

# Aucilla/Wacissa Watershed

Partnerships and Regional Incentives  
Jefferson, Madison and Taylor Counties

|   |              |
|---|--------------|
| <i>Year Added to Priority List</i>            | 2022         |
| <i>Project Acres</i>                          | 101,265      |
| <i>Acquired Acres</i>                         | 61,025       |
| <i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i>                 | \$5,886,137  |
| <i>Remaining Project Acres</i>                | 40,240       |
| <i>2021 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i> | \$59,086,672 |

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Aucilla/Wacissa Watershed project aims to protect the hydrological integrity of critical waterbodies by connecting a series of public and private conservation lands extending from the Georgia border to the Gulf Coast. Waterbodies in the watershed include the Aucilla River (an Outstanding Florida Water), Little Aucilla River, Wacissa River and related springs and tributaries. The project will promote sustainable forestry, protect critical wildlife habitat, protect aquatic caves and sinkholes, preserve important archaeological sites and provide the public with resource-based recreational opportunities.

## General Description

The Aucilla/Wacissa Watershed project is in Jefferson, Madison and Taylor counties and is owned by over 100 landowners. It encompasses much of the Aucilla River, a blackwater stream, and the Wacissa River, a spring-fed stream. Over 27,000 acres of the project are within the Wacissa Springs Group Basin Management Action Plan boundary and over 17,000 acres occupy the Priority Focal Area for the Wacissa Springs Group. Twenty-two springs are known to exist within the project area, as well as several unique geological features including the Aucilla River Sinks (where the Aucilla River flows underground and then reappears at the surface several times). The project also contains at least 40 documented cultural or archaeological sites, as well as multiple historic buildings, structures and bridges.

Much of the project area is primarily utilized for silviculture with some cattle ranching. Though some of these activities have impacted the landscape, the natural resources in the project are in good condition and even native perennial grasses such as wiregrass persist.

Natural communities such as mesic flatwoods, upland hardwood forests, freshwater forested wetlands, coastal wetlands, marshes, floodplain swamps, prairies and bogs are exhibited in the project area. These habitats are highly important for a diverse array of rare plants and animals, including birds, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates.



FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

| <b><u>FNAI Elements</u></b>                      | <b><u>Score</u></b> |
|--|---------------------|
| Florida black bear                               | G5T4/S4             |
| Frosted flatwoods salamander                     | G2/S1               |
| Eastern indigo snake                             | G3/S2?              |
| Gopher tortoise                                  | G3/S3               |
| Swallow-tailed kite                              | G5/S2               |
| Big Blue Spring cave crayfish                    | G1/S1               |
| Florida Big Bend cave amphipod                   | G1G2/S1S2           |
| Barbour's map turtle                             | G2/S2               |
| <i>pinewoods dainties</i>                        | G4T2/S2             |
| Florida olive hairstreak                         | G5T2/S2             |
| Florida red-bellied turtle, Panhandle population | G5T2/S2             |
| <i>large rosebud orchid</i>                      | G4/S1               |

**Public Use**

The project is proposed for both fee-simple and less-than-fee acquisition. Parcels that are acquired fee-simple could provide public use opportunities, such as canoeing, swimming, fishing, hunting and nature appreciation. The project area contains a multitude of historically significant places, which would be preserved for public use by the state if acquired. Land acquired as less-than-fee would not provide public use opportunities. However, the landowner of the West Aucilla River Buffer property has committed to allowing access to hunting for persons with disabilities. The project may also help complete the Florida National Scenic Trail, a statewide non-motorized trail that crosses several Florida Forever project sites. The trail is a congressionally designated national scenic trail.

**Acquisition Planning**

**1985**

In 1985, the Land Acquisition Selection Committee added the original Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks project to the Conservation and Recreational Lands Priority List. This fee-simple acquisition, sponsored by the Florida Natural Areas Inventory, consisted of approximately 13,668 acres, and three major ownerships (the largest with 13,000 acres).

**1986**

On March 21, 1986, the Land Acquisition Selection Committee approved the Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks project design for 20,258 acres that includes the original proposal and additional acreage.

