

ITEM 7:

Consider a 10-year update to the Bell Ridge Longleaf Wildlife and Environmental Area (Lease No. 4595).

LOCATION:

Gilchrist County

APPLICANT:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)

DSL STAFF REMARKS:

Background

The 720-acre Bell Ridge Longleaf Wildlife and Environmental Area (BRLWEA) is located in Gilchrist County, approximately 23 miles northwest of Gainesville, 30 miles south of Lake City, and 21.5 miles northeast of Chiefland. The BRLWEA is one of the highest quality longleaf pine sandhill forest tracts in the state of Florida. The BRLWEA is a benchmark model of a longleaf pine sandhill forest ecosystem. Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) has designated a portion of the BRLWEA as a reference area for sandhill natural communities. The BRLWEA is a multiple use area that allows for outdoor fish and wildlife-based public recreational opportunities that include hiking and wildlife viewing. Intact and properly managed sandhills are key in the survival of several rare fauna and flora species. Some of the species documented on site include sandhill spiny pod, gopher tortoise, southern fox squirrel, eastern indigo snake, and southeastern American kestrel.

The BRLWEA is managed by the FWC as a Wildlife and Environmental Area, providing ecological diversity, optimal habitat for common and imperiled wildlife, and fish and wildlife-oriented outdoor recreational opportunities for the Florida residents and visitors. The initial acquisition of all 720 acres of the BRLWEA was made in 1991 by the Nature Conservancy. The Board of Trustees approved the purchase of the BRLWEA in March 2008 and closed on the property on July 15, 2008 using FWC's Fish and Wildlife Habitat Acquisition Program funds.

Management Plan Overview

Through the services of the FNAI, FWC has mapped the natural and anthropogenic community types on BRLWEA. FNAI has identified sandhill as the sole natural community within the BRLWEA.

The FWC has developed a GIS-based assessment tool that incorporates a wide variety of land cover and wildlife species data. This tool, the Integrated Wildlife Habitat Ranking System (IWHRS), ranks the Florida landscape based upon the 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 IWHRS (2009) indicates that the BRLWEA has a mean wildlife value of 5.9 out of a maximum possible value of 10. In 2012, a Wildlife Conservation Prioritization and Recovery Strategy (WCPR Strategy) was completed for the BRLWEA. The WCPR Strategy includes monitoring and management actions for imperiled and focal species. During the previous planning period, FWC conducted imperiled and locally important species surveys for Florida mouse and gopher tortoise. The FWC also monitored four kestrel nest boxes. These imperiled species projects, along with other ongoing imperiled species management activities,

will continue to be implemented in accordance with the BRLWEA WCPR Strategy.

The Division of Historical Resources (DHR) observations are broken down into five categories: archeological sites, resource groups, historical structures, historic bridges and historic cemeteries. The DHR Master Site File indicates no known historic sites on the BRLWEA. The FWC will submit subsequently located historic sites on BRLWEA to DHR for inclusion in their Master Site File.

The FWC has adopted a comprehensive approach to the planning and administration of fish and wildlife resource based public outdoor recreational opportunities for the BRLWEA. To accomplish this, the FWC has worked with recreational stakeholders and the general public to develop a Recreation Master Plan for the BRLWEA. This plan will be used to further design and develop appropriate infrastructure that supports the recreational use of the area by the general public. The WPWEA Recreation Master Plan includes planning for parking, trail design, and area resource interpretation.

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, F.S., the Division of State Lands began compiling the short-term goals from each land management plan approved since July 1, 2016. The Division has included short-term goals from this management plan as part of this item.

Management goals presented in the draft plan include:

- Improve extant habitat and restore disturbed areas.
- Maintain, improve, or restore imperiled species populations and habitats.
- Monitor, maintain, improve, or restore game and non-game species populations and habitats.
- Remove exotic and invasive plants and animals and conduct needed maintenance and control.
- Provide public access and recreational opportunities.
- Protect water quality and quantity, restore hydrology to the extent feasible, and maintain the restored condition.
- Manage timber resources to improve or restore natural communities for the benefit of wildlife.
- Protect, preserve, and maintain historical resources.
- Develop the capital facilities and infrastructure necessary to meet the goals and objectives of this management plan.
- Enhance fish and wildlife conservation, resource and operational management through development of an optimal boundary.
- Develop appropriate adaptation strategies in response to projected climate change effects and their potential impacts on fish and wildlife conservation, resources, and the operational management of the WPWEA.
- Provide access and use of the BRLWEA to current cooperative managers and continue collaborative management and research efforts.

Public Involvement

The FWC conducted a Management Advisory Group Meeting on March 13, 2019, in Newberry,

- Continue to implement prescribed fire.
- Maintain and control invasive species.
- Maintain infrastructure.

