

# Upper Shoal River

Critical Natural Lands

Walton County

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2003
<i>Project Acres</i>	12,035
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	0
<i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i>	\$0
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	12,035
<i>2023 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$24,981,263

## Purpose for State Acquisition

The Upper Shoal River project will conserve timber resources within the Upper Shoal River watershed, protect unaltered and intact natural seepage streams and habitat for rare and imperiled species. The project will support the creation of a connected landscape corridor with nearby conservation lands including important buffer lands surrounding Eglin Air Force Base.

## General Description

The Upper Shoal River proposal does not include the river or its floodplain; however, it is comprised of two tracts of land that are within the river's watershed. The first of the two tracts, the Pine Log Creek tract, is about 3.5 miles north of the river and abuts the Okaloosa County line. The Pine Log Creek tract contains 9,727 acres. The remaining 2,300 acres are included in the Gum Creek tract, which is about five miles southeast of the Pine Log Creek tract. Combined, the two tracts contain approximately 20 miles of headwater tributary streams. Most of the site's original pinelands have been disturbed by conversion to pine plantations that comprise most of the proposal. Conservation lands near the project include those on nearby Eglin Air Force Base, Yellow River Water Management Area and the Upper Yellow River Florida Forever project.

Both tracts are characterized by high, rolling sandy hills that drain through rolling sandy hills downward through mesic or wet flatwoods and through slope forests into bottomland and floodplain forests along the seepage streams that are tributaries of the Shoal River. Upland communities include approximately 750 acres of sandhill and 300 acres of upland hardwood forest or slope forest. Approximately 100 acres of mesic and wet flatwoods are interspersed around these other natural community types. The sandhill communities are in moderately good condition with an intact diverse indigenous groundcover including wiregrass. Forested wetlands have 1,550 acres of baygall, floodplain or bottomland forest. The actual seepage stream communities are about 10 acres.

About 75 acres have been classified as disturbed. The Florida Natural Areas Inventory indicates that 22 percent (3,202 acres) of the project area are under-represented natural communities. Functional wetlands comprise eight percent (1,216 acres) of the project area and help conserve areas for aquifer recharge (35 percent, or 5,148 acres of project area), provide fish and wildlife habitat and provide for



natural floodplain function (13 percent, or 1,895 acres of project area). The Florida Natural Areas Inventory Florida Forever Measures Evaluation also indicates that the entire project area provides surface-water protection. Both tracts have been managed for silviculture operations. Neither tract shows evidence of intensive management activities. Scattered longleaf pine regeneration is present on both tracts. Most of the pine stands are planted in evenly aged compartments, with some compartments including uneven-aged stands, and a greater diversity of pine species. Past thinning of stands of loblolly pine, longleaf pine and slash pine has occurred throughout both parcels. Fire has not occurred on the tracts for several years, resulting in increased fuel loads. Ecotones adjacent to forested wetlands and seepage streams appear intact and undisturbed.

Imperiled or rare animal species either occurring or likely to occur within the project, include the blackmouth shiner, eastern diamondback rattlesnake, eastern indigo snake, Florida black bear, gopher frog, gopher tortoise, little blue heron, pine barrens treefrog, Sherman’s fox squirrel, southern pine snake and white ibis. Gopher tortoise burrows are of particular importance as they often provide refugia for a suite of declining wildlife species, including the eastern indigo snake and gopher frog. Available groundcover may provide a sufficient forage base for the gopher tortoise population. Slope forests, forested wetlands and seepage streams may support several listed plant and animal species, such as the pine barrens tree frog, which has been documented to occur in the project area. Game species observed, or for which sign was available in the project area, included mourning dove, white-tailed deer and wild turkey. Both tracts appear to have recently been used for hunting and fishing.

Imperiled or rare plant species documented to occur in the proposed project include Arkansas oak, mountain laurel, red pitcher plant and white-top pitcher plant. Other imperiled or rare plant species known to occur nearby that may occur in the proposed project include bog button, Florida flame azalea, hairy wild indigo, Harper’s yellow-eyed grass, panhandle lily, sandhill sedge, silky camellia, umbrella magnolia and yellow fringeless orchid. However, a large portion of the project provides habitat for many focal species, which according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, are indicators of natural communities and suitable habitat conditions for many other species of wildlife. Management goals for the site should consider habitat management to protect and enhance focal species habitat. Additionally, large tracts of habitat are important to conserve widely ranging species such as the eastern indigo snake and Florida black bear. Bears have been documented to use riparian corridors of the Shoal River and its tributaries in Okaloosa County, and to occur in Walton County. These are likely migratory routes for the Florida black bear.

FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

<u>FNAI Elements</u>	<u>Score</u>
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
<i>Wherry’s redflower pitcherplant</i>	G3T1?/S3
<i>Arkansas oak</i>	G3/S3
Pine barrens treefrog	G4/S3
<i>mountain laurel</i>	G5/S3





## Public Use

The Upper Shoal River project has the potential to provide a diverse resource-based recreational experience. Both project parcels have good boundary configurations that will enhance management efforts and are easily accessible from paved and unpaved public roads. Both tracts can support a diversity of resource-based outdoor recreational opportunities.

