

ITEM 8:

Consider an amendment to the Apalachicola River Wildlife and Environmental Area Management Plan (Lease No. 3584).

LOCATION:

Gulf and Franklin Counties

APPLICANT:

Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

DSL STAFF REMARKS:

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) is requesting to amend the management plan for the Apalachicola River Wildlife and Environmental Area (ARWEA) to add approximately 13,945 acres of recently acquired land to the 63,678-acre management area. The FWC is the designated lead managing agency for the ARWEA under the authority granted by Lease No. 3584. An update to the ARWEA Management Plan is not due until December 2024.

In Fall 2021, the FWC will begin the development of an updated 10-year management plan for ARWEA ahead of the current schedule. During the development of the updated management plan, the FWC will conduct a Management Advisory Group meeting and a Public Hearing in order to solicit public input for the 10-year management plan. The scope of the updated management plan will include plans for the newly acquired 13,945 acres.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Approve the management plan amendment.

ARC RECOMMENDATION:

APPROVE

APPROVE WITH MODIFICATIONS: _____

DEFER

WITHDRAW

NOT APPROVE

OTHER: _____



**Apalachicola River Wildlife and Environmental Area
Management Plan Amendment
July 2020
Gulf and Franklin counties, Florida**

Introduction

Encompassing approximately 100,306 acres in Franklin and Gulf counties, the Apalachicola River Wildlife and Environmental Area (ARWEA) is part of a vast ecosystem that begins hundreds of miles away in the Chattahoochee National Forest in Georgia at the confluence of the Chattahoochee and Flint rivers, which is now at the Lake Seminole dam. ARWEA contains the largest expanse of floodplain forest in Florida and is an important element in conserving the nationally and internationally recognized biological diversity of the Apalachicola River and Bay ecosystem. This ecosystem has been designated as a United Nations International Biosphere site for its vital role in sustaining ecological diversity. The area provides excellent opportunities for wildlife viewing, nationally recognized paddling and other fish and wildlife-based public outdoor recreation such as hunting, fishing, camping, horseback riding, bicycling and hiking.

Although the cumulative acreage within the ARWEA is 100,306 acres, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) is currently assigned lead management authority for approximately 77,423 acres, which is the focus of the Management Plan and this plan amendment. The FWC lead management area also includes a portion of Tate's Hell Wildlife Management Area. The Florida Forest Service (FFS), the Northwest Florida Water Management District (NFWFMD) and the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) have lead management authority over the remaining acres within ARWEA, with the FFS managing ~3,005 acres, the NFWFMD managing ~14,278 acres and the DEP managing ~4,392 acres (Figure 2). ARWEA is also within the boundary of the 246,766-acre Apalachicola Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (ANERR). Nationally, NERRs have been established by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to help improve coastal management decisions and to provide opportunities for long-term estuarine research and monitoring, as well as estuarine education and interpretation.

Location

ARWEA straddles both Gulf and Franklin counties, beginning just north of the town of Apalachicola and extends northward to the vicinity of Wewahitchka. The city of Eastpoint is one mile south, Carrabelle is 14 miles east and Port St. Joe is 22 miles west. The Apalachicola National Forest and Tate's Hell State Forest border ARWEA to the north and east and the southern boundary extends to East Bay. Residential development and agricultural/forestry operations border the western side of ARWEA. Numerous access points to the area from State Road (SR) 71, County Road (CR) 381, CR 387 and Sauls Creek Road are in Gulf County. In Franklin County, access points are located off SR 65, U. S. Highway-98 and CR 384 near Apalachicola.

Parts of ARWEA lie within the boundary of the Apalachicola Bay Aquatic Preserve (Chapter 18-2.018 and 18-2.021, Florida Administrative Code). ARWEA is not located within an Area of Critical State Concern (ACSC) but is adjacent to the city of Apalachicola, which has been designated as an ACSC (Chapter 380.05, Florida Statute).

Acquisition History

The Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund (Board of Trustees) holds 100% undivided title interest on ARWEA (Lease 3584) in fee-simple title subject to mineral reservations described in the title work for the area. In 1974, the Board of Trustees authorized the first purchase of a large tract of land in the Lower Apalachicola River Basin under the Environmentally Endangered Lands (EEL) program, totaling approximately 30,000 acres (Figure 2). Prior to state acquisition, uses on most of this area included hardwood logging, dredging, commercial activities such as fishing and shipping (barge traffic) and recreational hunting and fishing. A sawgrass marsh north of the Jackson River and west of the Apalachicola River was included in the original purchase.

In 1985, the state purchased five parcels under the Conservation and Recreation Lands (CARL) program, which included the M-K Ranch unit, the largest of these parcels (8,793 acres). In 1994, the state purchased the Bloody Bluff unit. Sand Beach and the Quinn Tract units were acquired by the state in 1996 and 1998, respectively. The additional lands that comprise ARWEA were purchased under the CARL, Preservation-2000 and Florida Forever programs.