Results of this meeting were used by the 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 Chapter 259.032(10), Florida Statutes, was held on April 11, 2019 in Trenton, Florida. No members of the public in attendance provided comments or asked questions.

Surplus Lands

The evaluation of BRLWEA 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 BRLWEA is recommended for potential surplus review.

State Land Management Review Team

This property has not been subject to a recent review by an interagency land management review team.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Approve the management plan.

ARC RECOMMENDATION:

- APPROVE**
- APPROVE WITH MODIFICATIONS:** _____
- DEFER**
- WITHDRAW**
- NOT APPROVE**
- OTHER:** _____

Bell Ridge Longleaf Wildlife Management and Environmental Area

Land Management Plan Short Term Goals

Section	Section Description	Goal	Item Number	Item Description
6.1	Habitat restoration and improvement.	Improve extant habitat and restore disturbed areas.	6.1.1	Update the prescribed burning plan.
6.2	Imperiled and Focal Species Habitat Maintenance, Enhancement, Restoration, or Population Restoration.	Maintain, improve, or restore imperiled species populations and habitats.	6.2.1	Revise and implement an update WCPR strategy by 2021.

Source: Florida DEP, Office of Environmental Services, Revised 2020-MWE.

LAND MANAGEMENT PLAN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Lead Agency: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)
 Common Name of Property: Bell Ridge Longleaf Wildlife and Environmental Area
 Location: Gilchrist County, Florida
 Acreage Total: 720 acres
 Acreage Breakdown:

<u>Land Cover Classification</u>	<u>Acres</u>	<u>Percent of Total Area</u>
Sandhill	687.7	95.5%
Roads	32.3	4.5%

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

Lease/Management Agreement No.: 4595 (Appendix 12.1)

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

Designated Land Use: Wildlife and Environmental Area

Sublease (s): None

Encumbrances: None

Type Acquisition: Fish and Wildlife Habitat Program

Unique Features: Natural: Sandhill natural community

Archaeological/Historical: None documented within BRLWEA.

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

Acquisition Needs/Acreage: 3,384 acres remaining in the Bell Ridge Sandhills Unit of the Longleaf Pine Ecosystem Florida Forever Project (Figure 4); 2,654 acres remaining on FWC's Inholdings and Additions list (Appendix 12.12).

Surplus Lands/Acreage: None

Public Involvement: Management Advisory Group consensus building meeting and Public Hearing (Appendix 12.4)

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ARC Approval Date _____ BTITF Approval Date: _____

