

ITEM 18:

Consider a 10-year update to the Little Gator Creek Wildlife and Environmental Area Management Plan (Lease No. 4723).

LOCATION:

Pasco County

APPLICANT:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)

DSL STAFF REMARKS:

Background

The Little Gator Creek Wildlife and Environmental Area (LGCWEA) is located in Pasco County and encompasses approximately 566 acres. The LGCWEA is located approximately 60 miles southwest of Orlando, 40 miles northeast of Tampa, 20 miles northwest of Lakeland, 6 miles northeast of Zephyrhills, and three miles north of State Road 98. The LGCWEA is accessed from FL-471 and is primarily surrounded by publicly owned forested uplands and wetlands and privately owned lands used for agricultural purposes. The LGCWEA was acquired in 1982 from Mr. C. M. Overstreet, a local cattleman and rancher under the Conservation and Recreation Lands (CARL) acquisition program. After the purchase of the property, the Land Acquisition Advisory Council recommended the FWC as the lead managing agency for the area. In November 1983, the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund leased the area to the FWC as lead manager (Lease No. 3291). The agreement was for a period of 20 years with one 10-year renewal option. In August 2017, Lease No. 3291 was then replaced with Lease No. 4723.

The area was acquired as a single-use property under the CARL program, for the preservation and proper management of a significant wading bird colony containing a large number of nests of the endangered wood stork and other wading bird species. As a condition of the acquisition, Mr. Overstreet, the former owner, agreed to provide the equipment and structures needed to regulate the water flow and levels within the wood stork colony for a period of five years after state acquisition. The LGCWEA is managed by the FWC for the purpose of operating a Wildlife and Environmental Area, providing ecological diversity, providing managed habitat for both common and imperiled wildlife, and for providing the public with fish and wildlife-oriented outdoor recreational opportunities.

Management Plan Overview

Through the services of the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI), FWC has mapped the natural and anthropogenic community types on LGCWEA. FNAI has identified and mapped a total of 12 community types within the LGCWEA. The primary vegetative communities found within the LGCWEA are mesic flatwoods and basin swamp.

FWC has developed the Florida Landscape Assessment Model (FLAM) as a Geographic Information Systems-based assessment tool that incorporates a wide variety of landscape and wildlife species data. The FLAM evaluates the Florida landscape based upon important natural resources and habitat needs of wildlife to identify ecologically significant lands in the state, and to assess the potential impacts of management and land-use changes. The FLAM was developed

to provide technical assistance to various local, regional, state and federal agencies and entities interested in wildlife needs and conservation in order to: (1) determine ways to avoid or minimize project impacts by evaluating alternative placements, alignments and transportation corridors during early planning stages, (2) assess direct, secondary and cumulative impacts to habitat and wildlife resources, and (3) identify appropriate parcels for public land acquisition for wetland and upland habitat mitigation purposes. The FLAM ranks habitat from zero to 10; a rank of 10 being of greatest value. The FLAM (2020) indicates that the LGCWEA has a very high mean wildlife value of 8.9.

The Division of Historical Resources observations are broken down into five categories: archeological sites, resource groups, historical structures, historic bridges and historic cemeteries. The Florida Master Site File indicates there are seven cultural resources located on the area. The FWC will submit subsequently located historic sites for inclusion in their Master Site File.

The Florida Legislature requires that all land management plans include long and short-term goals. These goals must be measurable objectives, and short-term goals must be achievable within a two-year planning period. Pursuant to section 253.034, Florida Statutes(F.S.), the Division of State Lands began compiling the short-term goals from each land management plan approved since July 1, 2016. The management plan identified objectives under the following short-term goals: capital facilities and infrastructure, and cultural resources.

Public Involvement

The FWC conducted a Management Advisory Group Meeting on September 22, 2021, resulting in the top three ranked ideas:

- Promote prescribed fire.
- Public access signage.
- Plan for climate change.

Results of this meeting were used by FWC to develop management goals and objectives and to identify opportunities and strategies for inclusion in this management plan.

A public hearing, as required by section 259.032(10), F.S., was held on November 17, 2021. Questions and comments made by the public during the testimony period were regarding signage, parking, and control of water levels.

Surplus Lands

The evaluation of LGCWEA by FWC has determined that all portions of the area are being managed and operated for the original purposes of acquisition and remain integral to the continued conservation of important fish and wildlife resources, and continue to provide good fish and wildlife resource based public outdoor recreational opportunities. Therefore, no portion of the LGCWEA is recommended for potential surplus review.