**1989**

On December 1, 1989, the Land Acquisition Advisory Council approved a fee-simple, 320-acre addition to the Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks project boundary. Sponsored by the Division of Historical Resources, the addition consisted of one landowner (St. Joe Land and Development Co.). The landowner already has property in the project boundary. This addition will bring into State ownership and management the remainder of the archaeologically significant feature known as Calico Hill.





### **1992**

On April 7, 1992, the Land Acquisition Advisory Council approved a fee-simple, 4,500-acre addition to the Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks project boundary. The addition consisted of two ownerships, St. Joe Paper and Proctor and Gamble Cellulose. This addition will provide continuity between St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, Big Bend Wildlife Management Area and the project. St. Joe Paper is already within the project boundary.

### **1999**

On March 26, 1999, the Land Acquisition and Management Advisory Council approved a fee-simple, 11,920-acre addition to the Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks project boundary. It was sponsored by The Nature Conservancy and consisted of one landowner (The St. Joe Company). The landowner is already in the boundary. This addition would provide connectivity with the Aucilla Wildlife Management Area.

On December 9, 1999, the Land Acquisition and Management Advisory Council removed 19,840 acres owned by The St. Joe Company from the Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks project and moved it to the St. Joe Timberland project. The Land Acquisition and Management Advisory Council also approved the addition of 18 acres to the Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks project boundary.

### **2000**

In 2000, the Acquisition and Restoration Council approved the transfer of approximately 20,036 acres from the Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks project to the St. Joe Timberland Florida Forever project. This acreage is portions of the original project owned by The St. Joe Company.

### **2001**

On October 25, 2001, the Acquisition and Restoration Council approved a fee-simple, 7,068-acre addition to the Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks project boundary. It was sponsored by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and consisted of one landowner (Foley Land and Timber Company). This tract fills a critical gap in the regional landscape of protected conservation areas by filling the hole between the BOT's ownership along the Wacissa River and Suwannee River Water Management District ownership along the Aucilla River. These parcels were designated as essential.

On October 25, 2001, the Acquisition and Restoration Council also approved a fee-simple, 117-acre addition to the Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks project boundary. It was sponsored by the Division of State Lands and consisted of seven small ownerships. This addition will protect Aucilla Spring and the other springs in the Wacissa springhead group as well as provide buffer areas for the associated spring run. These parcels were designated as essential.

### **2007**

On June 15, 2007, the Acquisition and Restoration Council added the West Aucilla River Buffer project to Group B of the Florida Forever Priority List. This less-than-fee project was submitted by the landowner, Mr. Carl Joiner. In 2007, the 721-acre project had a tax assessed value of \$322,849.

On December 14, 2007, the Acquisition and Restoration Council voted to move the West Aucilla River Buffer to Group A of the 2008 Florida Forever Priority List.





### **2011**

On December 9, 2011, the Acquisition and Restoration Council placed the West Aucilla River Buffer project in the Less-Than-Fee category and the Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks project in the Critical Natural Lands category.

### **2012**

On April 20, 2012, the 2,836-acre Flint Rock tract was transferred to the Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks Florida Forever project from the St. Joe Timberland project. After this most recent boundary change in 2012, the project had a combined historic estimated tax assessed value of \$3,413,439.

### **2019**

On October 18, 2019, the Acquisition and Restoration Council added Econfina Timberlands, a 1,665-acre project, to the Florida Forever project list as a fee simple project. This project was sponsored by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and had a tax assessed value of \$2,368,711. All land within the approved boundary was designated essential.

### **2020**

In 2020, The Nature Conservancy sold 3,121.55 acres of the Flint Rock tract (a part of the Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks project boundary) to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

### **2022**

On April 8, 2022, the Acquisition and Restoration Council added the 18,575-acre Aucilla River Corridor project to the 2023 Florida Forever Priority List.

On August 12, 2022, the Acquisition and Restoration Council voted to combine the Aucilla River Corridor, Econfina Timberlands, West Aucilla River Buffer, Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks Florida Forever projects and the Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks tracts of the St. Joe Timberlands Florida Forever project and create a new Florida Forever project. This project was named the Aucilla/Wacissa Watershed project to be added to the 2023 Florida Forever Priority List.