Horseback riding may be more appropriate for the larger Pine Log Creek tract. Depending on management emphasis, hunting would be suitable on the Pine Log Creek tract. The smaller Gum Creek tract is closer to residential areas and would not be as suitable for this activity. However, both tracts could support camping, hiking, off-road bicycling, natural resource appreciation and educational activities.

## Acquisition Planning

### **2003**

On December 5, 2003, the Acquisition and Restoration Council added the fee-simple project to the Florida Forever Priority List.

### **2011**

On December 9, 2011, the Acquisition and Restoration Council placed the project in the Critical Natural Lands category.

## Coordination

The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Department of Defense are acquisition partners for the project.

## Management Policy Statement

The primary land management goal for the Florida Forest Service is to restore, maintain and protect in perpetuity all native ecosystems; to integrate compatible human use; and to ensure long-term viability of populations and species considered rare. This ecosystem approach will guide the Florida Forest Service's management activities on the project.

## Manager(s)

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Florida Forest Service will be co-managers. The Division of Recreation and Parks will manage the Gum Creek tract.

## Management Prospectus

The Florida Forest Service and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission are prepared to share all management responsibilities for Upper Shoal River under a unified management concept. The project has the capability to provide important fish and wildlife habitat in a manner that is compatible with silviculture. Since the project goals include protecting biodiversity and providing natural resource-based recreational and educational opportunities, programs would be developed that serve to manage ecosystems for multiple use. Conservation and protection of native habitats and rare or imperiled species should be an important management goal for the project. Particular attention should be directed to the protection of upstream riparian systems that are an important habitat for imperiled fish and invertebrates. Under the unified management approach, timber stands would be managed to maintain a broad diversity of age classes ranging from young stands to areas with old growth characteristics. This





would provide habitat for species that would be found in the natural environment, therefore benefitting biodiversity. The project area is near many users that enjoy fishing, hiking, hunting and wildlife viewing.

### **Qualifications for State Designation**

The project area consists of two separate tracts and ownerships situated in the Northern Highlands physiographic province where some of Florida's highest elevations occur. The project includes headwater streams and creeks connected to the Shoal River system and is entirely within its watershed.

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

Upper Shoal River is a medium-need tract that will require up-front resource management activities, including the frequent use of prescribed fire where appropriate. Approximately 75 percent of the project area has been subjected to ground cover disturbance from past silvicultural activity; additional effort will be required to accomplish restoration. The Florida Forest Service and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission propose to work cooperatively to assess site management needs and develop the conceptual management plan for the site. Examples of situations that may require cooperative effort include restoration of mesic and wet flatwoods previously managed for timber production, removal or thinning of off-site timber species to promote the regeneration of native ground covers and appropriate tree species and reforestation of recently harvested areas. As part of the unified management approach, the managing agencies will conduct a historic vegetation analysis to determine appropriate desired future conditions and identify appropriate restoration methods and tools.

Other unified management priorities will include protection and restoration of sensitive wetlands along with the identification, control and follow-up monitoring of exotic species. Restoration methods will also include thinning of dense pine stands to decrease canopy cover and facilitate the restoration of native groundcovers. An adequate road system exists on both sites to assist with prescribed burning operations. Because many imperiled or rare species are expected to occur in the project, biotic surveys would be conducted as part of early unified management activities. Environmentally sensitive areas such as erosion-prone sites, listed species habitats, outstanding natural areas and wetlands are to be identified during the initial resource inventory to implement appropriate protective measures.

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

It is anticipated that during the first year after acquisition, both agencies will emphasize site security, posting boundaries, public access for low-intensity outdoor recreation, fire management, resource inventory and removing refuse. The managing agencies will meet frequently to coordinate task assignments and other related management duties. Both managing agencies will participate in the joint development of a conceptual management plan specifying area management goals and objectives.

Long-term goals would emphasize management and the conservation of the site's natural resources including timber, wildlife and water. These goals would include restoring habitat and hydrology and conserving and protecting listed species.

Following completion of plant community inventory and historic vegetation analysis, quantified vegetation management objectives would be developed pursuant to an objective-based vegetation management process. Where practical, disturbed sites would be restored to conditions expected to occur in naturally functioning ecosystems, including re-establishment of species expected to occur naturally on





specific sites. Management would emphasize enhancement of abundance and spatial distribution of imperiled or rare species. Essential roads would be stabilized to provide all-weather public access and management operations. Programs providing multiple recreational uses would also be implemented.

Both agencies will work towards the development of a fire management plan that will apply prescribed burning in a manner that maximizes natural resource protection and enhancement. Whenever possible, existing roads, black lines, foam lines and natural breaks will be utilized to contain, and control prescribed and natural fires. Growing season prescribed burning would be used where appropriate to best achieve management objectives. Where appropriate, timber resources will be managed using acceptable silvicultural practices.