State Land Management Review Team

The LGCWEA has not been subject to a review by an inter-agency land management review team.

DSL STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Approve the management plan.

ARC RECOMMENDATION:

APPROVE

APPROVE WITH MODIFICATIONS: _____

DEFER

WITHDRAW

NOT APPROVE

OTHER: _____

LAND MANAGEMENT PLAN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Lead Agency: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)
 Common LGCWEA of Property: Little Gator Creek Wildlife and Environmental Area (LGCWEA)
 Location: Pasco County, Florida
 Acreage Total: 566 acres

Acreage Breakdown:

Land Cover Classification	Acres	Percent of Total Area
Basin swamp	194.69	33.88%
Blackwater stream	1.42	0.25%
Canal/ditch	0.93	0.16%
Clearing/regeneration	5.53	0.96%
Depression marsh	5.03	0.88%
Developed	1.22	0.21%
Dome swamp	31.15	5.42%
Floodplain swamp	2.38	0.41%
Hydric hammock	46.88	8.16%
Mesic flatwoods	255.86	44.53%
Mesic hammock	25.04	4.36%
Road	4.49	0.78%

*GIS-calculated acreage for land cover classification varies slightly from actual total acreage.

Lease/Management Agreement No.: 4372 (Appendix 12.1)

Use: Single X Management Responsibilities:
 Multiple Agency FWC Responsibilities
LEAD, LESSEE (Wildlife and Environmental Area, resource protection, law enforcement)

Designated Land Use: Wildlife and Environmental Area

Sublease (s): None

Encumbrances: None

Type Acquisition: Conservation and Recreation Lands Program

Unique Features: Wading Bird and Wood Stork Colony Site, Basin Swamp, and Mesic Flatwoods

Archaeological/Historical: Seven sites documented within the LGCWEA.

Management Needs: Habitat restoration and improvement; public access and recreational opportunities; hydrological preservation and restoration; invasive species maintenance and control; imperiled species habitat maintenance, enhancement, and restoration.

Acquisition Needs/Acreage: 2,442 acres FWC Additions and Inholdings list (Figure 11); 160,797 acres remaining in the Green Swamp Florida Forever Project

Surplus Lands/Acreage: None

Public Involvement: Management Advisory Group consensus building meeting and Public Hearing (Appendix 12.3)

DO NOT WRITE BELOW THIS LINE (FOR DIVISION OF STATE LANDS USE ONLY)