### **Coordination**

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Suwannee River Water Management District, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and The Nature Conservancy are acquisition partners for various portions of this project. The project is adjacent to existing DEP, Suwannee River Water Management District and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lands, as well as privately held conservation easements.

### **Management Policy Statement**

The primary goals of management of the Aucilla/Wacissa Watershed project are to conserve, protect, manage and restore important ecosystems that make up the watershed, with an emphasis on the water resources. Where compatible with a site's resources and management, recreation opportunities will be provided to the public.

Less-than-fee acquisitions will be managed for conservation purposes by the landowners as outlined in the conservation easement.





### **Manager(s)**

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Suwannee River Water Management District, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and The Nature Conservancy currently manage different parts of the project. As other acquisitions are made by the state, one of the state agency managers will take on management responsibilities for new parcels.

Management responsibility for less-than-fee properties within the project boundaries would remain with the landowners. Periodic monitoring of the site's management to confirm continued compliance with the conditions of the conservation easement would be coordinated by the Division of State Lands.

### **Management Prospectus**

#### **Qualifications for State Designation**

This project will conserve, protect and restore important ecosystems that will enhance and protect significant natural resources. The Aucilla/Wacissa Watershed project will also provide wildlife corridors for rare and imperiled species by increasing linkages between public lands and private conservation easements in the region. Large portions of the project will also provide opportunities for nature-based public outdoor recreation.

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

Natural community types, topography, soils, surface and ground water conditions, extent of historic disturbance and already existing improvements are conditions that may affect the intensity of management in the project area. Environmentally sensitive areas (such as erosion-prone sites, outstanding natural areas and wetlands) will be identified, protected and appropriately managed.

Some areas may require ecological restoration of ground cover, control of invasive species, thinning or reforestation. Such resource management projects may be necessary to accomplish restoration objectives and to attain the desired future conditions for communities. This is especially important for conservation of habitats and populations of imperiled or rare species. Landscape ecology is also important, as land use changes in the vicinity may also affect resource conservation goals and the effectiveness of resource management projects.

Other areas indicate a relatively low need for intense management. The project's unique resources and presence of numerous cultural sites indicates a need for intense protective measures and a need to focus on control of public access.

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

If acquired and leased to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission for management, an amendment to the existing Aucilla Wildlife Management Area Management Plan will include management goals and objectives necessary to implement future resource management programs on some sites in the project area. The management plan will also establish the current and future roles of cooperating entities including governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders.





Long-range plans would stress ecosystem management and the protection and management of locally important, rare, and imperiled species. If acquired, historic analysis of natural communities and vegetation types may be conducted, and quantified vegetation management objectives will be developed. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission would also assess the condition of wildlife resources and provide planning support to enhance management and recovery of locally important and imperiled species. Use of prescribed fire and other essential resource management activities will be implemented to maintain and restore natural communities and vegetation types to benefit native wildlife resources.

With several public-access points already in place, programs providing resource-based public outdoor recreational uses will be considered for implementation following acquisition. These potential recreational uses will enhance the public's understanding of the region while providing ample opportunities for outdoor recreational enjoyment. Essential roads will be maintained to provide all-weather public access and management operations. Unnecessary roads, fire lanes and hydrological disturbances will be abandoned or restored as practical. Infrastructure development will be limited to only that which is necessary to allow public access and to provide for the necessary facilities, security and management of the property. First-year activities would include posting the boundaries, establishing control at public-access points and beginning the planning process. Long-term management (second year and following) would entail management of these lands as an integral part of the Big Bend/Aucilla Wildlife Management Area recreational complex. Archaeological and historical sites will be managed in coordination with the Division of Historical Resources.

### **Revenue-generating Potential**

Revenue from this public conservation land can include sales of various permits and recreational user fees and ecotourism activities if such projects could be economically developed. Area regulations would be developed to identify the necessary and required permits, fees and regulations. Timber sales from thinning operations or restoration of off-site plantations may also yield additional revenue. Apiary leases will be considered as a revenue source depending on whether the area meets the criteria of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Apiary Policy. In addition, the Florida Legislature appropriates funds for land management. The long-term values of ecosystem services to local and regional land and water resources, and to human health, are expected to be significant.

