

ITEM 9:

Consider an amendment to the Box-R Wildlife Management Area Management Plan (Lease No. 4454).

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 Box-R Wildlife Management Area (BRWMA) to add approximately 6,194 acres of recently acquired land to the 12,278-acre management area. The FWC is the designated lead managing agency for the BRWMA under the authority granted by Lease No. 4454. An update to the BRWMA Management Plan is not due until February 2027.

In Fall 2022, the FWC will initiate the development of an updated 10-year management plan for the BRWMA 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 6,194 acres.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Approve the management plan amendment.

ARC RECOMMENDATION:

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



**Box-R Wildlife Management Area
Management Plan Amendment
July 2020
Gulf and Franklin counties, Florida**

Introduction

Encompassing 18,472 acres in Franklin and Gulf counties, the Box-R Wildlife Management Area's (BRWMA) diverse wildlife habitats include floodplain swamp, floodplain marsh, bottomland forest and pine flatwoods that support significant populations of imperiled, rare and more prevalent wildlife species. Among others, the wildlife includes the Florida black bear, wood stork, bobwhite quail, fat threeridge, Barbour's map turtle, gulf moccasinshell, oval pigtoe, purple bankclimber, osprey and southern bald eagle. Conserving the area's unique assemblage of tidal marshes, creeks, floodplain swamps, hammocks and pine uplands provides vital habitat for these and many other wildlife species.

Location

Located just inland along Florida's "Forgotten" northwest Gulf coast in Franklin and Gulf counties, 2.5 miles west of the historic town of Apalachicola, the BRWMA fulfills an important function within a renowned and complex ecological system that includes Lake Wimico, the Apalachicola and Jackson rivers and Apalachicola Bay. The Apalachicola Bay Ecosystem has been designated as a United Nations International Biosphere site for its vital role in sustaining ecological diversity. Conservation of the BRWMA aids in protecting the watershed and water quality of the Apalachicola River and Bay ecosystem.

Acquisition History

The initial acquisition of lands within what is now the BRWMA was obtained when The Nature Conservancy (TNC), acquired 7,597 acres from the St. Joe Timberland Company (SJC) in April 2003. Subsequently, in December of 2003, the FWC and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) jointly acquired the original 7,597 acres of the BRWMA from TNC through the FWC's Florida Forever Additions and Inholdings (A&I) Acquisition program and the DEP's Florida Forever program, respectively, as part of the Lake Wimico Unit of the St. Joe Timberland Florida Forever Project. This acquisition comprised the initial establishment boundary of the area in April of 2004. In April 2005, an 800-acre tract of the Apalachicola River Wildlife and Environmental Area (ARWEA), contiguous to the BRWMA, was added to the established BRWMA boundary. In January 2009, another noted addition to the area occurred when the DEP acquired an additional 2,819 acres of land within the Lake Wimico Unit of the St. Joe Timberland Florida Forever project from the SJC.

Additionally, in November 2017, the DEP and the FWC purchased two parcels that were added to the BRWMA in Franklin County. Using funds from the FWC's Florida Forever A&I Acquisition Program and the DEP's Florida Forever Program, the two agencies evenly

split the cost of purchasing 552 acres from Wimico Bud, LLC, and 492 acres from Wimico Imports, LLC, as part of the St. Joe Timberland Florida Forever Project. Together, the properties added roughly 1,044 acres and 2,400 feet of protected frontage along the Jackson River. This addition increased the area of the BRWMA to more than 12,260 acres. A management plan amendment was submitted in March 2018 to amend the current management plan to include these acquisitions.

Since the BRWMA Management Plan amendment was approved, in June of 2018, the FWC purchased approximately 18 acres through the FWC's Florida Forever A&I Acquisition program. Additionally, TNC donated approximately 20,161 acres, through funding by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), in December of 2019. This donated property was within the St. Vincent Sound to Lake Wimico Unit of the St. Joe Timberland Florida Forever Project. Approximately 6,194 acres of the total donation was added to the BRWMA boundary for management, bringing the area to its current size of 18,472 acres.

The addition of these key properties to the BRWMA, allows for expanded recreational opportunities for visitors, the conservation of important habitat for rare plants and animals and the 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 the BRWMA under the authority granted by Lease 4454 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 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 on approximately 12,260 acres of the BRWMA were mapped. FNAI documented 30 natural and anthropogenic communities. The largest communities are pine plantation (19.8%), floodplain swamp (19.5%), shrub bog (16.1%), floodplain marsh (14%), restoration mesic flatwoods (10.7%) and restoration wet flatwoods (4.5%), respectively. The FWC already has a contract in place with FNAI regarding natural community mapping for the newly added 6,194 acres. 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 vegetative communities as a guide to help prioritize management and restoration efforts. The FWC will continue to focus on restoring the form and function of the natural communities at the BRWMA.

Management Plan

An update to the BRWMA Management Plan is not due until February 2027. However, since nearly 6,194 acres were recently added to the BRWMA boundary, the FWC is submitting this management plan amendment. In Fall 2022, the FWC will begin the development of an updated 10-year management plan for the BRWMA. 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 6,194 acres. Parcel additions and updated boundary maps are provided in Figure 1.

Management Activities

As stated above, the FWC has contracts in place for a rare and exotic plant survey and hydrology assessments. In addition to these assessments, the FWC will perform 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 includes 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 fences 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 5.6.3 and 6.5 of the previously approved BRWMA Management Plan).

The FWC will also continue to work with 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 BRWMA addition is estimated to be \$991,040, which includes cost of surveys, contractual work and other potential public access enhancement projects. Through a grant issued by NFWF, following acquisition, the

FWC will receive approximately \$1.3 million during the first three years of management to assist with various management projects. Below is an estimate of the recurring costs to operate and manage the newly acquired 6,194 acres. Optimal management of the newly acquired addition would require two (2) 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 BRWMA, are reflected in the cost estimate below. All land management funding is dependent upon annual legislative appropriations.