ARC Approval Date _____ BTIITF Approval Date: _____

Comments: _____

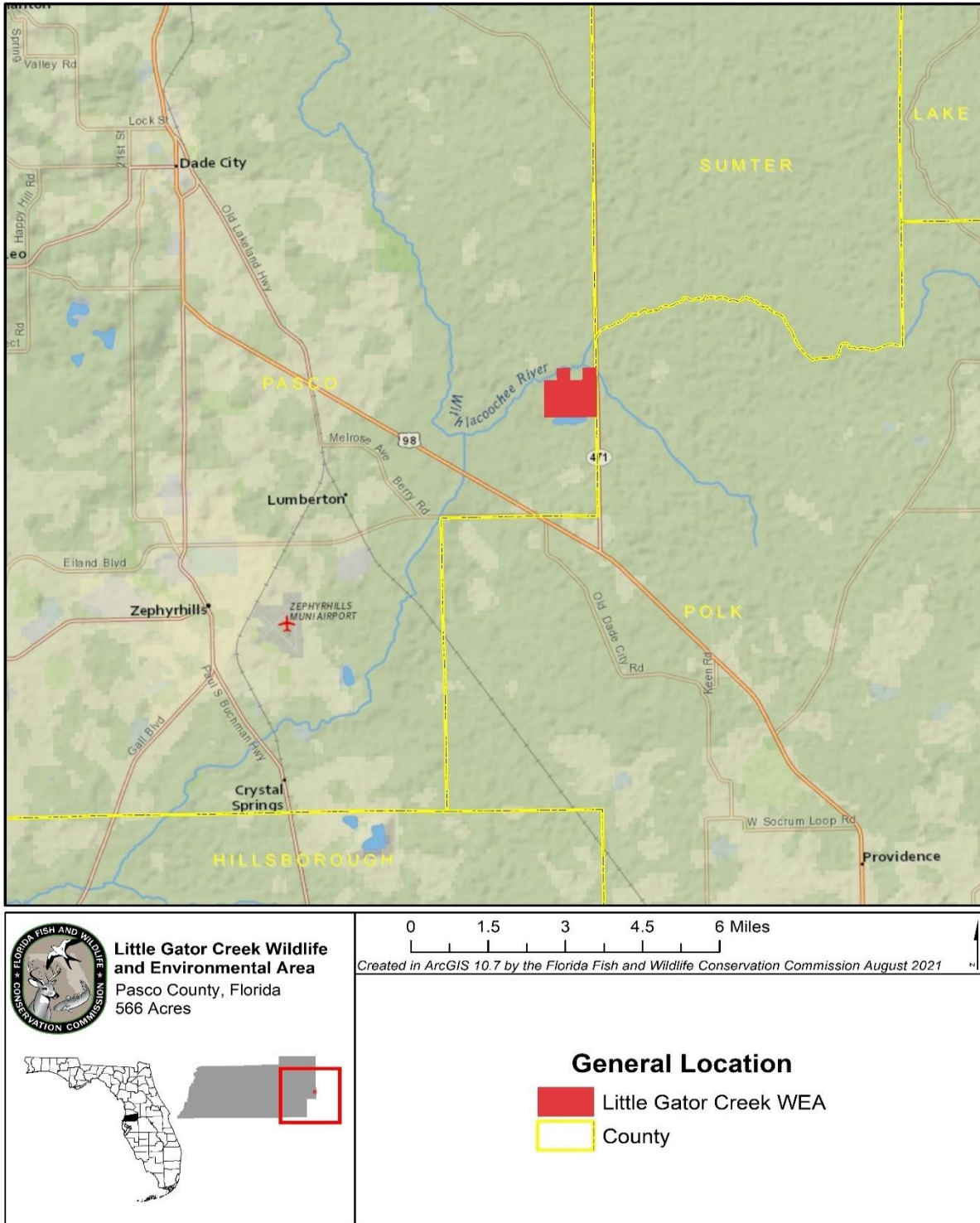


Figure 1. General Location of the LGCWEA

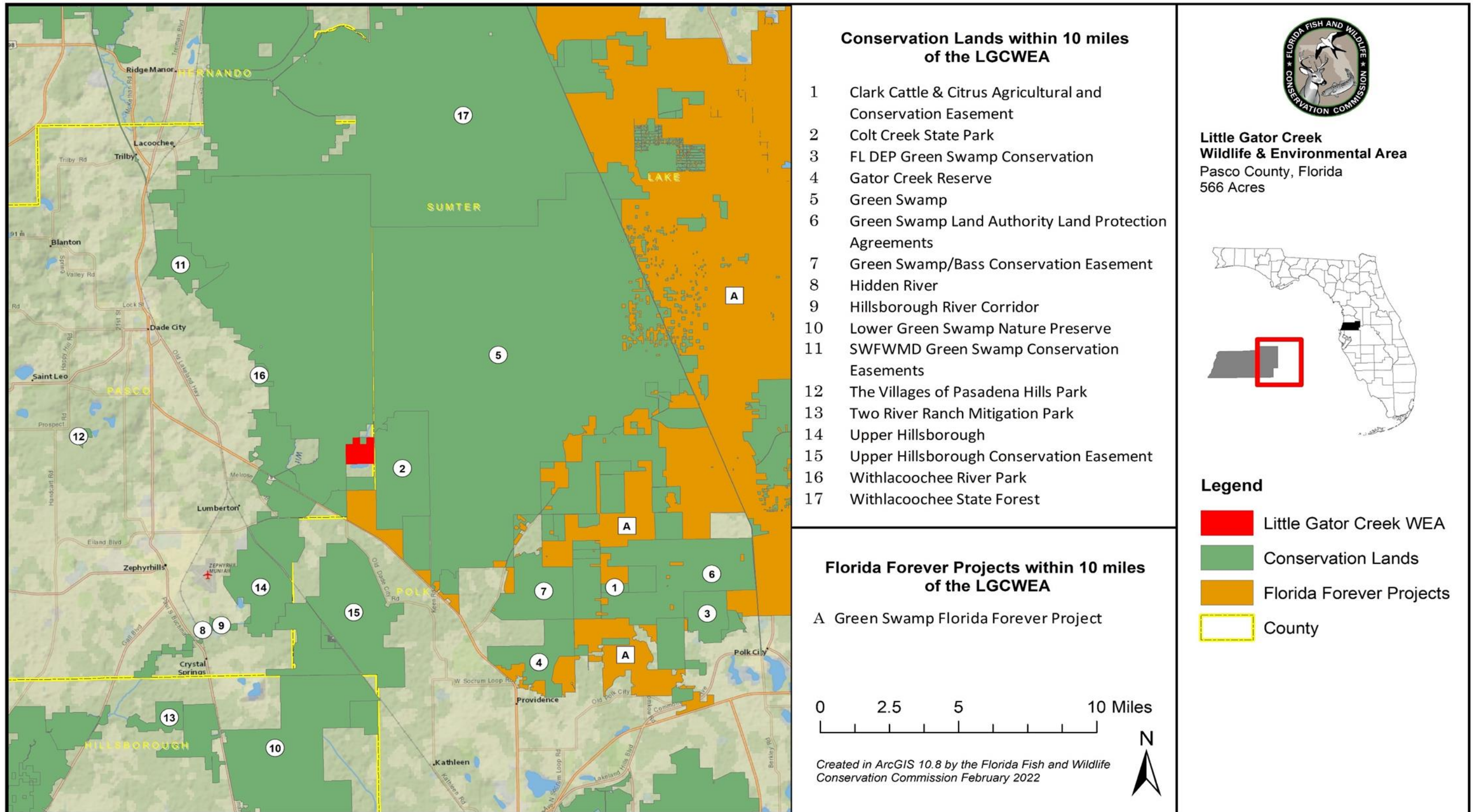


