Among the recorded artifact assemblage, which included a number of lithic flakes and possible stone tool cores, none were temporally diagnostic. The site has been evaluated by the SHPO as Ineligible for listing in the NRHP.

The two Resource Groups recorded on the Wilson Ranch Florida Forever Proposal are the Historic Wilson Ranch complex (circa 1960) and a portion of the Saddle Creek/Lake Hancock Drainage Canal (8PO7244). The Wilson Ranch complex (8PO6205) consists of two Historic residences, a horse barn, three utility barns, a pump house, and several animal pens. The ranch complex dates to the early 1960s when the Wilson family acquired the property. The original buildings included a circa 1938 small house which was moved to the ranch to serve as an office, as well as two pole barns, a two-story horse barn, one animal pen, and one pump house all circa 1960. In 1975, a circa 1916 Frame Vernacular building was moved onto the property just west of the other buildings to serve as a private residence. It was demolished in 2015 after collapsing. The ranch has been evaluated by the SHPO as Ineligible for the NRHP.

The Saddle Creek/Lake Hancock Drainage Canal (8PO7244) is represented by a 2.5-mile stretch of Saddle Creek that has been channelized. The date that Saddle Creek was channelized is unknown, but canals of its kind are common in Florida. It was evaluated by the recorder as ineligible for the NRHP as there are no known features or historical associations to distinguish Saddle Creek from other Florida canals associated with mining and agriculture operations.

**FIELD OBSERVATIONS:**

Due to Department of State travel 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.*

The proposed project does not contain forest resources that would be available for sustainable forest management.

**Measure G3:**

*The number of acres of forestland acquired that will serve to maintain natural groundwater recharge functions.*  
The proposed project does not contain forestland that would benefit natural groundwater recharge functions.

**FLORIDA FOREVER CRITERIA**

The proposed project meets the following Florida Forever criteria (§ 259.105, F.S.)

- The project meets multiple goals described in subsection (4):
- The project is part of an ongoing governmental effort to restore, protect, or develop land areas or water resources.
- The project has funding sources that are identified and assured through at least the first 2 years of the project.
- The project contributes to the solution of water resource problems on a regional basis.
- The project has a significant portion of its land area in imminent danger of development, in imminent danger of losing its significant natural attributes or recreational open space, or in imminent danger of subdivision which would result in multiple ownership and make acquisition of the project costly or less likely to be accomplished.

The Acquisition and Restoration Council shall give increased priority to:

- Projects that contribute to improving the quality and quantity of surface water and groundwater.

**MANAGEMENT**

The proposed manager for this project is Polk County Environmental Lands Program. The management prospectus is provided in Appendix D.

**FUNDING SOURCES**

Florida Forever

**FUNDING FOR MAPPING, APPRAISAL, NEGOTIATIONS & CLOSING**

**OWNERSHIP PATTERN AND ACQUISITION PLANNING**

The project is under single ownership and no phasing would be required.

**Title and Legal Access Issues**

Wilson Ranch is in Sections 4-30S-25E and 33-29S-25E. The state claims sovereign (ownership) below the Ordinary High Water Line (OHWL) of the Peace River within the project area. Saddle Creek has been altered and channelized from its natural condition in Section 33, and therefore has no Board of Trustees (BOT) title interest. No BOT title interest within the uplands on the property.

**Known Encumbrances (easement, long-term leases, restrictive covenants, etc.)**

During the interagency site visit, the landowner confirmed that there are a few easements across the property including a Gulfstream gas easement and Tampa Electric Company utility easement.

**Estimated Cost of Appraisal and Mapping**

DEP's Bureau of Appraisal estimates \$12,000 to \$20,000 in appraisal fees.

**Acquisition Phases**

Since the site is 450 acres under a single owner, no acquisition phasing would be needed.

## **GOVERNMENT PLANNING and DEVELOPMENT**

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

If purchased fee-simple, the proposal has a moderate to high potential for contributing to recreation and open space needs. The property could function as a wildlife corridor, and various recreational activities could include bicycling, camping, environmental education and interpretation, fishing, hiking/jogging, horseback riding, and wildlife observation and photography.

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

Much of the subject property is improved pasture (137.96 acres), field crops (113.31 acres) and mixed wetland hardwoods (113.89 acres). According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), the property contains approximately 273 acres of FWC Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas, 293 acres identified in the National Wetlands Inventory and 183 acres of potential habitat of the Florida sandhill crane.

*Low/Moderate Potential:* The majority of the property (approximately 420 acres) includes natural attributes associated with Saddle Creek, Peace Creek, the Peace River, and the adjoining uplands. The potential for losing these significant natural attributes due to urban development is low. Allowable future land uses for most of the property are limited to recreation, open space, and conservation.

The potential for losing significant natural attributes on an approximately 30-acre portion of the property is low to moderate because the future land-use designations include residential or commercial uses. This portion has a high potential for urban development but constitutes a relatively small portion of the entire property and is located in two areas; one along State Road 60 and the other near US Highway 17.

### **Potential for Being Subdivided**

*Low Potential (420 acres) and High Potential (30 acres):* The future land use designation is Mixed Use with a Wilson Ranch overlay provision that allows residential use on approximately 30-acres, located in two separate areas in close proximity to arterial roadways (one along State Road 60 and the other near US Highway 17). These areas have a high potential for being subdivided for urban-type residential use (allows maximum density of less than 12 dwelling units per gross acre). The remaining 420 acres are limited to recreation, open space and conservation uses. and have a low potential for being subdivided.

### **Zoning and Densities within the Project Boundaries**

The property is zoned as Mixed Use with Wilson Ranch overlay by the City of Bartow and has a residential development potential of 359 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: low intensity urban (7.09 acres); canal (1.27 acres); natural rivers and streams (18.75 acres); transportation (0.08 acres); improved pasture (137.96 acres); field crops (113.31 acres); mixed wetland hardwoods (113.89 acres); wet prairie (30.24 acres); rural open (1.05 acres); mixed hardwood coniferous (23.93 acres); cypress (1.50 acres); marshes (0.89 acres); and mixed scrub-shrub wetland (0.55 acres). The current use of the property is agriculture (pasture).