Since the ARWEA Management Plan has been approved, the state has purchased 177 acres through the Florida Forever Program. Additionally, in September 2018, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) donated approximately 45 acres. Most recently in December 2019, a donation of approximately 20,161 acres from TNC, part of the St. Joe Timberland Florida Forever Project, was processed with funding provided through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF). Of the 20,161-acre donation, 13,945 acres were added to the ARWEA boundary for management. This most recent acquisition has brought ARWEA to its current size of 100,306 acres and brought the FWC lead managed portion to 77,423 acres (Figure 2).

The addition of this key property to ARWEA, allows for expanded recreational opportunities for visitors, the conservation of important habitat for rare plants and animals and protection of the watershed and water quality of the Jackson and Apalachicola rivers and Apalachicola Bay.

Management Authority

The FWC is the designated lead managing agency for ARWEA under the authority granted by Lease 3584 from the Board of Trustees agent, the DEP-Division of State Lands. Further management authority derives from Article IV, Section 9 of the Florida Constitution as well as the guidance and directives of Chapters 253, 259, 327, 370, 372, 375, 378, 379, 403, 487,

597 and 870 of the Florida Statutes. These constitutional provisions and laws provide the FWC the authority to protect, conserve and manage the State's fish and wildlife resources.

Land Cover and Vegetation

Through the services of the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI), the natural and historic natural communities for approximately 63,000 acres of the FWC lead managed areas of ARWEA were mapped. FNAI documented 31 natural and anthropogenic communities. The largest communities are floodplain swamp (58.4%), floodplain marsh (8.5%), pine plantation (7.5%), shrub bog (5%), restoration wet flatwoods (3.3%) and bottomland forest (3.1%). The FWC already has a contract in place with FNAI regarding natural community mapping for the newly added parcels. Additionally, the FWC has contracts in place for a rare and exotic plant survey and hydrology assessments to be completed on the most recent addition.

The FWC uses the mapped current and historic vegetation communities as a guide and to help prioritize management and restoration efforts. The FWC will continue to focus on restoring the form and function of the natural communities at ARWEA.

Management Plan and Public Input

An update to the ARWEA Management Plan is not due until December 2024. However, since nearly 13,945 acres were recently added to the ARWEA boundary, the FWC is submitting this management plan amendment. In Fall 2021, the FWC will begin the development of an updated 10-year management plan for ARWEA. During the development of the updated management plan, the FWC will perform a Management Advisory Group meeting and a Public Hearing in order to solicit public input for the 10-year management plan. The scope of the updated management plan will include plans for the newly acquired 13,945 acres. Parcel additions and updated boundary maps are provided in Figure 1.

Management Activities

As stated above, the FWC has contracts for a rare and exotic plant survey and hydrology assessments, in place. In addition to these assessments, the FWC plans to conduct the following activities on the new addition:

- Conduct wildlife and plant surveys, for imperiled, locally important and common species.
- Coordinate with FNAI for mapping of natural and anthropogenic communities.
- Coordinate with the Florida Department of State's Division of Historical Resources (DHR) for a cultural resource assessment or reconnaissance survey.
- Contract for a timber inventory.
- Perform longleaf pine planting and restoration where necessary and appropriate.
- Perform upland habitat restoration activities including roller chopping, mowing and site preparation where necessary and appropriate.

- Conduct prescribed burning on fire adapted communities.
- Installation of fire breaks where needed and appropriate.
- Conduct road maintenance such as grading, repair and removal of roads.
- Install or replace gates and fencing on the area as needed and appropriate.
- Contract for invasive and exotic treatments and control.
- Begin to explore the feasibility of recreational opportunities expansion and an increased carrying capacity (Sections 5.6 and 6.5 of the previously approved ARWEA Management Plan).

The FWC will also continue to work with the DHR regarding any potential discovery or impacts to historical resources, and any ground disturbing activities that may occur on the area, as necessary.

Estimate of Costs

The initial non-recurring (first year only) start-up cost for the 13,945 acres added to ARWEA is estimated to be \$2,231,000, which includes cost of surveys, contractual work and other potential public access enhancements for management of the area. Through a grant issued by NFWF, the FWC will receive approximately \$1.3 million during the first three years of management, following acquisition, to assist with various management projects. Below is an estimate of the recurring costs to operate and manage the new addition to ARWEA. Optimal management of the newly acquired addition would require three (3) full-time equivalent (FTE) positions. Salary requirements for these FTE positions, as well as those of other needed FWC staff, and costs to operate and manage the ARWEA, are reflected in the cost estimate below. All land management funding is dependent upon annual legislative appropriations.

