

# Wolfe Creek Forest

Critical Natural Lands

Santa Rosa

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	<i>2010</i>
<i>Project Acres</i>	<i>10,902</i>
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	<i>6,289</i>
<i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i>	<i>\$5,337,562</i>
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	<i>4,613</i>
<i>2020 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	<i>\$6,423,354</i>

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Wolfe Creek Forest project will protect numerous seepages and blackwater stream systems that are contiguous with the Blackwater River and other conservation lands. The project will conserve habitat for wildlife species such as the Florida black bear, little blue heron, and southeastern weasel. The stream systems within this project support numerous rare aquatic flora and fauna considered a focal habitat for FWC's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy. The project will provide the public with resource-based recreational opportunities and support the continuation of sustainably managed silviculture practices. Twelve archaeological sites, two of which are historic and ten of which are prehistoric (including Wolfe Creek Mill) are within the project.

## General Description

Wolfe Creek Forest, a fee-simple project, is located in central Santa Rosa County, between Blackwater River State Forest to the east, and Whiting Field Naval Air Station to the southwest. This project shares 5.7 miles of its southern boundary with two disjunct tracts of the state forest, forming a connection between all three tracts. Within it run 35 miles of streams that feed into Big Coldwater Creek and Big Juniper Creek, two major tributaries of the Blackwater River. The property is owned by Conservation Forestry of Florida, LLC, and is managed by American Forest Management.

Most of the site (82 percent) is in various stages of intensively managed pine plantation in areas that historically supported upland pine forest and sandhills. Approximately 18 percent of the site can be readily classified into natural communities. The most prominent and those in the best condition are wetlands that include seepage and blackwater streams, and associated bottomland forest, floodplain swamp, and baygall. A few dome swamps occur with the plantations. Upland natural communities include a few small areas of mesic flatwoods and mesic hammock. The highest elevations, 220 feet above mean sea level, occur in the northernmost portion of the project (upper Wolfe Creek), and on either side of County Road 191 in the easternmost portion. The lowest elevations, around 30 feet above sea level, are in the Coldwater Creek floodplain in the western part of the proposal. From CR 191 the

terrain generally slopes downward to the east, toward Big Juniper Creek. West of the road, and from north to south, the terrain slopes downward in a southwesterly direction toward Coldwater Creek.

The project is within a large gap in conservation lands between Whiting Field, outparcels of Blackwater River State Forest, and the main tract of the Forest. The Wolfe Creek Forest tract, according to the Florida Master Site File, holds 12 archaeological sites, two of which are historic. Ten of these are prehistoric, and one of those is Wolfe Creek Mill.

### FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

FNAI Elements	Score
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
<i>hairy-peduncled beaksedge</i>	G3/S3
Southeastern weasel	G5T4/S3?
Little blue heron	G5/S4

### Public Use

The project has potential for a variety of forest related recreational activities including activities such as canoeing, bird watching, hunting, hiking, horseback riding, biking, environmental education, nature study and photography. Once the project area is acquired and assigned to FFS, public access will be immediately provided for low intensity outdoor resource-based recreation activities such as hiking, hunting, and fishing.

### Acquisition Planning

#### **2010**

On June 11, 2010, the ARC added the Wolfe Creek Forest project to the Florida Forever priority list in the Critical Natural Lands category. After the most recent boundary change in 2010, the project had a combined, historic, estimated tax value of \$14,080,729.

#### **2016**

On November 3, 2016, DEP purchased a 626-acre restrictive easement to protect flight operations at nearby Whiting Field. FFS will manage the easement to restore and maintain native ecosystems.

#### **2021**

DEP purchased 1,789.77 acres fee simple from the Trust for Public Land to be managed by FFS as an addition to Blackwater River State Forest.

DEP also acquired 1,699.57 acres fee simple via donation.

On December 10, 2021, the ARC approved an addition of 757 acres in Santa Rosa County to the project boundary.



### Coordination

DOD has been interested in partnering with the state for nearby lands, however, they have not expressed a specific interest in assisting in the acquisition of this tract. Furthermore, NFWFMD does not have interest in acquisition of this tract.

### Management Policy Statement

The primary land management goals are restoration, maintenance and protection in perpetuity of all native ecosystems; integration of compatible human uses; and insurance of long-term viability of populations and species considered rare.

### Manager(s)

FFS is recommended as manager of the project.