*Future Land Uses:* The subject property is designated as "Mixed Use" on the City of Bartow Comprehensive Plan Future Land Use Map (FLUM). The Mixed Use designation is implemented with a FLUM overlay map and plan policies that direct the location and amount of potential residential and nonresidential uses within the property and result in allowing the following: commercial use (maximum intensity of floor area ratio 0.25) or residential use (maximum density of 11.99 dwelling units per gross acre) on approximately 30 acres; and recreation and open space or conservation uses on approximately 420 acres. Thus, the subject property has a residential development potential of 359 dwelling units (30 acres with a density of 11.99 dwelling units per gross acre).

**Development Potential**

Based on the City of Bartow Comprehensive Plan future land use designation (Mixed Use with Wilson Ranch overlay provisions), the subject property has a residential development potential of 359 dwelling units.

**Transportation Planning Issues**

The proposed project area is located in Polk County in FDOT's District 1 and lies between SR 60 (US 98) and US 17/92 (SR 555). Portions of the properties lie directly adjacent to both SR 60 and US 17/92. SR 60 is a Strategic Intermodal System (SIS) facility. US 17/92 is noted as a freight distribution corridor, and the SUN Trail network runs along US 17/92 in this area. This SUN Trail segment, the Bartow to Winter Haven trail, is listed as an "unfunded gap."

Several FDOT Work Program projects are in the vicinity of the proposed acquisition:

- SR 555 (US 17) – intersection reconstruction in the area of Spirit Lake.
- SR 60 (US 98) – resurfacing from E Van Fleet Drive to Flamingo Drive.

The Polk Transportation Planning Organization's Long-Range Transportation Plan lists several relevant items:

- US 17/92 from Bartow to Winter Haven is planned to have enhanced bus service.
- SR 60 from SR 60 (Van Fleet Drive E) to SR 25/US 27 is listed for a widening from 4 lanes to 6 lanes. It is partially funded.

In addition, this project is located within the study area for the Southwest Central Florida Connector, one of the corridors studied under the Multi-use Corridors of Regional Economic Significance (M-CORES) program. The M-CORES program was created through Senate Bill 7068, signed by Governor Ron DeSantis on May 17, 2019. More information about M-CORES can be found at [www.floridamcores.com](http://www.floridamcores.com).

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.

**ONGOING GOVERNMENTAL EFFORTS**

The SWFWMD has completed the projects that acquired lands to the north of the Wilson Ranch for the Lake Hancock Lake Level Modification Project implemented to help moderate periods of high and low water flows to the Peace River. The lake Hancock project also included the construction of an approximate 1,500-acre treatment marsh to reduce nutrient loads and improve the water quality of the flows from Lake Hancock into Saddle Creek. The SW District was directed by the State Legislature to manage the Peace Creek which is accomplished by controlling exotic species in and along the canal banks as well as clearing accumulations of debris in the canal.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Staff in DEP's Division of State Lands (DSL) and the Florida Natural Areas Inventory determined the final project recommendations. Deborah Burr and Sine Murray in DSL's Office of Environmental Services were 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 Lou Shepherd
- Department of Economic Opportunity - Dan Evans
- DSL Bureau of Appraisal – Jay Scott

- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission – Laramie Ferry and Ethan Noel
- Florida Natural Areas Inventory - Katy NeSmith and Kimberly Alexander
- DEP Division of Environmental Assessment and Restoration - Kevin Coyne
- Florida Department of Transportation – Lauren Peters and Jennifer Carver
- Southwest Florida Water Management District – Steve Blaschka
- Polk County Environmental Lands Program – Gaye Sharpe and Tabitha Biehl

**APPENDICES**

**Appendix A: Florida Forever Measure Evaluation (FFME)**

Wilson Ranch: Florida Forever Measure Evaluation 20210211

GIS ACRES = 450

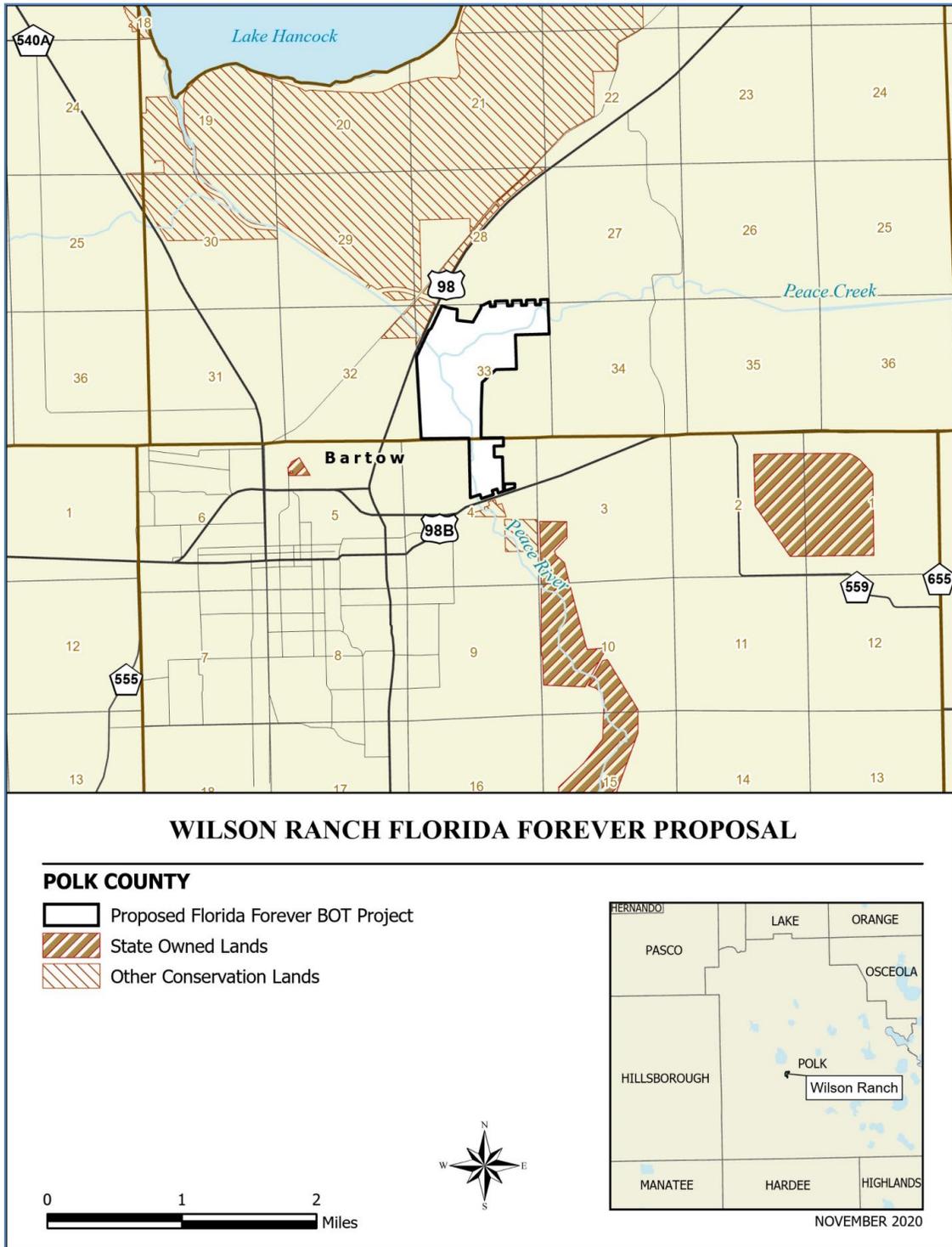
MEASURES	Resource Acres <sup>2</sup>	% of project
<b>B1: Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	211	47%
Priority 4	0	0%
Priority 5	67	15%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>278</b>	<b>62%</b>
<b>B2: FNAI Habitat Conservation Priorities</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	0	0%
Priority 4	13	3%
Priority 5	109	24%
Priority 6	196	44%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>71%</b>
<b>B3: Ecological Greenways</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	448	100%
Priority 4	0	0%
Priority 5	0	0%
Priority 6	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>448</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)	0	0%
Seepage Slope (G2)	0	0%
Sandhill (G3)	0	0%
Sandhill Upland Lake (G3)	0	0%
Upland Pine (G3)	0	0%
Mesic/Wet Flatwoods (G4)	0	0%
Upland Hardwood Forest (G5)	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</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	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	30	7%
Priority 4	215	48%
Priority 5	166	37%
Priority 6	5	1%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>417</b>	<b>93%</b>