Comments: _____

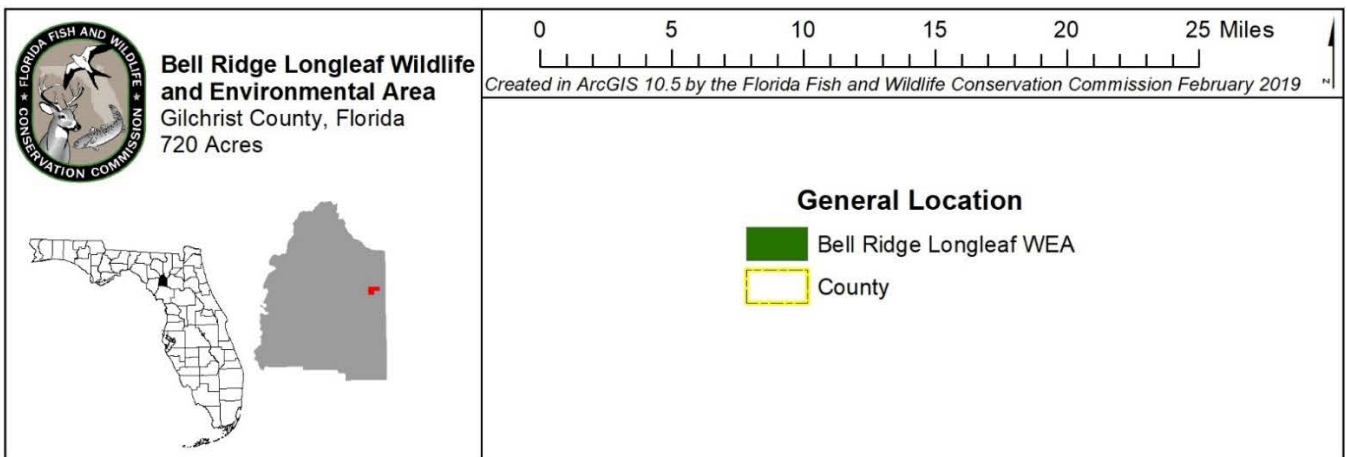
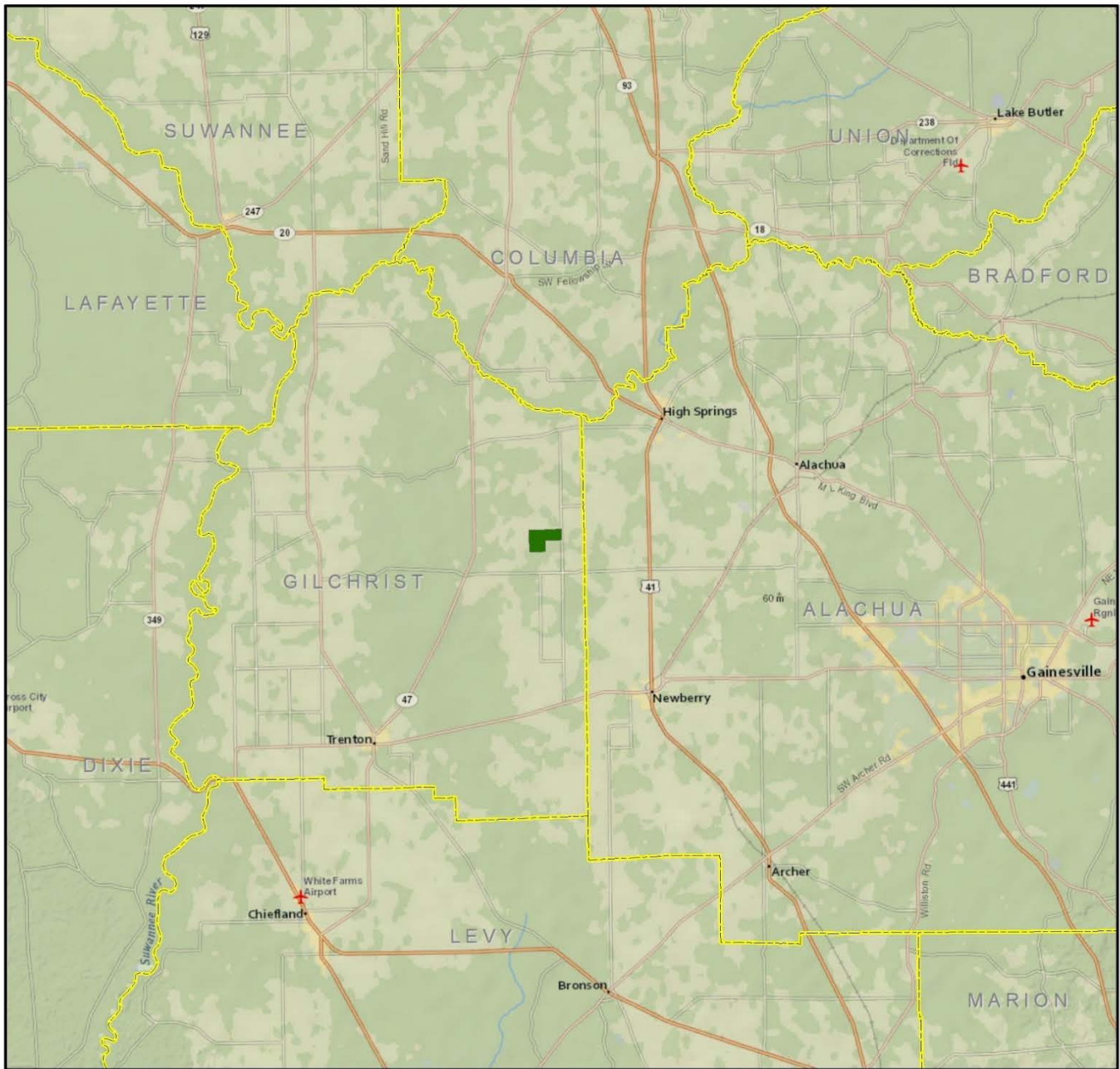