Archaeological and historic sites would be managed in coordination with the Division of Historical Resources. A plan identifying road for vehicular access by the public, and roads required for administrative use will be developed. Unnecessary roads, fire lanes and hydrological disturbances would be abandoned or restored as practical. Other existing infrastructure necessary for management would be protected to the extent possible. Infrastructure development would be the minimum required to serve the needs of the public, including provisions for facilities necessary for the security and management of the project area.

**Revenue-generating Potential**

Timber sales would be conducted as needed to improve or maintain desirable ecosystem conditions. Additional revenue could come from sales of hunting licenses, fishing licenses, wildlife management area permits and other special hunting permits. Some revenues might come from recreational user fees and ecotourism activities if such projects can be economically developed. Fifteen percent of all gross revenues will be returned to the county from which funds were generated. Both agencies have agreed to a unified management framework whereby all management funds, site-generated revenues and management expenditures are to be evenly divided between the Florida Forest Service and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

**Cooperators in Management Activities**

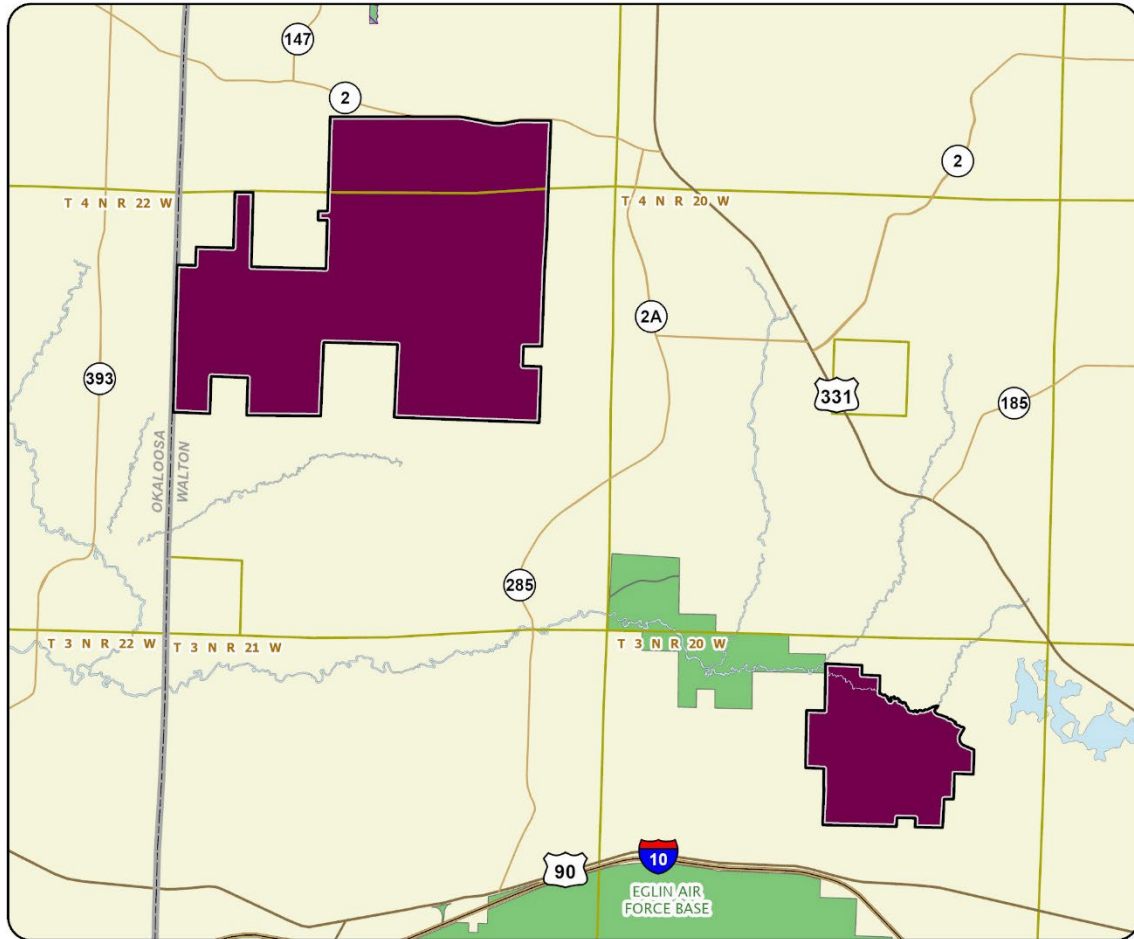
The unified managers (Florida Forest Service and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission) should cooperate with other state and local governmental agencies, including the Northwest Florida Water Management District, to manage the project area. The project should be designated as a state forest and wildlife management area.

Management Cost Summary

<u>FFS and FWC</u>	<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Source of Funds	LATF	LATF
Resource Management	\$212,891	\$244,479
Administration	\$82,345	\$33,072
Support	\$149,080	\$31,566
Capital Improvements	\$2,187,189	\$58,179
Visitor Services/Recreation	\$10,191	\$10,191
TOTAL	\$2,641,696	\$377,487

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted





### UPPER SHOAL RIVER

#### WALTON COUNTY