MEASURES (continued)	Resource Acres <sup>2</sup>	% of project
<b>C5: Surface Water Protection</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	29	6%
Priority 3	0	0%
Priority 4	412	92%
Priority 5	3	< 1%
Priority 6	6	1%
Priority 7	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>450</b>	<b>100%</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	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	27	6%
Priority 4	119	27%
Priority 5	1	< 1%
Priority 6	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>33%</b>
<b>D3: Aquifer Recharge</b>		
Priority 1	53	12%
Priority 2	100	22%
Priority 3	137	31%
Priority 4	126	28%
Priority 5	33	7%
Priority 6	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>450</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	1.1	
Land Trail Opportunities	0.7	
<b>Total Miles</b>	<b>1.8</b>	
<b>F2: Arch. &amp; Historical Sites (number)</b>		
	3 sites	
<b>G1: Sustainable Forestry</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	0	0%
Priority 4	0	0%
Priority 5 - Potential Pinelands	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>G3: Forestland for Recharge</b>		
	0	0%

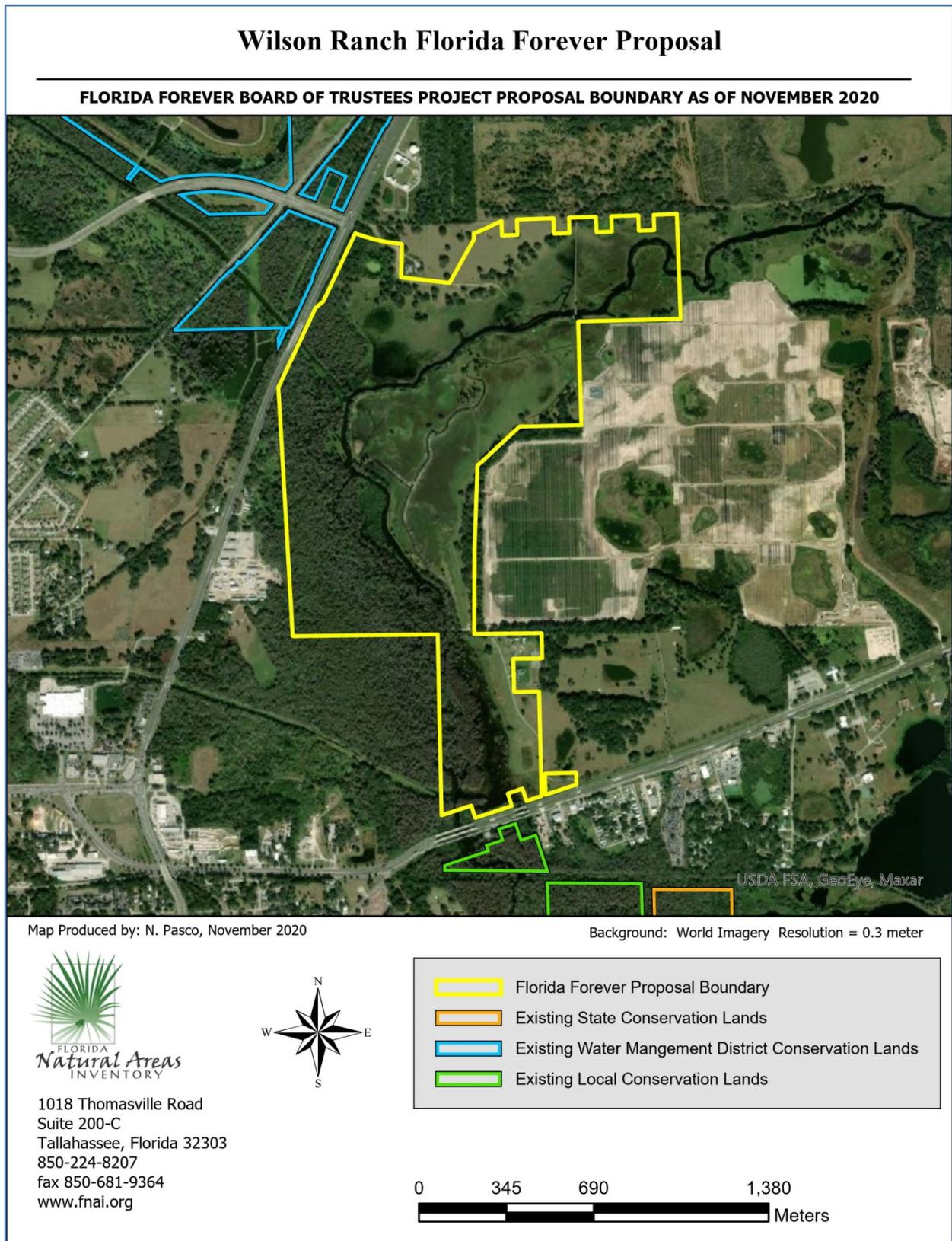
<sup>2</sup>Acres of each resource in the project and percentage of project represented by each resource are listed except where noted. This analysis converts site boundary into pixels, which causes slight differences from GIS acres; this effect is most noticeable on small sites.