Figure 1: General Location of BRLWEA

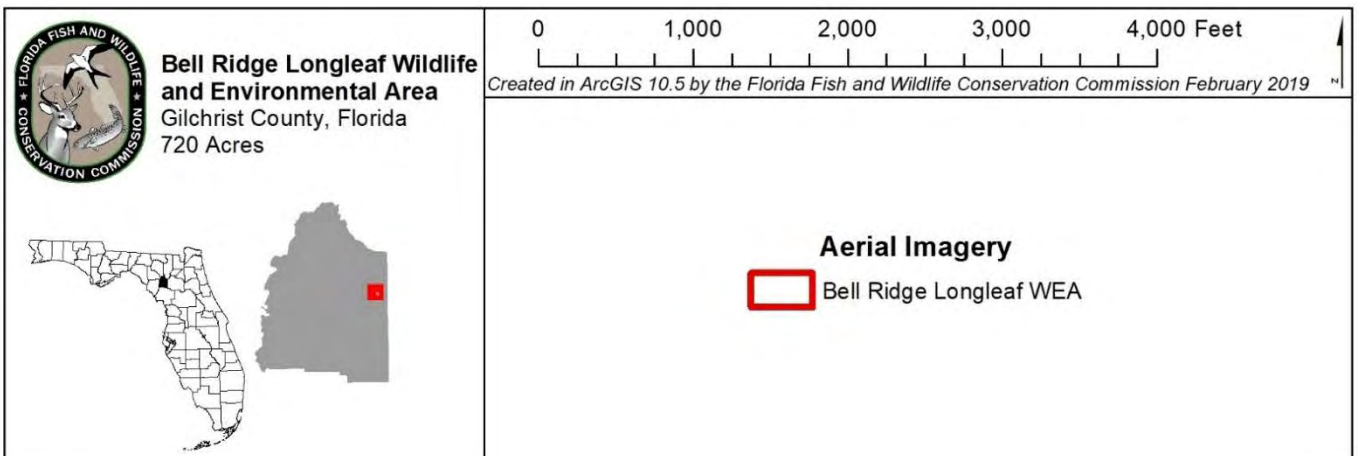
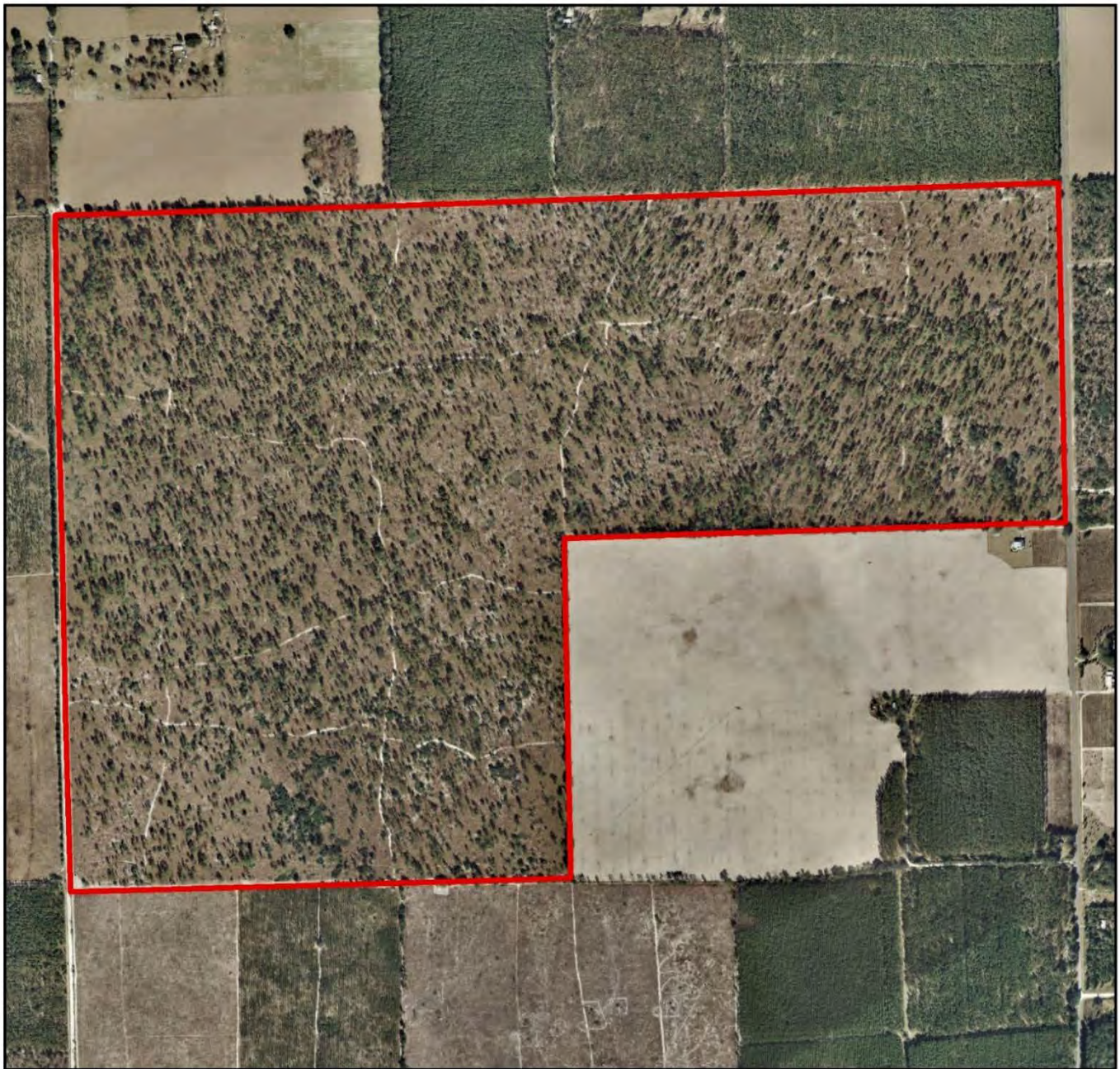