Figure 4. Nearby Conservation Lands and Florida Forever Projects

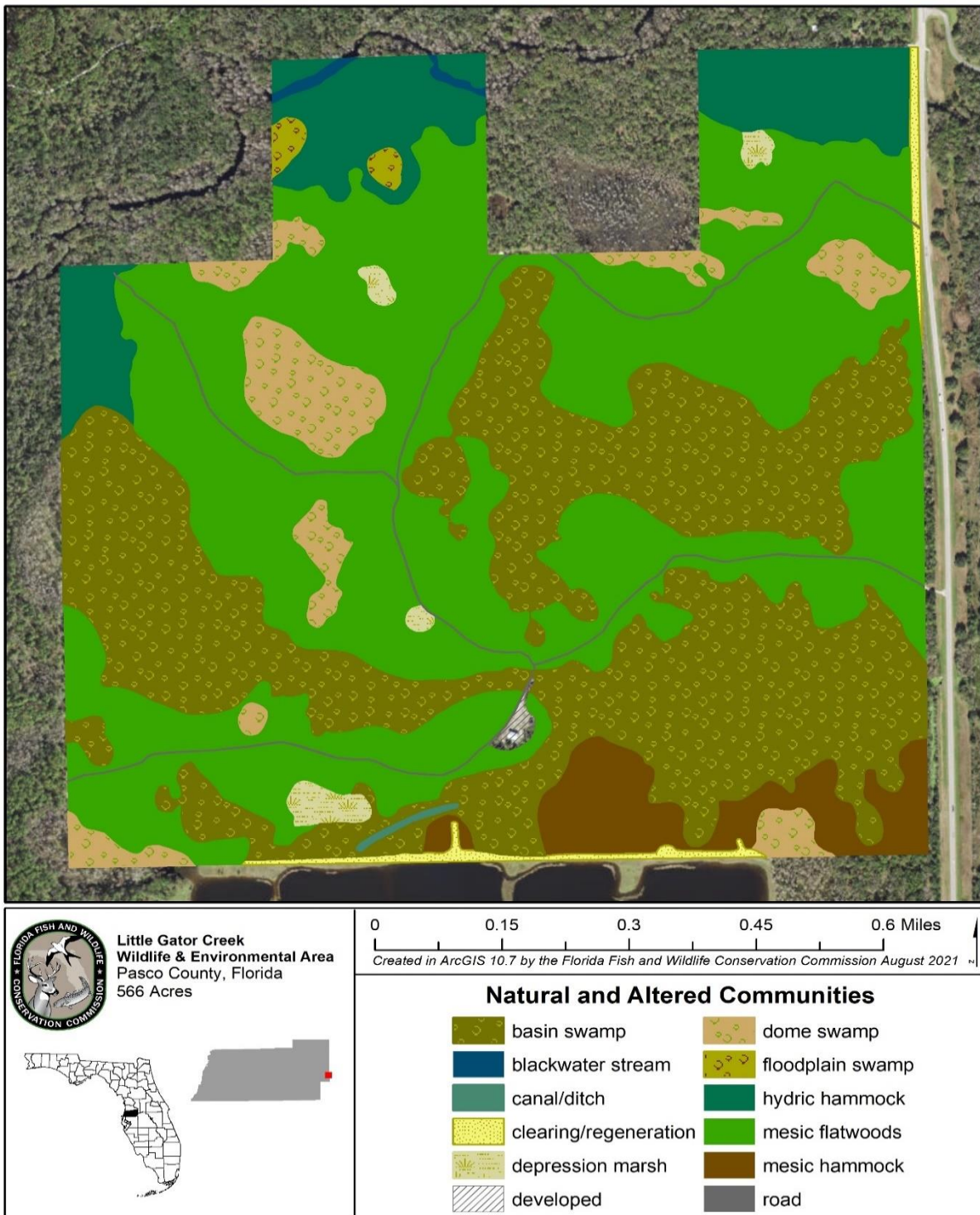


Figure 7. Natural and Altered Communities found on the LGCWEA