**Appendix B: Florida Forever proposal boundary maps**

**B1: Florida Forever map**



B2: Aerial map



**Appendix C: Property IDs for Final Recommended Boundary**

County	Parcel ID	Owner	Acres	Assessed Value	Just (Market) Value
Polk	25-29-33-000000-011010	C Wilson Ranch Inc.	212.04	\$ 38,031	\$106,021
Polk	25-29-03-000000-013020	Thomas Richard Wilson (50%), Dana Dawn Wilson (25%), Bobbi Jean Wilson (25%)	40.41	\$ 36,363	\$ 36,363
Polk	25-29-33-000000-033030	Thomas Richard Wilson (50%), Dana Dawn Wilson (25%), Bobbi Jean Wilson (25%)	29.73	\$ 5,612	\$14,863
Polk	25-29-33-000000-034030	C Wilson Ranch Inc.	102.07	\$ 267,582	\$ 267,582
Polk	25-30-04-000000-012010	C Wilson Ranch Inc.	65.78	\$ 62,357	\$ 84,101
		Total	450.03	\$ 409,945	\$ 508,930

**Appendix D: Management Prospectus for Wilson Ranch**



**Management Prospectus**

**Wilson Ranch- Florida Forever Program**

**February 2020**

**Polk County Board of County Commissioners, Environmental Lands Program**

**Introduction**

Wilson Ranch is a 450.5 +/- acre candidate for addition to the Florida Forever Program as a Fee-Simple acquisition. This potential acquisition provides positive impact on the Peace River due to being located within the Peace River Basin and containing the confluence of Peace Creek and Saddle Creek, which are the headwaters of the Peace River. It also provides connectivity to adjacent conservation lands, preservation of natural habitats, and opportunities for compatible passive recreation.

This Management Prospectus is not a complete land management plan for the project site; it serves as the framework for a more detailed and developed management plan as required upon acquisition.

**Purpose and Scope**

The purpose of this acquisition is to preserve the resources onsite with emphasis on the water resources. Compatible passive recreation to the public will be incorporated if feasible. There are five parcels within the scope of the project site that are proposed for acquisition with a combined market value of \$276,229.

Parcel Key	Zoning	Owner	Acres	Market Value
011010	A/RR	C Wilson Ranch Inc.	212.04	\$106,021
031020	A/RR	Thomas Richard Wilson, Dana Dawn Wilson, Bobbi Jean Wilson	40.10	\$20,206
033030	Pasture	Thomas Richard Wilson, Dana Dawn Wilson, Bobbi Jean Wilson	29.73	\$14,863
034030	Pasture	C Wilson Ranch Inc.	102.07	\$51,038
012010	Pasture w/ Res.	C Wilson Ranch Inc.	65.78	\$84,101
Total:			449.72	\$276,229

*Information gathered from Polk County Property Appraisers, [www.polkpa.org](http://www.polkpa.org)*

**Site Description**

The Wilson Ranch property is located within the southern portion of Polk County, in the City of Bartow, between State Road 60 (SR 60) and Highway 17. The five parcels comprising the Wilson Ranch border the Peace Creek extending from SR 60 at the south and Highway 17 at the northwest (Figure 1). There are conservation lands north and south of the site. North is the conservation lands of Lake Hancock owned by Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) and south are the Laurent/ Peace River site owned by Polk County as well as the property along the Peace River managed by Florida Department of Environmental Protection. Also, to the east of the property is a solar farm owned by Tampa Electrical Company, see Figure 2. The Wilson Ranch is a key site to connect existing public lands and provide a corridor along the Peace River.

Wilson Ranch consists primarily of improved pasture; however, bottomland forest, floodplain swamp, freshwater marsh and wet prairie are features associated with the riverine floodplain. The uplands identified on the property consists of mesic hammock with a live oak canopy over a predominantly saw palmetto understory and in areas where active grazing has occurred the understory is primarily pasture.

While flooding from the Peace River likely inundates many of these hammocks occasionally or annually, much of the historical wetlands associated with this river stream have been drained using agricultural ditching and pumping to de-water the site and create an improved pasture for cattle grazing. The de-watering/drainage of the pasture areas along with the historical agricultural maintenance of the subject property have dramatically altered the water levels, water storage capacity and hydroperiod of the wetlands on the property. This has caused an almost complete loss of wetland function for the area now encompassed by improved pasture. However, given the soil type and vegetation currently present within portions of the pasture, some areas may still be considered wetlands and other would require little effort other than reestablishment of the inundation cycle to once again function. There is potential for rehydrating the wetlands through changes from operating the existing pumping system to drain the land for grazing and reintroducing native plants.

Habitat for wildlife species has similarly been impacted by the disruption to normal communication between the river and adjacent floodplain. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) identifies part of the site as a wading bird rookery. A variety of wildlife will benefit from a restoration of the hydrology of this site.

North of the Wilson Ranch, on Tenoroc, a large-scale restoration occurred known as the Upper Peace River/Saddle Creek Restoration Project, which was directed by FDEP's Mining and Mitigation program and FWC. Design and creation of three wetland restoration projects was achieved. These newly built marshes and wetland forest were connected to existing pit lakes. Over 115,000 trees and 1.3 million plants and shrubs were planted throughout this 2,000-acre project footprint. The result is a higher quantity of clean water flowing into Saddle Creek, expanded public recreational opportunities and immediate use by wildlife.