Apalachicola River WEA Addition
Estimated Recurring Management Costs

<u>Resource Management</u>	<u>Expenditure</u>	<u>Priority</u>	<u>Priority schedule:</u>
Exotic Species Control	\$34,444	(1)	(1) Immediate (annual)
Prescribed Burning	\$73,769	(1)	(2) Intermediate (3-4 years)
Cultural Resource Management	\$3,068	(1)	(3) Other (5+ years)
Timber Management	\$4,741	(1)	
Hydrological Management	\$31,237	(1)	
Other (Restoration, Enhancement, Surveys, Monitoring, etc.)	\$385,719	(1)	
Subtotal	\$532,978		
<u>Administration</u>			
General administration	\$11,574	(1)	
<u>Support</u>			
Land Management Planning	\$18,826	(1)	
Land Management Reviews	\$2,789	(3)	
Training/Staff Development	\$3,347	(1)	
Vehicle Purchase	\$58,151	(2)	
Vehicle Operation and Maintenance	\$34,305	(1)	
Other (Technical Reports, Data Management, etc.)	\$31,655	(1)	
Subtotal	\$149,072		
<u>Capital Improvements</u>			
Facility Maintenance	\$81,160	(1)	
<u>Visitor Services/Recreation</u>			
Info./Education/Operations	\$51,178	(1)	
<u>Law Enforcement</u>			
Resource protection	\$10,738	(1)	
<u>Total</u>	\$836,700	*	

*Based on the characteristics and requirements of this area, three (3) full time equivalent (FTE) positions would be optimal to fully manage this area. All land management funding is dependent upon annual legislative appropriations.