Figure 3: Boundary of BRLWEA

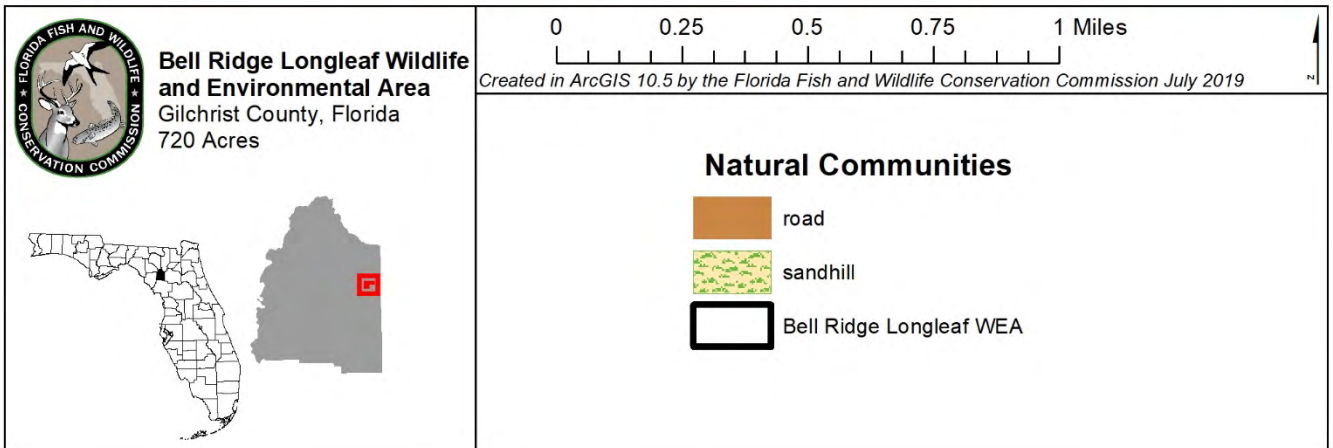
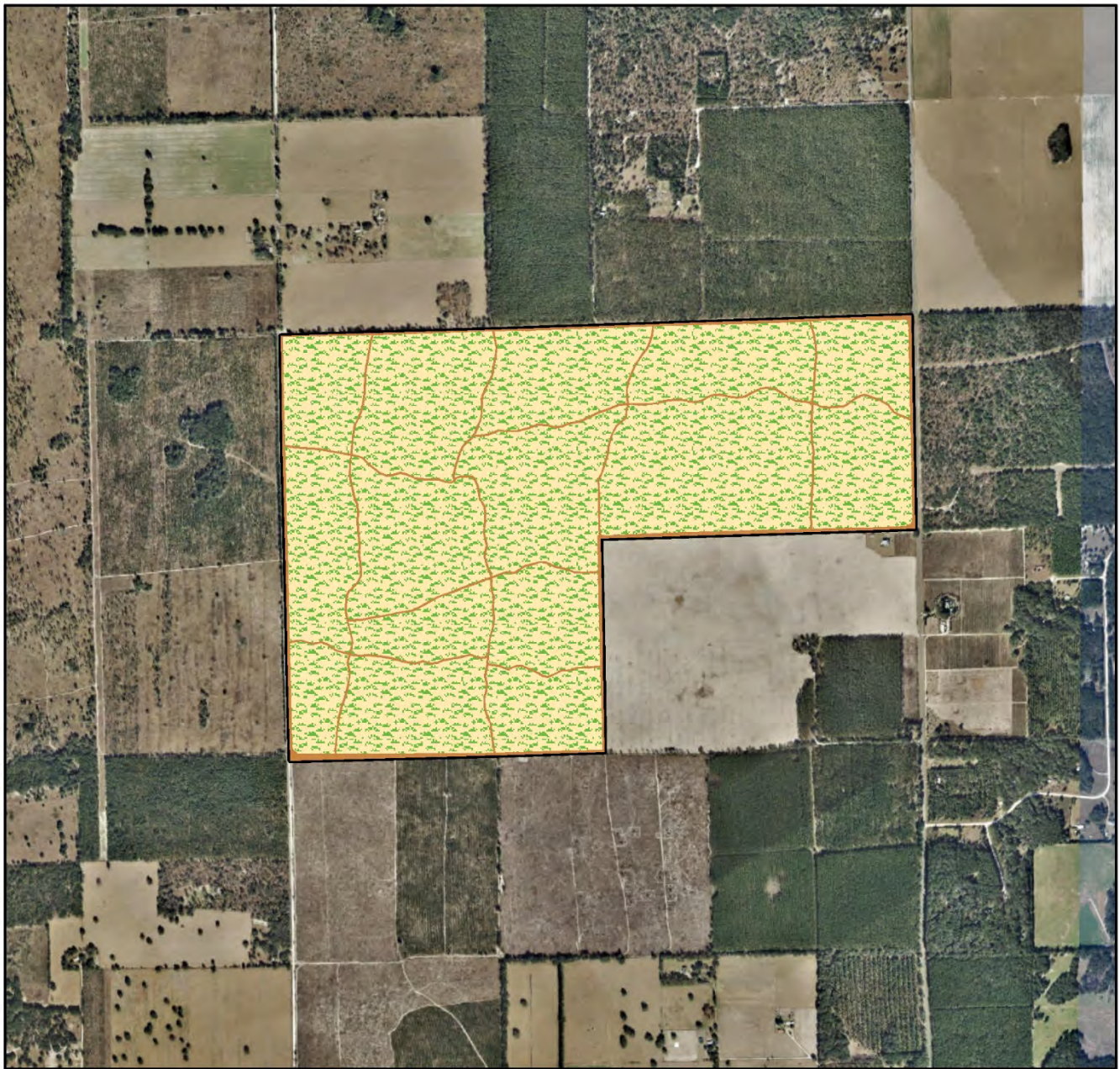