Overall, there 12 different land covers throughout the site. Including: Cropland/Pasture, Cultural, Cypress, Freshwater Forested Wetlands, Improved Pasture, Low Intensity Urban, Marshes, Etc. See figure 3. There are 10 different soils types, the main two being Nittaw sandy clay loam and Placid fine sands (Figure 4).

The Peace River basin itself comprises about 2,350 square miles in the southern half of the SWFWMD. Beginning at the confluence of Peace Creek and Saddle Creek (entirely within the Wilson Ranch Property), the river Stretches 75 miles southward through Bartow, Zolfo Springs, and Arcadia where it finally empties into the Gulf of Mexico at Charlotte Harbor.

A more detailed analysis of the property will be completed post acquisition and provided in the ten-year management plan.

### **1. Management Goals**

The following goals and objectives were identified by Polk County's Environmental Lands Program staff and are consistent with the Environmental Lands Program policy guidelines:

- To preserve, maintain, enhance, and restore natural communities and wildlife habitat
- To protect and sustain populations of threatened and endangered species
- To allow restoration of the wetland systems
- To provide connectivity to adjacent conservation lands
- To provide appropriate nature-based recreation that offers public enjoyment of the site without damaging the unique natural habitats
- To periodically review, evaluate and modify the management of the Wilson Ranch property

The Polk County will be the agency charged with managing the subject property and implementing the management plan. Other agencies that may cooperatively assist Polk County in the long-term management include the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' Division of Forestry, FDEP, FWC and the SWFWMD.

## **2. Intensity of Management**

The conditions which will affect the intensity of management will be directly related to the goals for the site. A full assessment will need to be conducted to determine the condition of natural resources described above and extent of restoration feasible at the site. Implementation of compatible based recreation will also affect the intensity of management. This will be included in the site assessment and incorporated into the ten-year management plan.

## **3. Estimate of the Revenue Generating Potential**

The Polk County Environmental Lands Program currently manages natural areas to protect and restore the water, wildlife, and wilderness and at the same time when appropriate allows passive outdoor recreation. Polk manages recreation at 13 natural area properties throughout the County. There are no plans to generate revenue from this site. If plans to generate revenue come to light, then it will be addressed in the ten-year management plan.

## **4. Timetable for Implementation**

Once acquisition is completed, a site assessment will be conducted and the management plan for the site will be drafted. As the plan is created, securing the site and low impact accessibility improvements will begin. Any extensive site improvements for restoration or allowing for public access will not be initiated until the final management plan is accepted by the State.

## **5. Potential Multiple-Use Activities**

Multi-use activities on the property will be implemented pursuant to S. 259.034 F.S. The primary objective will be to protect the resources on-site while providing access and compatible passive recreation opportunities to the public. The site's potential activities could be hiking, wildlife education and viewing, bicycling, and fishing. Recreation activities will be evaluated to not degrade the natural resources and not alter natural habitats. Observation areas may include educational signage describing the importance of the site, mainly its ecological value to the Peace River, Saddle Creek, and the Peace River Basin. Other potential facilities listed below, will require a full site assessment to determine the extent of feasibility and will be discussed in the ten-year management plan.

A preliminary list of improvements may include:

- Parking area
- Trailhead with information kiosk
- Hiking trails
- Nature viewing areas
- Interpretive signs
- Paddling access points
- Multi-use trails

The following prohibitions or incompatible uses are proposed as part of this prospectus and may be included in the final management plan:

- No clear cutting of trees, other than non-native species, is allowed without prior written approval of the State of Florida or as included in the management plan.
- No major land alterations may be done without prior written approval of the State of Florida or as included in the management plan.
- No generation, storage, treatment or discharge of hazardous, toxic materials or chemicals are allowed on the property.
- No improvements or physical alterations are allowed without the State's written permission until a management plan is approved (except those necessary for security and maintenance of the property).

**6. Provisions for protecting existing infrastructure**

The site protection starts with effective monitoring and planning strategies. The primary access point located on SR 60 is already fenced. A proper assessment will be conducted to determine if and where additional fences should be constructed to protect the resources. Any fences constructed will do so in a manner which encourages ecological connectivity to the other conservation lands. The site will be monitored regularly for signs of resource degradation activities and illegal dumping. Any evidence of illegal dumping will be reported, and actions taken to reduce the likelihood of illegal dumping. Any evidence of dumping that has the possibility to contaminate the groundwater resources will be reported and mitigated upon discovery. The site will also be monitored for trespassers and unauthorized access on a regular basis. Boundary signs will be reported with any applicable restrictions clearly listed and contact information for those seeking authorized access.

**7. Expenses and Financial Support**

Initial cost to develop the site are estimated to be \$55,000.00. included in these costs are improving site security, invasive plant treatments, and developing a final management plan.

A preliminary estimate for expenditures during the first year is as follows:

Site Security (fencing/gate repair, boundary signs) .....	\$30,000.00
Invasive Plant Management .....	\$15,000.00
Final Management Plan .....	\$10,000.00
Total .....	\$55,000.00

Polk County's Environmental Lands Program recognizes that additional cost may occur. When available, department staff will seek out supplemental funding sources such as grants, cooperative-assistance funding, and in-kind contributions.

**8. Staff**

The management strategy for the project site includes oversight by the Polk County's Environmental Lands Staff. It also includes the use of partnerships with state land management partners. Polk County has a history of successfully partnering with multiple state agencies for implementing appropriate habitat management activities on County owned and State-owned lands that Polk County manages.

