

# Natural Bridge Timberlands

Critical Natural Lands

Jefferson and Leon Counties

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2022
<i>Project Acres</i>	5,442
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	5,442
<i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i>	\$13,400,000
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	0
<i>2023 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$0

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Natural Bridge Timberlands project will contribute to the completion of an expansive corridor of public conservation lands that promote ecological connectivity, conserve valuable habitat for rare plant and animal species and protect sensitive cultural resources. The project will protect the water quality and quantity of the St. Marks River and the associated natural springs and karst features found within the Upper St. Marks River Basin. The project will also allow for the expansion of public resource-based recreational opportunities and support the continuation of sustainably managed silviculture practices.

## General Description

The Natural Bridge Timberlands project is located in Leon and Jefferson counties, east of Old Plank Road and north of Natural Bridge Road. The project area abuts Natural Bridge Battlefield Historic State Park to the west and Plank Road State Forest to the north. The Aucilla Wildlife Management Area is within a half-mile to the east. The project is proposed as a fee simple acquisition to be managed by the Florida Forest Service as part of Plank Road State Forest.

The property primarily consists of pine plantation on former mesic/wet flatwoods. Basin and dome swamps account for more than one third of the project area. The property drains towards the upper reaches of the St. Marks River that flows within a mile of the northern and western project boundary. Rare species documented on the property can be seen in the table below. The entire project is located within Priority 2 of the Florida Ecological Greenways Network. The project is also within the recently designated Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape, a component of the U.S. Department of Defense's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program.

The project sits in one of the most archaeologically rich areas of Florida and is near the Natural Bridge archaeological site (LE188), which contains evidence of occupations spanning the entirety of Florida history, including most notably the Civil War Natural Bridge Battlefield. No archaeological or cultural resources are currently recorded on-site. However, Division of Historical Resources staff noted several areas with a high likelihood of intact archaeological deposits during field review.



FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4

Public Use

Upland areas of the project could be utilized for expansion of public outdoor recreation opportunities currently available within Plank Road State Forest. Activities such as hiking, biking, fishing, camping and nature study are all compatible with the resources identified in the project.

Acquisition Planning

**2022**

On October 14, 2022, the Acquisition and Restoration Council added the Natural Bridge Timberlands project to the 2023 Florida Forever Priority List.

**2023**

DEP acquired, in fee, 5,457 acres in Jefferson and Leon counties from American Land and AG Holdings, LLC. The acquisition closed after the Project Ranking occurred and therefore the project could not be removed as complete from the 2024 Florida Forever Priority List.

Management Policy Statement

The Natural Bridge Timberlands property is in southeastern Leon and western Jefferson counties, less than three miles southeast of the city limits of Tallahassee. Natural Bridge Historic Battlefield State Park and Plank Road State Forest, both important natural buffers for protecting the St. Marks River, border the property along its entire western and northern boundary. Its eastern border is within approximately 1,500 feet of the 46,000-acre Aucilla Wildlife Management Area. Natural Bridge Road forms the southern boundary of the property.

The following management goals and objectives were identified: protection of surface and groundwater resources; reintroduction of prescribed fire to gradually reduce accumulated fuel load; improvement of habitat for rare, threatened and endangered wildlife species; provide opportunities for recreation activities; and protection of cultural resources.

Manager(s)

The Florida Forest Service is the proposed manager for the Natural Bridge Timberlands project.

Management Prospectus

**Qualifications for State Designation**

A significant portion of the Natural Bridge Timberlands has been used for silviculture, but a few of the plantation areas have retained some native understory. With prescribed fire and sustainable forestry management practices, the project area could be transformed from lands managed for silviculture to lands managed for their ecological and recreational benefits. The project’s size, proximity to Plank Road State Forest and habitat quality make it desirable for use and management as part of Plank Road State Forest.





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

The encroachment of hardwoods into sandhill and mesic upland portions of the property have shaded out much of the characteristic species of these habitats. As the hardwoods move in, shrubs come in as well. This makes the use of fire for management more difficult, and further exacerbates the extirpation of the plant species that are native to the community. Removal of hardwoods and shrubs, as well as the use of more prescribed fire, will likely be the focus of initial management efforts. The level of intensity and related management costs are expected to be initially moderate, and long-term management costs are expected to be low to maintain the area as part of Plank Road State Forest.

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

Once the project area is acquired and assigned to the Florida Forest Service, public access will be available for low-intensity outdoor resource-based recreation activities. The Florida Forest Service 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 of harvested areas, providing site security and assessing public and fire management access. Inventories of the site's natural resources and listed species will be conducted to provide a basis for the formulation of a management plan.

Roads throughout the property necessitate the development of a plan to identify those roads that are to be utilized for access by the public and for administrative use; 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 resource information, management proposals for the project are conceptual in nature. Long-range plans for the property will be directed toward the restoration of disturbed areas, maintenance of natural communities, and responsible public access. 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 sites.