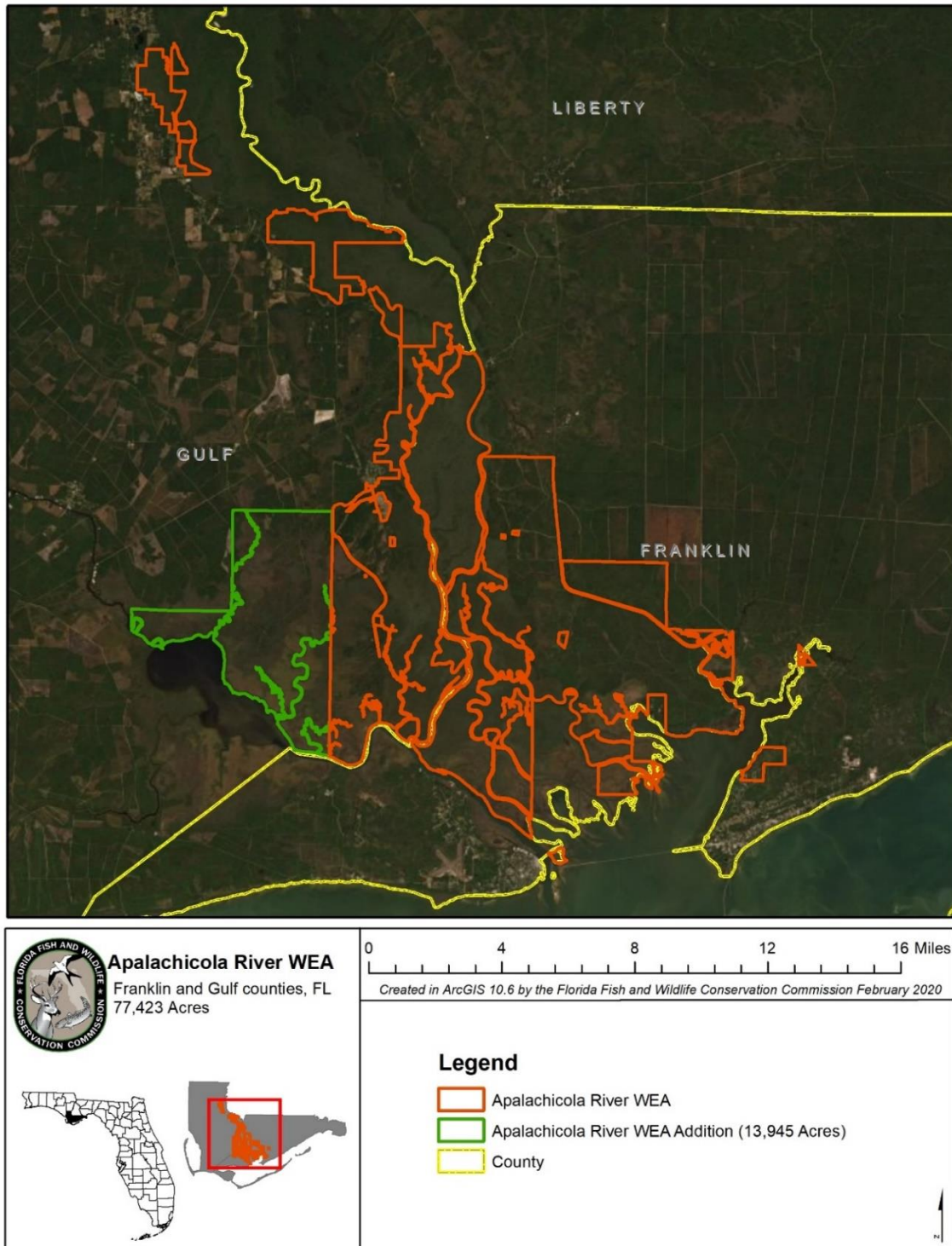


Figure 1. Additions to the FWC Lead Managed Portion of ARWEA

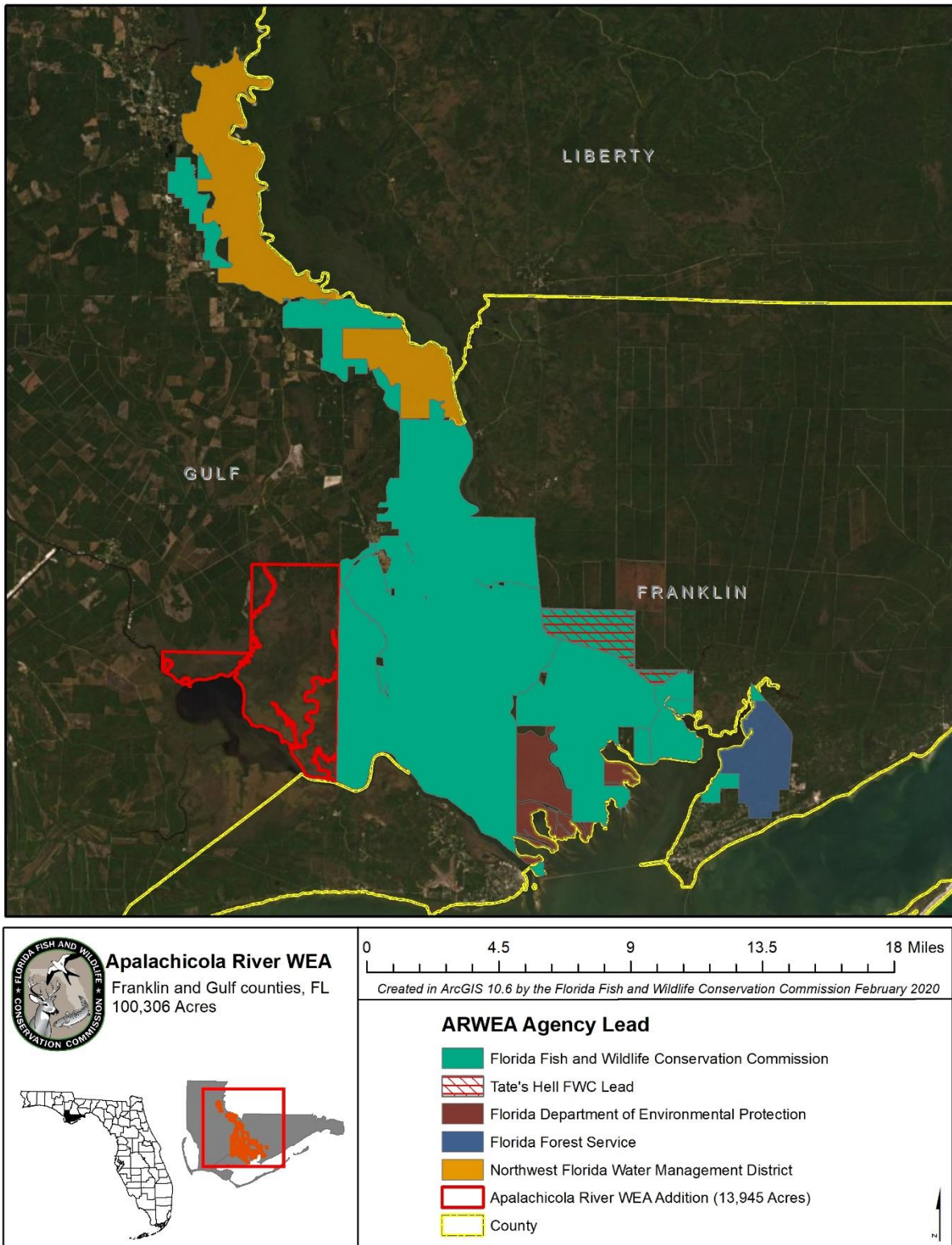


Figure 2. ARWEA with Agency Leads