### Management Prospectus

#### **Qualifications for state designation**

The tract is dominated by silviculture, but many of the plantations have retained some of the understory including wiregrass, bluestem grass, and gallberry and yaupon holly. With thinning, prescribed fire, and sustainable forestry management practices, the project could be quickly transformed from management for silviculture to an area managed for its ecological and recreational benefits. With the removal of offsite pine species, replanting of longleaf pines, introduction of prescribed fire, and sustainable forestry management practices, and this project could be restored to a more natural state. The project's size and diversity make it desirable for use and management as a state forest.

#### **Conditions affecting intensity of management**

Much of the project's upland pine and sandhill areas have been altered by silvicultural operations and will require restoration efforts. Areas where timber species are off-site species will necessitate removal as well as the restoration of native ground covers and canopy. Biotic surveys would be important to accomplish during the early part of plan development and implementation, because several rare or listed species are expected to occur in the project. Development of facilities, as on all conservation lands, would be kept to a level necessary to assure a high-quality experience, and any such development would be confined to areas of previous disturbance. Restoration efforts will focus on introduction of prescribed fire, removal of offsite pine species, exotic species treatment, facilitating the restoration of native groundcovers, and possibly wetland restoration. The level of management intensity and related management costs is expected to be moderate to high initially to obtain the necessary information and resources to restore and manage this system as a State Forest. Once this information is obtained and the resources are available, long-term management costs are expected to be moderate to maintain this area as a State Forest.

#### **Management implementation, Public access, Site security and Protection of infrastructure**

Once the project area is acquired and assigned to the FFS, public access will be immediately provided for low intensity outdoor resource-based recreation activities such as hiking, hunting and fishing. FFS



proposes to manage the site as a State Forest and will carry out management activities and coordinate public access and use. Initial and intermediate management efforts will concentrate on resource inventory, restoration and reforestation of areas where harvesting has occurred, providing site security, and assessing public and fire management access. Inventories of the site's natural resources, threatened and endangered flora and fauna, will be conducted to provide a basis for the formulation of a management plan.

The roads throughout the property necessitate the development of a road plan to identify those roads to be utilized for vehicular access by the public, those roads that are required for administrative use, and roads that are determined to be unnecessary for management or access should be closed. Steps will be taken to ensure that the public is provided appropriate access while simultaneously affording protection of sensitive resources.

Prior to collection of necessary resource information, management proposals for this project are conceptual in nature. Long-range plans for this property will be directed toward the restoration of disturbed areas, maintenance of natural communities, and responsible public access. To the greatest extent practical, disturbed sites will be restored to conditions that would be expected to occur in naturally functioning ecosystems. Off-site species will eventually be replaced with species that would be expected to occur naturally on those specific sites.

Very little of this project area has been burned by prescribed fire in recent years. Burning goals for this project will be to eventually establish an all-season prescribed burning program on all the fire dependent community types. Whenever possible, existing roads, black lines, foam lines and natural breaks will be utilized to contain, and control prescribed and natural fires.

Timber management activities will primarily consist of re-introducing longleaf pines, restoration harvests and improvement cuts aimed at restoring and perpetuating native ground covers. Stands will not have a targeted rotation age but will be managed to maintain a broad diversity of age classes ranging from young stands to areas with old growth characteristics. This will provide habitat for the full spectrum of species that would be found in the natural environment and enhance and maintain biodiversity.

The resource inventory will be used to identify sensitive areas that need special attention, protection or management, and to identify areas that are appropriate for responsible recreational or administrative facilities. Recreation and administrative infrastructure development will be primarily located in disturbed areas and will be at a minimum required to allow suitable public access, provide facilities for public use, and to administer and manage the property. FFS will promote recreation and environmental education in the natural environment. It is anticipated that interpretive and user services recreation facilities will be developed and the use of low impact, rustic facilities will be stressed. High impact organized recreation areas are not planned due to possible adverse effects on the natural environment. Unnecessary roads, fire lines and hydrological disturbances will be abandoned and/or restored to the greatest extent practical.



Please note that capital project expenditures are needed on this tract for prescribed fire, vegetative and hydrologic restoration, improved public access/use, and facilities, both public and administrative. It is anticipated that some of the existing roads and trails may be used as multi-use trails for hiking, horseback riding and biking. This Management Prospectus is not intended to be an application for capital project funding; however, as more information is gathered, and an analysis of the site is completed, FFS intends to apply for capital project funds.