Burning goals for the project will be to eventually establish an all-season prescribed burning program on all the fire dependent community types. Whenever possible, existing roads and natural breaks will be utilized to contain and control 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. This will provide habitat for various native species and will enhance and maintain biodiversity.

The resource inventory will be used to identify areas that need special attention, protection or management and areas that are appropriate for recreational or administrative facilities. Development will be primarily located in disturbed areas and will be at a minimum required for management and public access and use. The Florida Forest Service will promote recreation and environmental education in the natural environment. It is anticipated that interpretive and user services recreation facilities will be developed. 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.

**Revenue-generating Potential**

Natural Bridge Timberlands will be managed to promote and improve overall forest health. Timber is a valuable economic resource, and timber harvesting for the purposes of biological restoration and forest health improvement are recognized silvicultural objectives. Proposed include both commercial timber harvests and timber stand improvement activities, as needed. Sales will primarily take place in planted pine stands and will provide a variable source of revenue dependent upon a variety of factors.

**Cooperators in Management Activities**

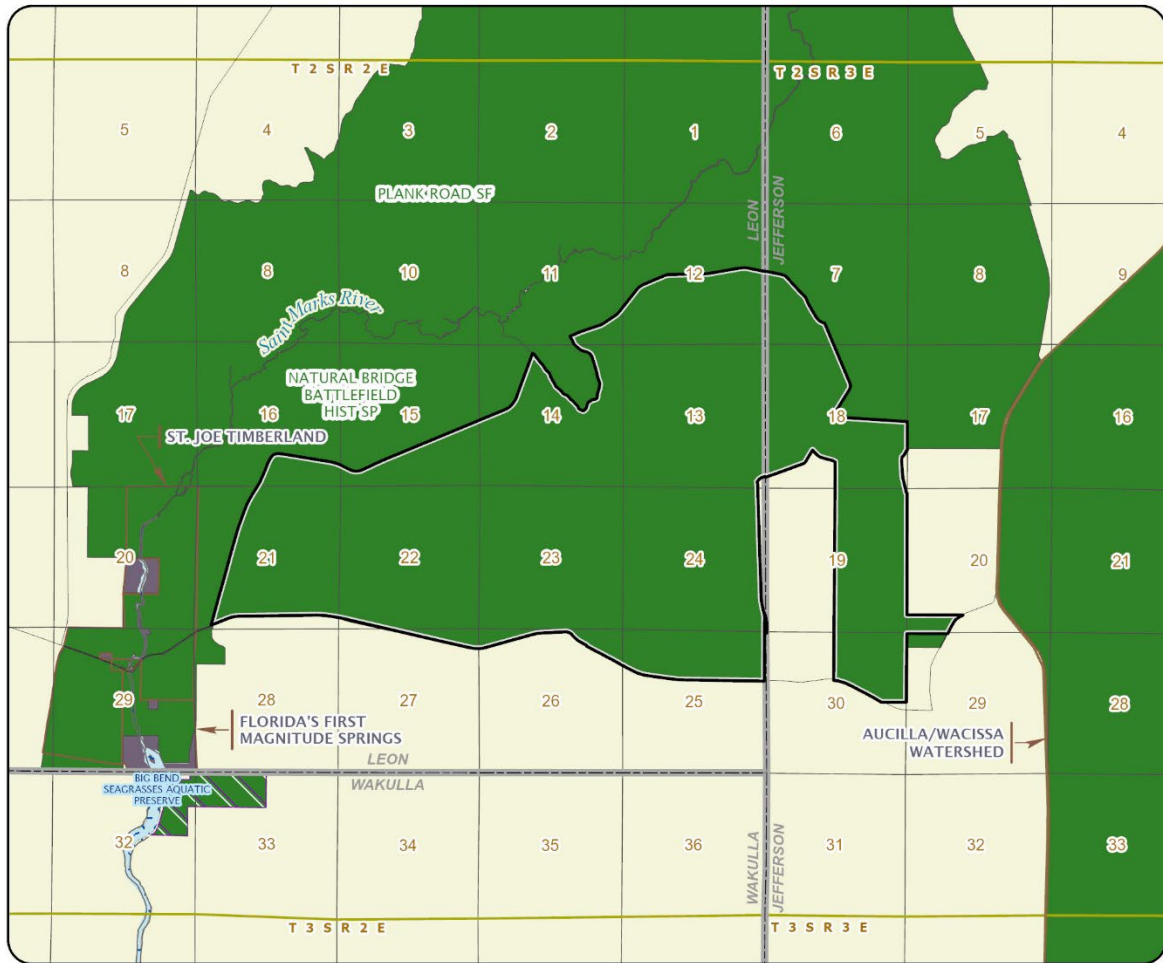
The Florida Forest Service will cooperate with and seek the assistance of other state agencies, local government entities and interested parties as appropriate.

Management Cost Summary

	2022
Salary (1-OPS Park Ranger)	\$45,000
Expense	\$50,000
OCO	\$250,000
Outsourcing	\$20,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$365,000</b>

*Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted*





### NATURAL BRIDGE TIMBERLANDS

#### JEFFERSON AND LEON COUNTIES