Figure 7: Natural and Anthropogenic Communities of the BRLWEA

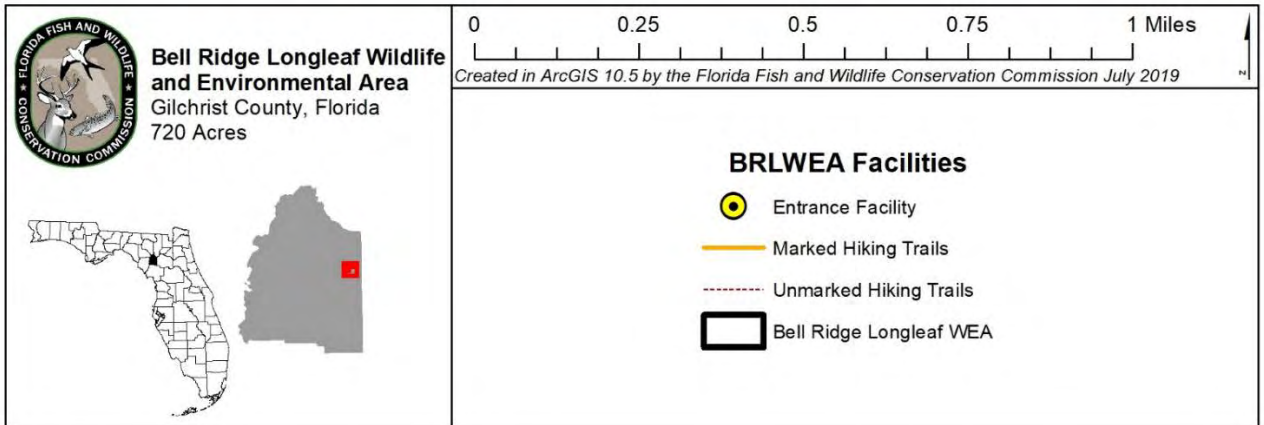
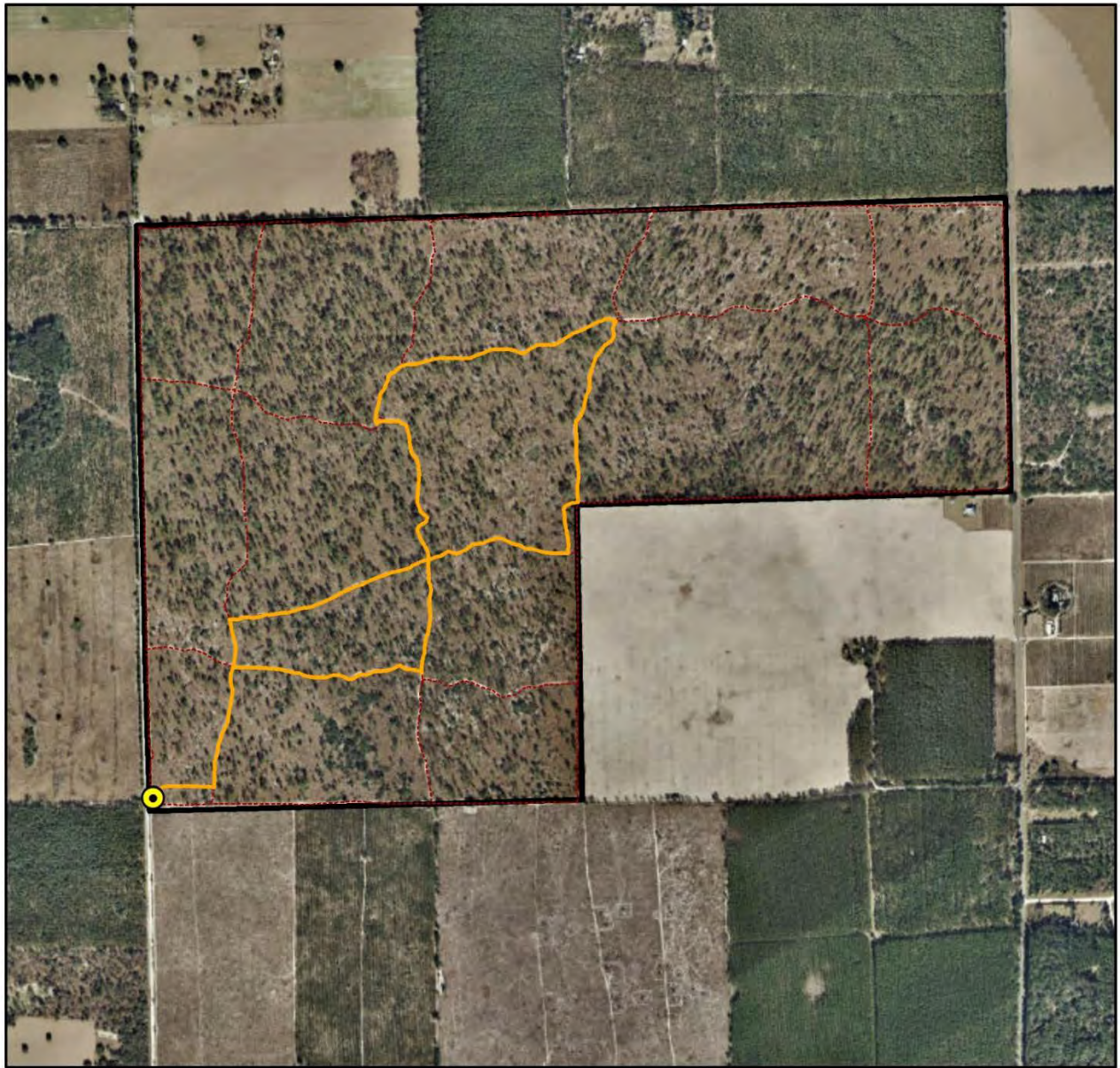