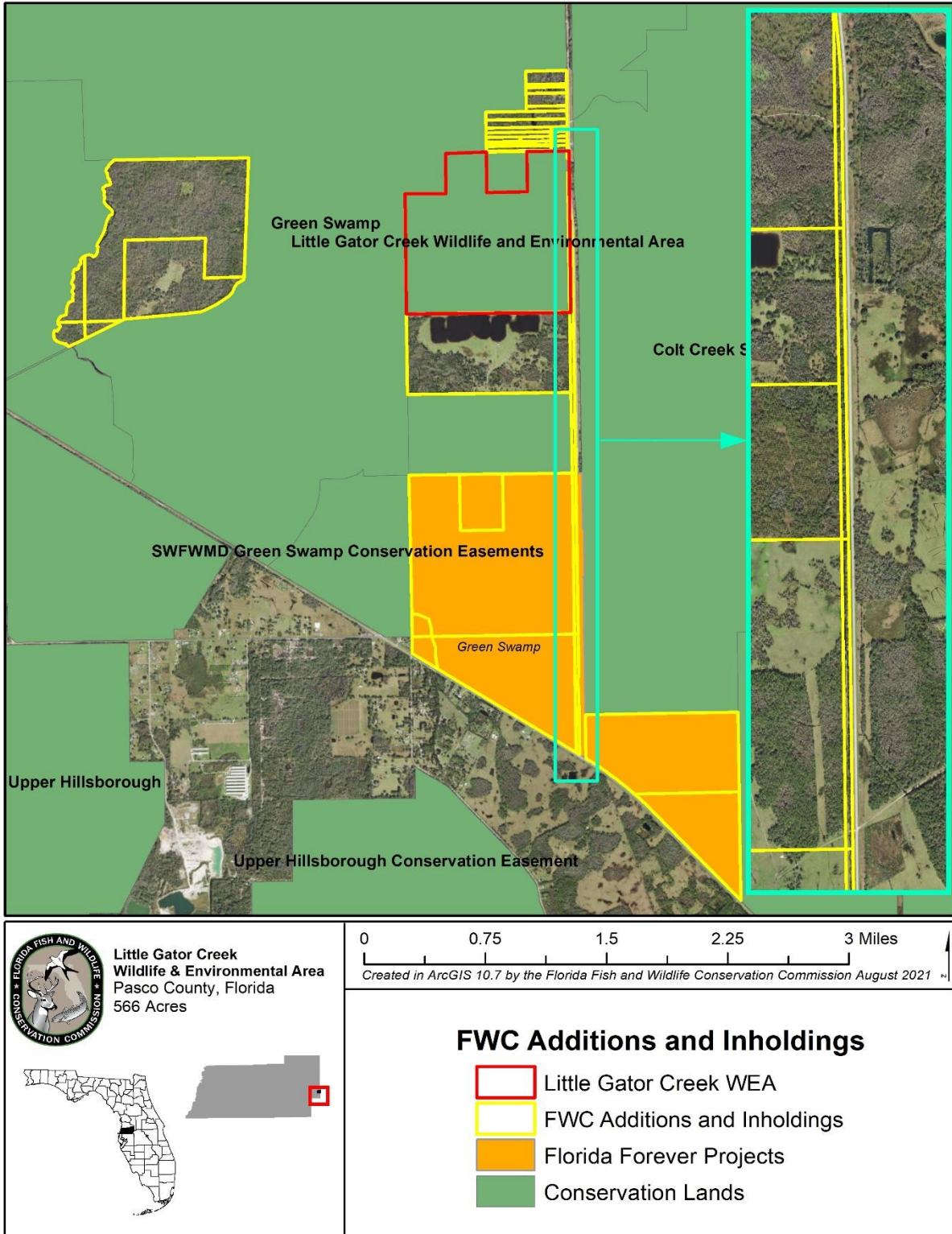


Figure 11. FWC Additions and Inholdings

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission | Little Gator Creek WEA Management Plan