Box-R WMA Addition
Estimated Recurring Management Costs

<u>Resource Management</u>	<u>Expenditure</u>	<u>Priority</u>	<u>Priority schedule:</u>
Exotic Species Control	\$15,299	(1)	(1) Immediate (annual)
Prescribed Burning	\$32,766	(1)	(2) Intermediate (3-4 years)
Cultural Resource Management	\$1,363	(1)	(3) Other (5+ years)
Timber Management	\$2,106	(1)	
Hydrological Management	\$13,875	(1)	
Other (Restoration, Enhancement, Surveys, Monitoring, etc.)	\$171,326	(1)	
Subtotal	\$236,735		
<u>Administration</u>			
General administration	\$5,141	(1)	
<u>Support</u>			
Land Management Planning	\$8,362	(1)	
Land Management Reviews	\$1,239	(3)	
Training/Staff Development	\$1,487	(1)	
Vehicle Purchase	\$25,829	(2)	
Vehicle Operation and Maintenance	\$15,237	(1)	
Other (Technical Reports, Data Management, etc.)	\$14,060	(1)	
Subtotal	\$66,214		
<u>Capital Improvements</u>			
Facility Maintenance	\$36,049	(1)	
<u>Visitor Services/Recreation</u>			
Info./Education/Operations	\$22,732	(1)	
<u>Law Enforcement</u>			
Resource protection	\$4,769	(1)	
Total	\$371,640	*	

*Based on the characteristics and requirements of this area, two (2) full time equivalent (FTE) positions would be optimal to fully manage this area. All land management funding is dependent upon annual legislative appropriations.

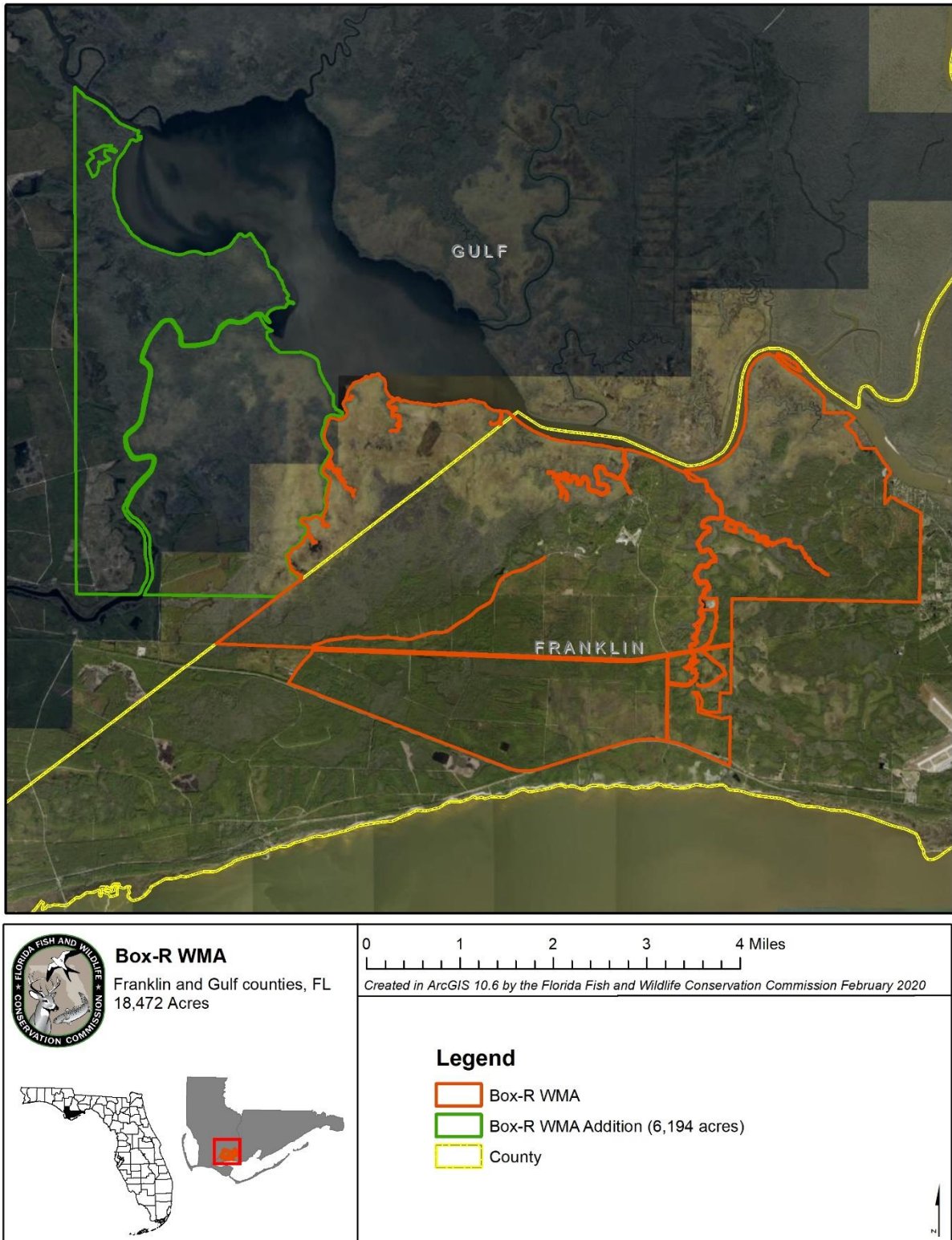


Figure 1. Additions to BRWMA