Figure 1: Location

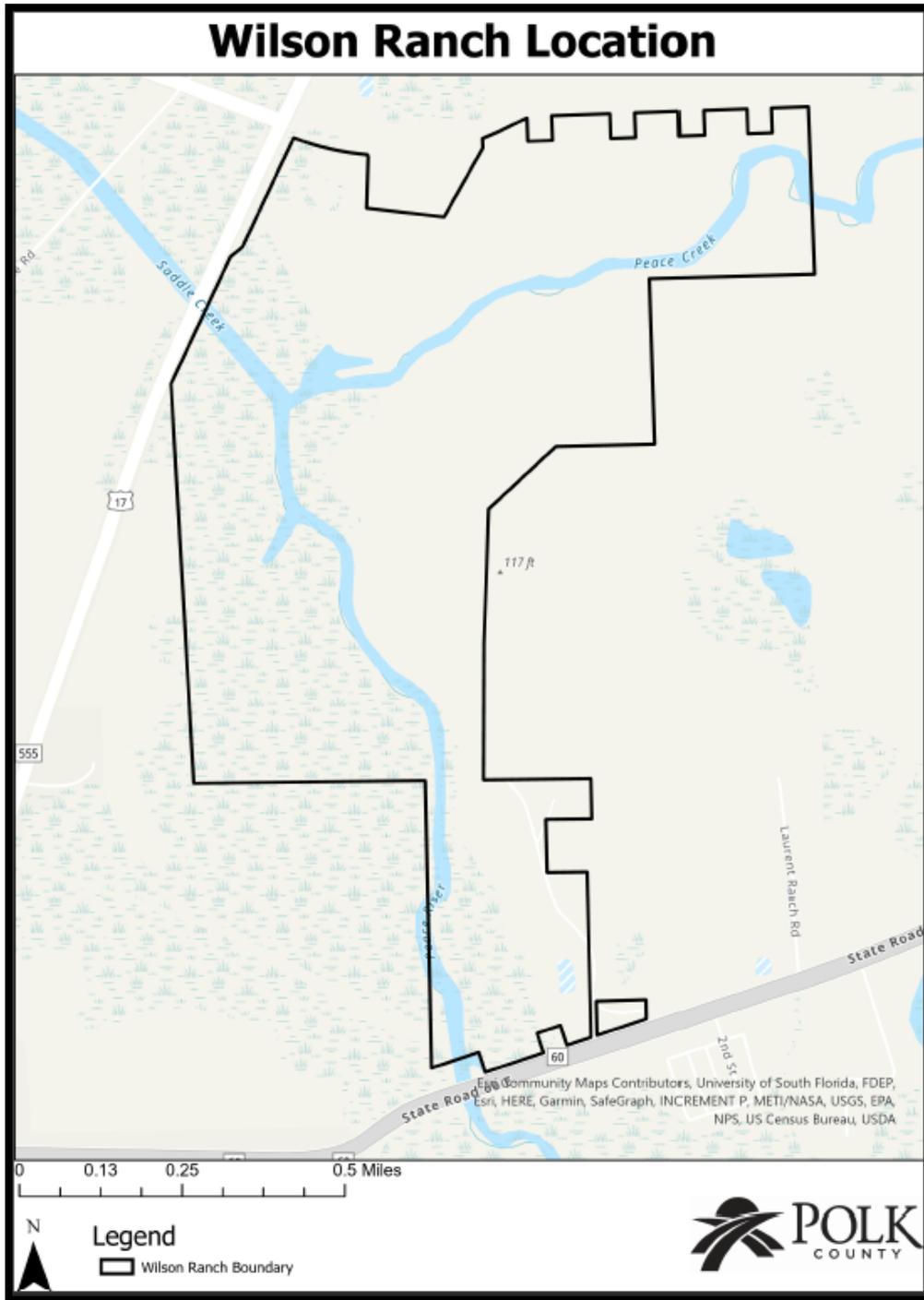


Figure 2: Surrounding Conservation Lands

