

Horse Creek Ranch

Less-Than-Fee

DeSoto, Hardee

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|---|--------------|
| <i>Year Added to Priority List</i> | 2010 |
| <i>Project Acres</i> | 16,316 |
| <i>Acquired Acres</i> | 0 |
| <i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i> | \$0 |
| <i>Remaining Project Acres</i> | 16,316 |
| <i>2020 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i> | \$45,408,630 |

Purpose for State Acquisition

The proposed Horse Creek Ranch project will provide a buffer for Horse Creek, a high water-quality tributary of the Peace River. The project will support additional resource protection for the Peace River watershed and riverine wetlands, the Charlotte Harbor Estuary and Peace River Refuge Florida Forever projects, and the Gasparilla Sound-Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserve. The project will provide enhancement of imperiled natural communities and habitat protection for numerous rare species.

General Description

The Horse Creek Ranch project is located in southwestern Hardee County and northwestern DeSoto County, southwest of the town of Wauchula. The county line divides the ranch about midway north-south. County Roads (CR) 663 and 661 form the eastern boundary in a portion of the north and south, respectively, and CR 665 traverses the northern third of the property east-west. The site's natural communities include mesic and wet flatwoods, bottomland forest, depression and basin marshes, mesic hammock, scrubby flatwoods, baygall, and blackwater streams. The natural uplands are principally longleaf-pine-dominated mesic flatwoods with pockets of scrubby flatwoods on the highest elevations and more hydric wet flatwoods in the ecotone between the uplands and the Horse Creek floodplain.

A large block of high-quality mesic flatwoods extends from the eastern floodplain of Horse Creek to the eastern boundary of the property in the southern part of the project. The groundcover in these flatwoods is in excellent condition and is well managed with prescribed fire. There is a lush, diverse mixture of low shrubs, grasses and other vegetation

Smaller pockets of flatwoods occur to the north and to the west of Horse Creek. Extensive stands of old growth longleaf pines occur in the southern portions of the property. Smaller patches of flatwoods that support a mix of South Florida slash pine and longleaf pine can be found in the northeastern portion of the project.

The remainder of the property is improved pastures and old agricultural fields. The property is a working cattle ranch, and there are some small areas of row crops and sod fields. Horse Creek and Limestone

Creek are blackwater streams, as is typical of most creeks in the area. A small tributary to Horse Creek on the western side of the property, called “Sand Gully” by the property owner, appears to be, a seepage stream. Limestone Creek has been channelized throughout its length on the property. Horse Creek appears to be in good, relatively unaltered condition.

A 5.3-mile stretch of the middle reaches of Horse Creek, a major tributary to the Peace River, runs south through the project. The surrounding area is largely pastureland and citrus groves, and the property is not contiguous with existing conservation lands. An approximately 243-acre inholding (citrus grove) straddles CR 665 in the northern portion of the project. Along the Peace River, DeSoto County’s Morgan Park is four miles south and the Southwest Florida Water Management District’s Lower Peace River Corridor is sixteen miles south of the project. Apart from the 520-acre Altman Tract Conservation Easement at the headwaters of Horse Creek in Manatee County, no other conservation lands are along this important tributary.

FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

| FNAI Elements | Score |
|---------------------------------|--------------|
| Gopher tortoise | G3/S3 |
| Florida sandhill crane | G5T2/S2 |
| Eastern diamondback rattlesnake | G3/S3 |
| Crested caracara | G5/S2 |
| Little blue heron | G5/S4 |
| White ibis | G5/S4 |

Public Use

Horse Creek Ranch is proposed for less-than-fee acquisition and does not provide for public access. However, upon coordination with the landowner, limited public access could be negotiated for research or school groups for educational purposes. Canoers and kayakers could observe its riverbanks passing through from the headwaters of Horse Creek to conservation areas such as Desoto County’s Morgan Park.

Acquisition Planning

2010

At the December 10, 2010 meeting, the ARC recommended that this less-than-fee project be added to the list. In 2010, the project had an estimated tax assessed value of \$9,893,163.

2011

On December 9, 2011, this project was placed in the Less-than-Fee category.

Coordination

As a co-applicant, TNC is a partner on this project; however, they do not have funding available for assistance with acquisition. Because this project buffers Horse Creek and ensures better water quality for Horse Creek and the Peace River, the water management district would be supportive of state acquisition of this parcel.



Management Policy Statement

As a less-than-fee acquisition, the Horse Creek Ranch would be managed for conservation purposes by the landowner as outlined in the conservation easement.

Manager(s)

If acquired as less-than-fee, management responsibility of Horse Creek Ranch would remain with the landowner. Periodic monitoring of the site's management to confirm continued compliance with the conditions of the conservation easement would be coordinated with OES.

Management Prospectus

OES will periodically monitor the conservation easement, while the management will be conducted by the property owner.

Qualifications for state designation

This project meets the following public purposes: Enhance the coordination and completion of land acquisition projects; Increase the protection of Florida's biodiversity at the species, natural community, and landscape levels; Protect, restore, and maintain the quality and natural functions of land, water and wetland systems of the state; Ensure that sufficient quantities of water are available to meet the current and future needs of natural systems and the citizens of the state ; Increase natural resource-based public recreation or educational opportunities; Preserve significant archaeological or historic sites; and, Increase the amount of forestland available for sustainable management of natural resources.