Figure 11: BRLWEA Facilities

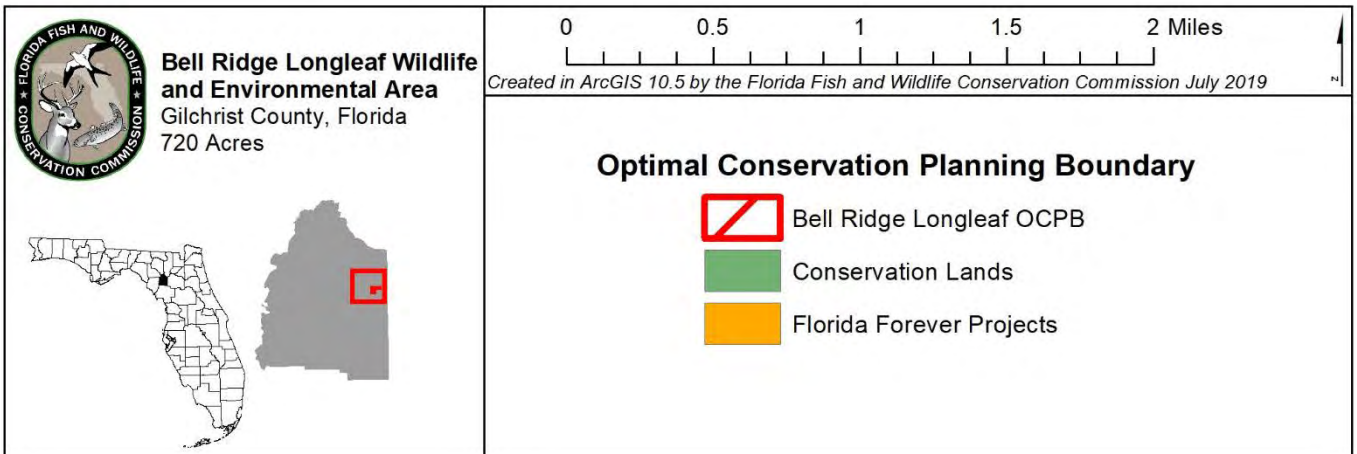