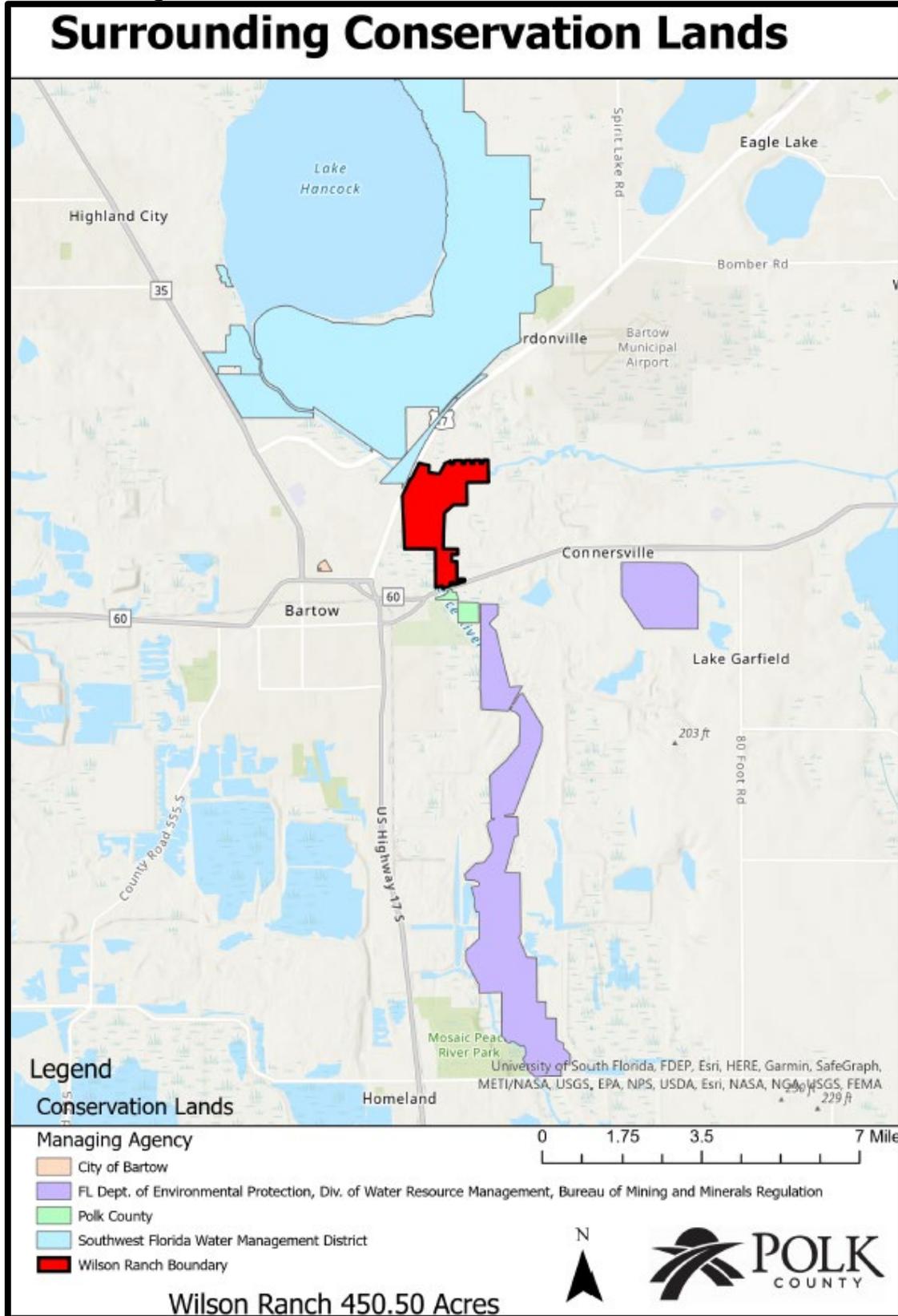
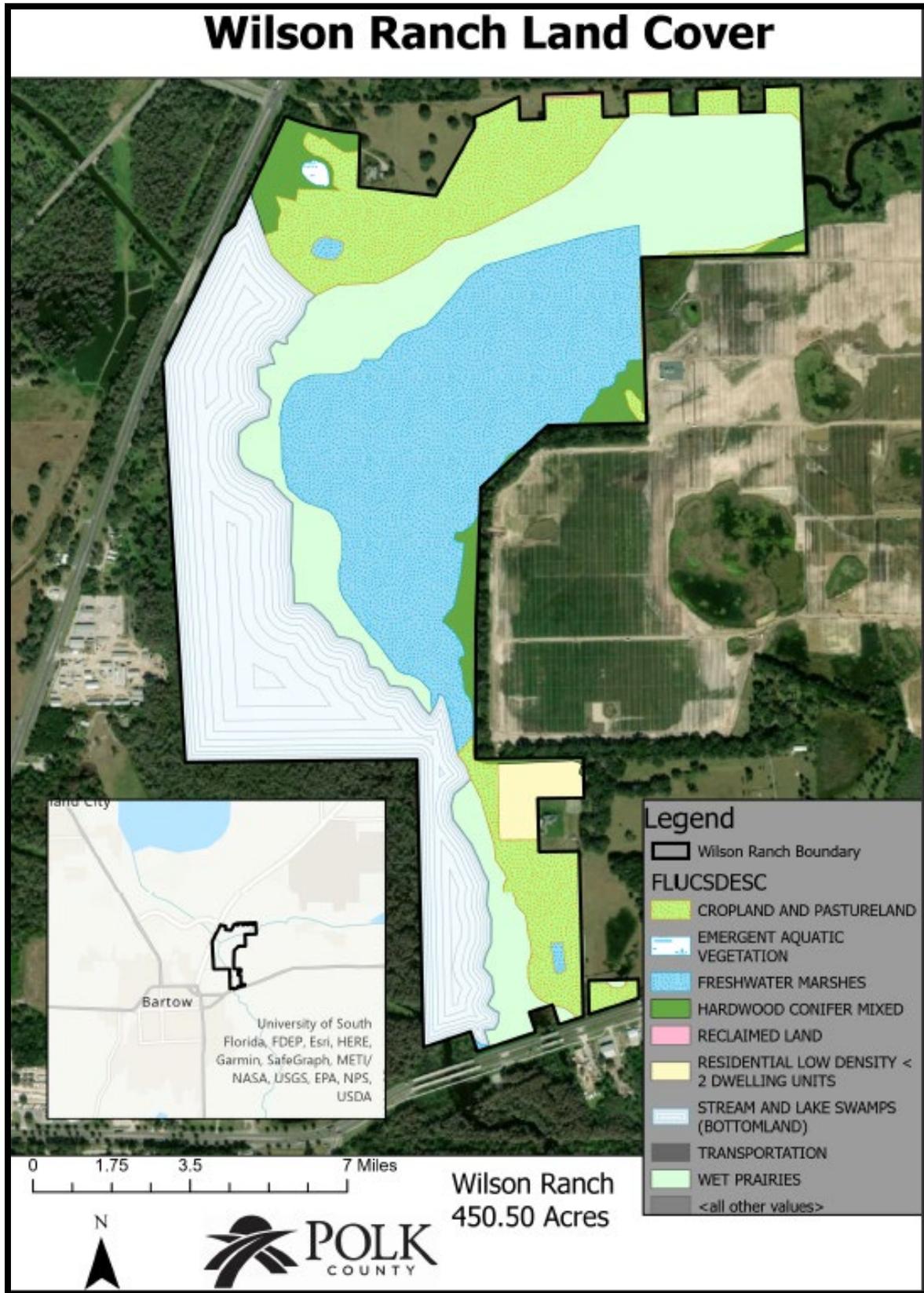