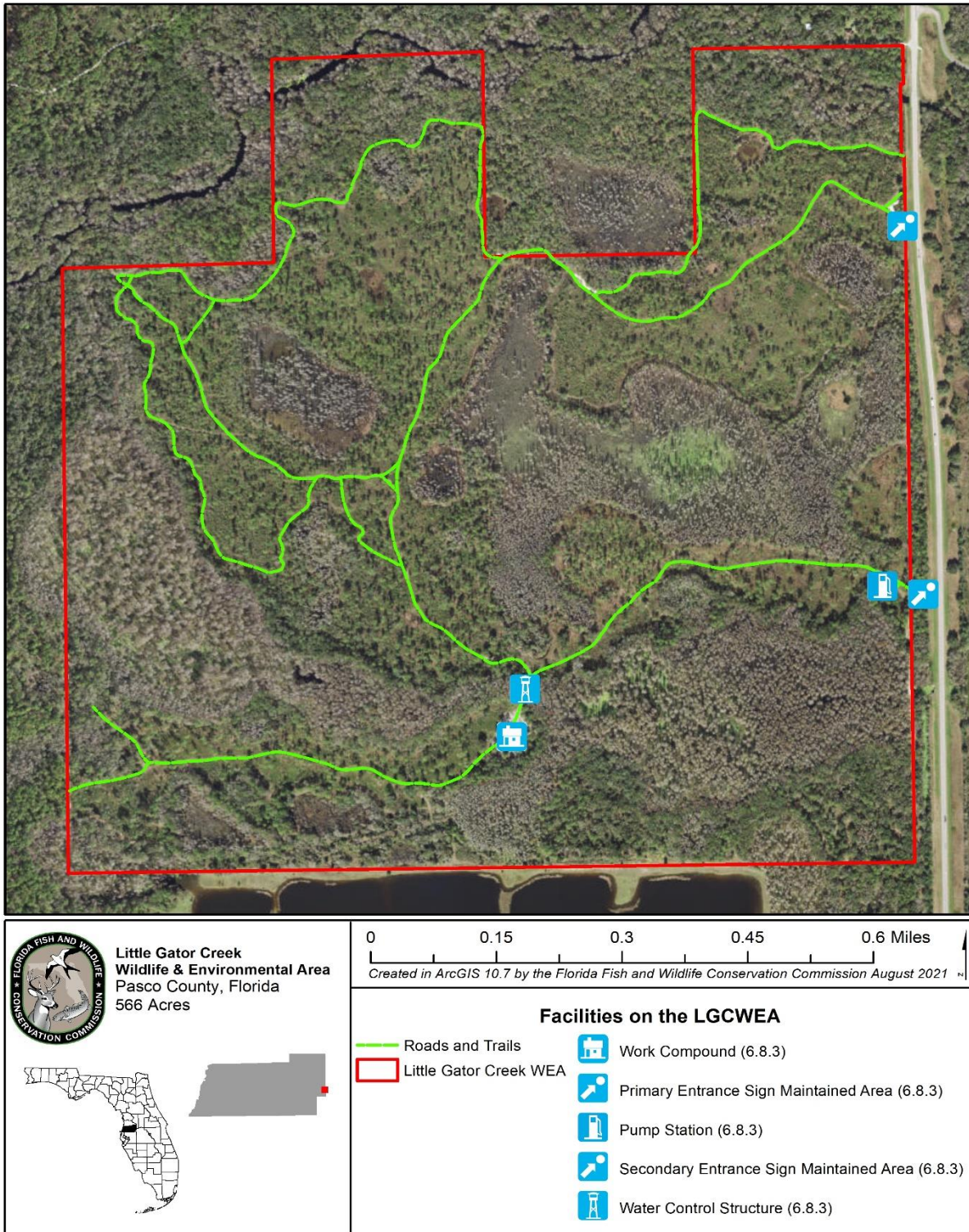


Figure 12. Facilities on the LGCWEA