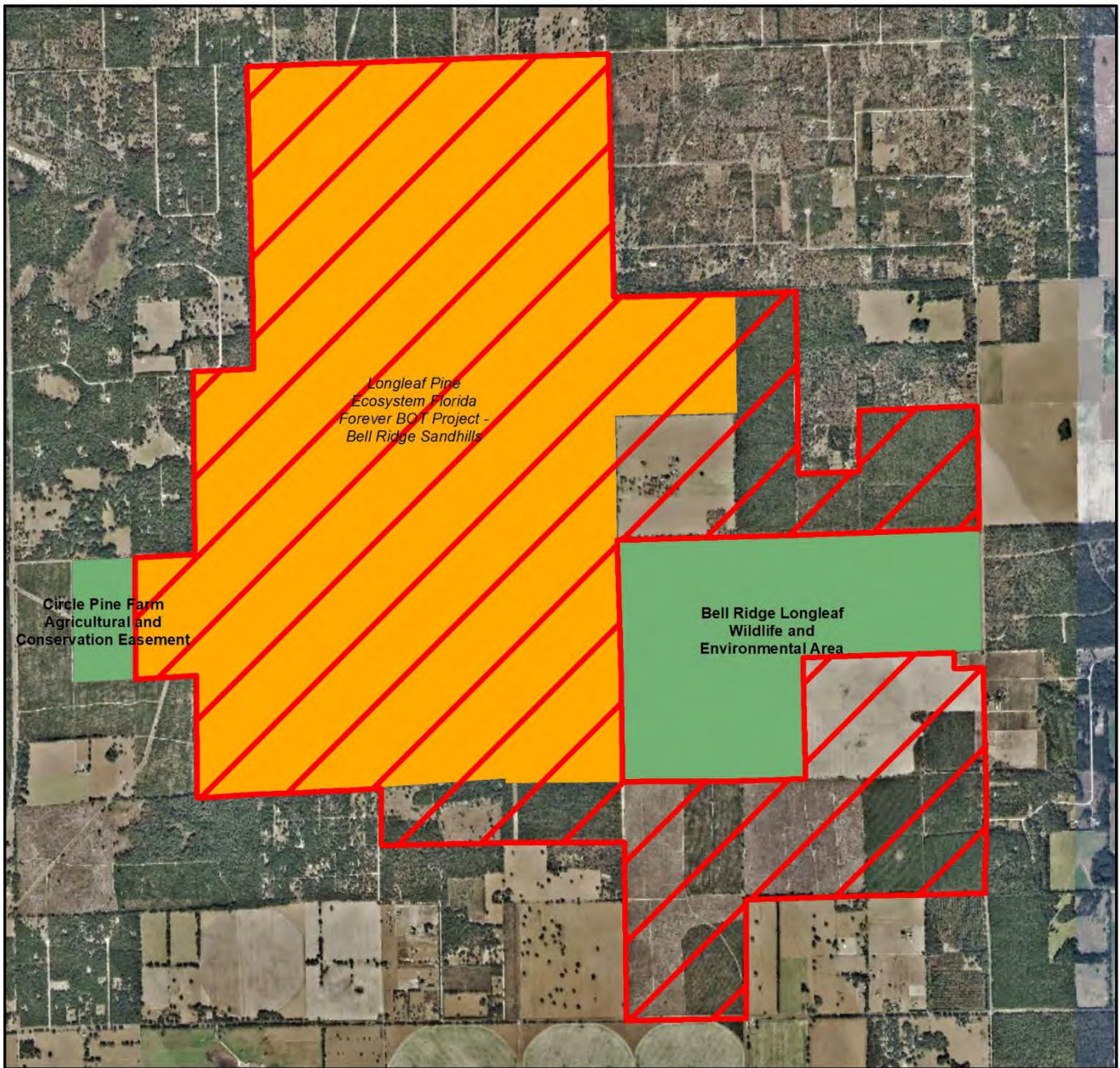


Figure 12: Optimal Conservation Planning Boundary