### **Revenue-generating potential**

Timber sales will be conducted as needed to improve or maintain desirable ecosystem conditions. These sales will primarily take place in planted pine stands and will provide a variable source of revenue dependent upon a variety of factors. Due to the existing condition and volume of the timber resources on the property, revenue generating potential of this project is expected to be moderately high.

### **Cooperators in management activities**

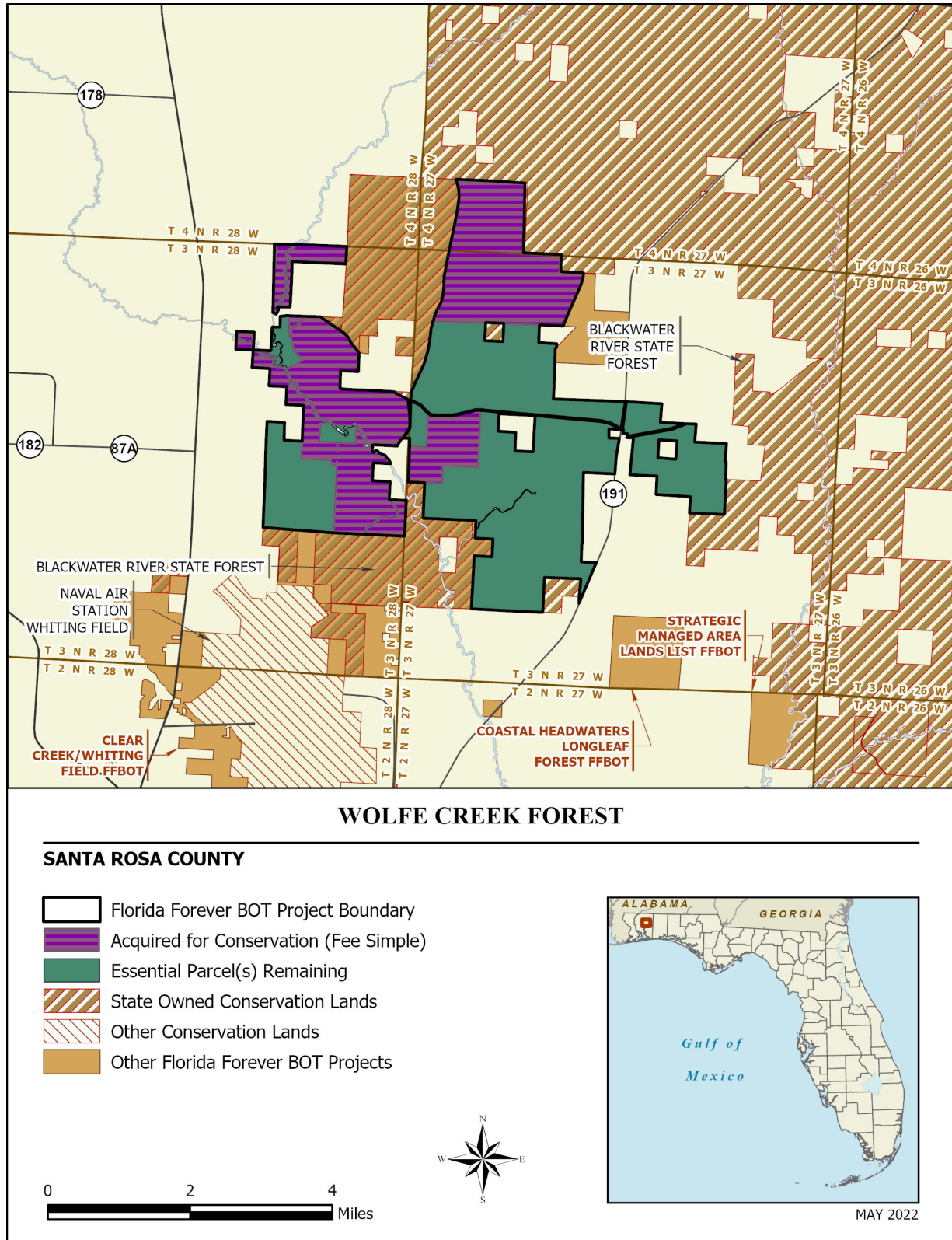
FFS will cooperate with and seek the assistance of other state agencies, local government entities and interested parties as appropriate.

#### Management Cost Summary

<u>FFS</u>	<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Source of Funds	CARL	not provided
Salary (4 FTE)	\$132,141	not provided
Expense	\$315,000	not provided
OCO	\$188,600	not provided
TOTAL	\$635,741	not provided

*Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted*





Map 1: FNAI, May 2022