### **Cooperators in Management Activities**

State, federal and local governmental agencies will cooperate with each other and private conservation organizations in the continued management of the properties in this project.



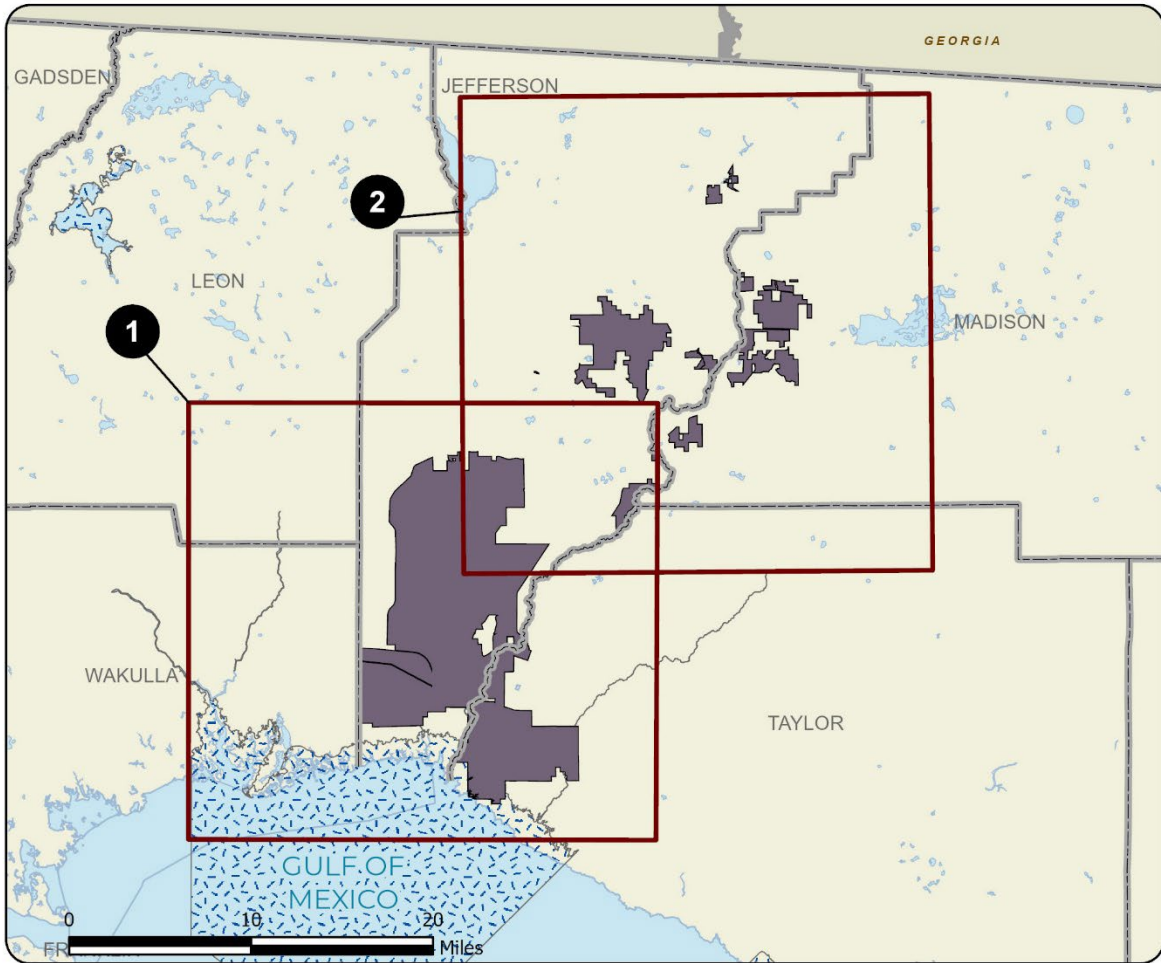


Management Cost Summary

| <u>FWC</u> | <u>Recurring</u> | <u>Non-recurring</u> | <u>Source of Funds</u> |
|------------|------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Salary     | \$38,267 (1 FTE) |                      | LATF                   |
| Expense    | \$19,925         |                      |                        |
| OCO        | \$277,220        |                      |                        |
| FCO        | \$70,988         | \$266,400            | LATF                   |

*Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted for Econfina Timberlands, Wacissa/Aucilla River Sinks, Aucilla River Corridor*



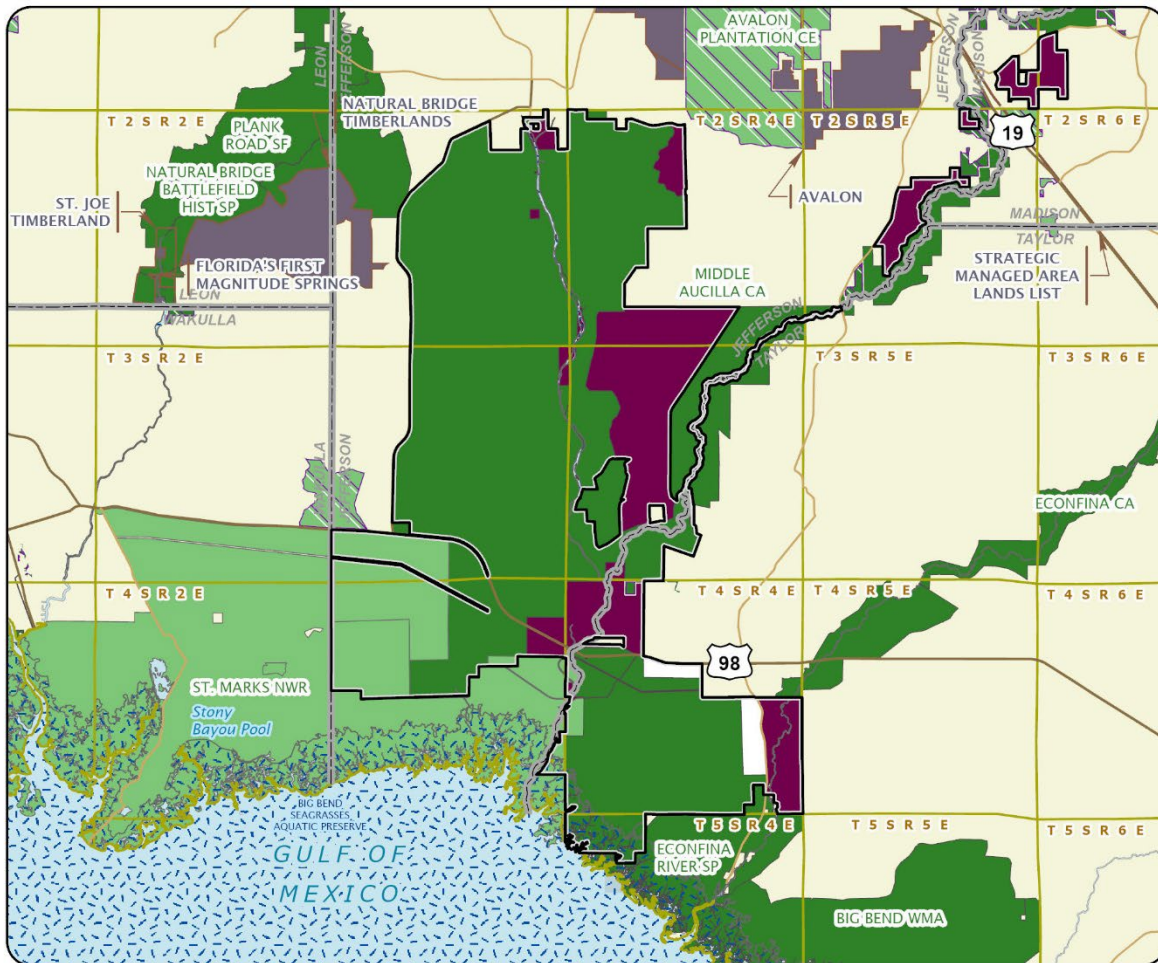


### AUCILLA/WACISSA WATERSHED: OVERVIEW

#### JEFFERSON, MADISON, AND TAYLOR COUNTIES

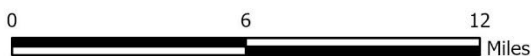


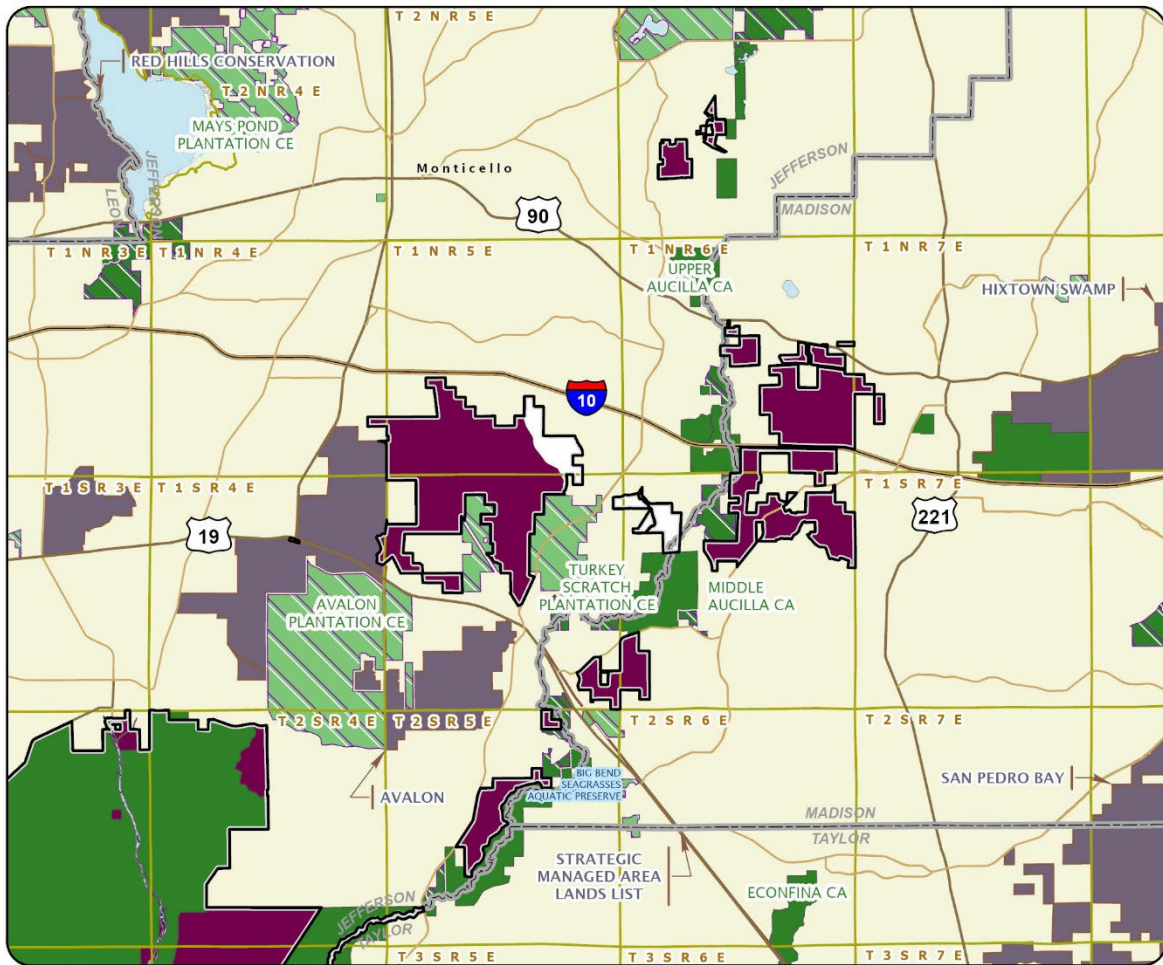




AUCILLA/WACISSA WATERSHED: MAP 1

JEFFERSON, MADISON, AND TAYLOR COUNTIES





### AUCILLA/WACISSA WATERSHED: MAP 2

#### JEFFERSON, MADISON, AND TAYLOR COUNTIES

- Florida Forever Project Boundary
- Essential Parcels Remaining
- Other Florida Forever Projects
- State Conservation Lands
- Other Conservation Lands
- Less-Than-Fee Acquisition
- State Aquatic Preserve