Figure 3: Natural Communities



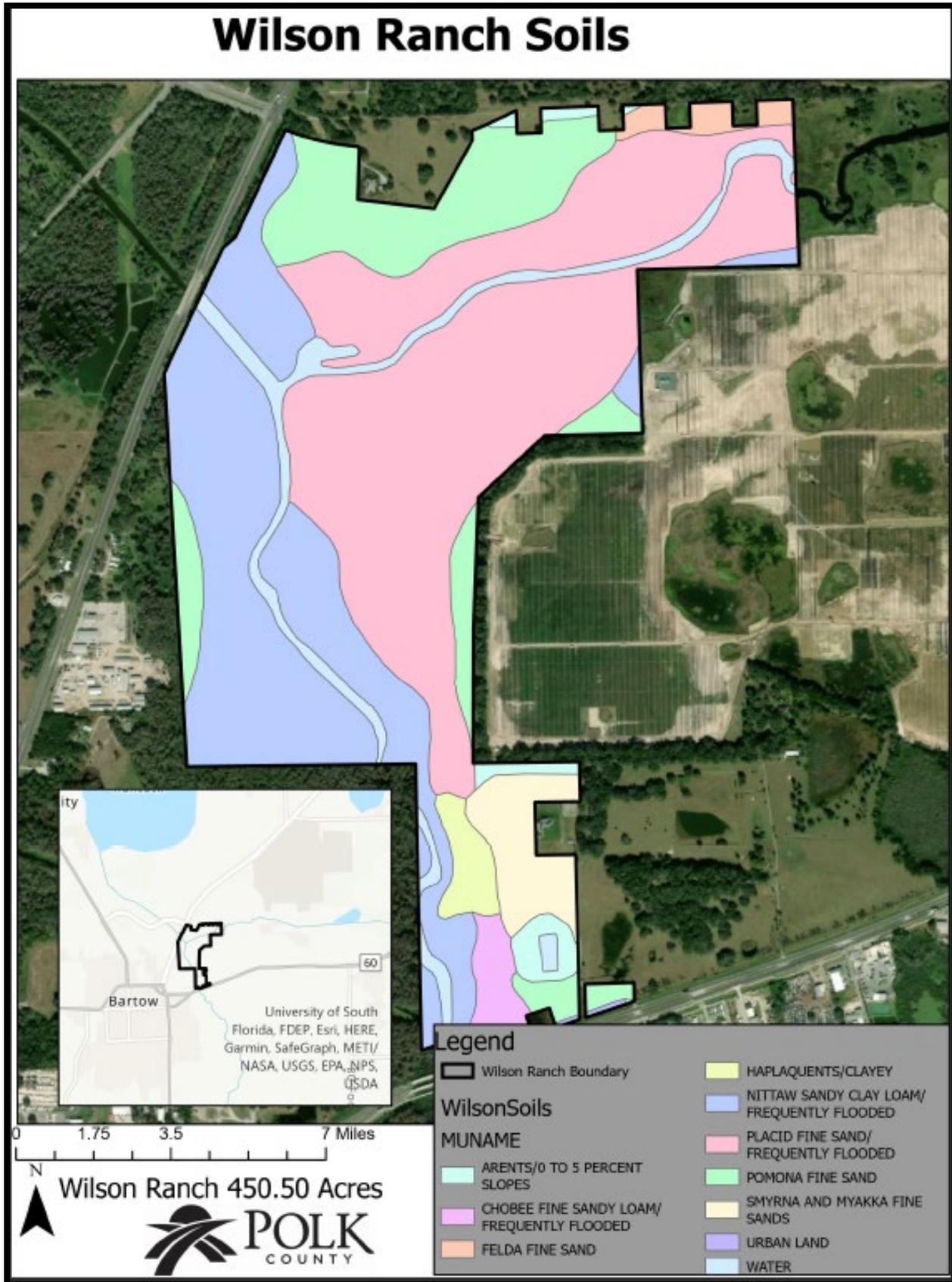


Figure 4: Soil Types

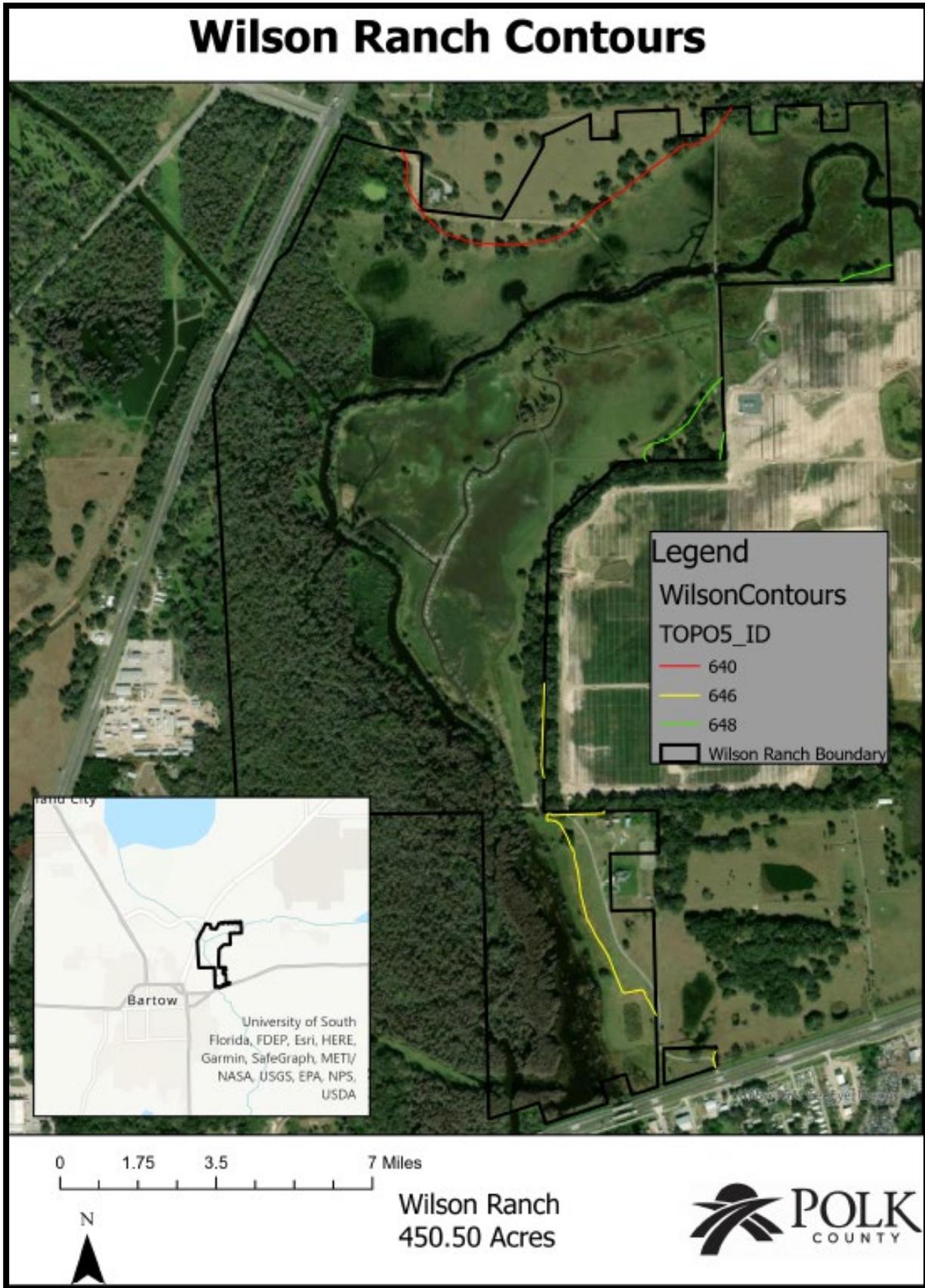


Figure 5: Contours



Appendix F: Map of recreational trail corridors from DEP's Greenways and Trails

