

Arbuckle Creek Watershed

Less-Than-Fee

Highlands County

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2014
<i>Project Acres</i>	11,989
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	9,636
<i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i>	\$0
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	2,353
<i>2021 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$1,053,393

Purpose for State Acquisition

The Arbuckle Creek Watershed project will preserve agricultural lands under threat of conversion to residential use and provide resource protection for Lake Istokpoga and the Greater Everglades Ecosystem. Arbuckle Creek is a major tributary to Lake Istokpoga, a part of the Greater Everglades Ecosystem watershed. The project consists of multiple large tracts of land that are mostly contiguous, border Arbuckle Creek and act as a wildlife and ecological corridor. The properties included in the project boundary are either adjacent to or contiguous with the southwestern boundary of Avon Park Air Force Range and create a buffer of open space for protection of the military base.

General Description

The Arbuckle Creek Watershed is on the eastern edge of the ancient Lake Wales Ridge and almost entirely in the Kissimmee Valley of the Eastern Flatwoods District. It is characterized by seasonally flooded lowlands and grassland prairies. The westernmost portion of the Rafter T Ranch and Long R Ranch fall into the Lake Wales Ridge of the Central Lake District, the topographic crest of central Florida, formed from relic dunes with deep sand deposits. An eastern arm of Lake Wales Ridge juts out and ends in the northeastern part of Arbuckle Creek Ranch.

The majority of the land in Arbuckle Creek Watershed is working cattle ranches and improved pasture with small areas of ruderal or agricultural lands. There are a few offices or homes, barns and equipment sheds associated with cattle operations, mainly on Rafter T and SY Hartt ranches. Arbuckle Creek Road (County Road 700A) runs through SY Hartt Ranch and unimproved roads are present on all the properties. Most of the uplands were historically dominated by mesic, wet and scrubby flatwoods, dry prairie, mesic and xeric hammock and scrub. Today, they have been converted to improved pasture with relatively small remnants of intact natural uplands remaining (17 percent), the majority of which occur on Rafter T and Long R Ranches. Wetland natural communities make up an additional 18 percent of the proposal and include baygall/hydric hammock, floodplain marsh, floodplain swamp and small, mostly disturbed,



depression marshes and dome swamps. Species such as gopher tortoise, Florida scrub jay, bald eagle and Sherman’s fox squirrel have been documented on this site.

FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

FNAI Elements	Score
Florida scrub-jay	G1G2/S1S2
Eastern indigo snake	G3/S2?
Gopher tortoise	G3/S3
Florida black bear	G5T4/S4
<i>Highlands goldenaster</i>	G2/S2
<i>short-leaved rosemary</i>	G2Q/S2
<i>cutthroatgrass</i>	G3/S3
<i>Florida jointweed</i>	G3/S3
Sand skink	G3/S3
Wood stork	G4/S2
Florida burrowing owl	G4T3/S3
Crested caracara	G5/S2

Public Use

Arbuckle Creek Watershed is proposed for less-than-fee acquisition and does not provide public access. The project is not within a “land trail opportunity corridor” but is adjacent to the Arbuckle Creek Run “paddling trail opportunity corridor.”

Acquisition Planning

2014

On August 15, 2014, the Acquisition and Restoration Council voted to allow this proposal to be evaluated. The project sponsor of the project was The Nature Conservancy.

On December 12, 2014, the Acquisition and Restoration Council voted to add this project to the Less-than-Fee category. The project had an estimated tax assessed value of \$4,133,966.

2021

The Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Department of Defense and Natural Resources Conservation Service partnered to purchase a conservation easement over 1,069 acres known as Ravensworth Farms.

Coordination

There were no specific acquisition partners at the time this project was added. However, the landowners and The Nature Conservancy are in contact with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and may explore less-than-fee acquisition opportunities. Some of the lands within the ranches are not included in the proposal boundary because conservation easements have already been acquired on them. Rafter T Ranch had one Wetlands Reserve Program easement and the second Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration easement in place at the time the project was approved. At the time of approval for Florida Forever, some of the Rafter T Ranch property and the SY Hartt Ranch property in this project boundary





had also been awarded Tier 1 status in Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' Rural and Family Lands Protection Program. In 2016, the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services acquired an easement on 3,229 acres of the SY Hartt Ranch property.

Management Policy Statement

As a less-than-fee acquisition, the Arbuckle Creek Watershed project would be managed by the landowner as outlined in the conservation easement. Furthermore, all of these owners are continuing to pursue other avenues to establish easements on the remainder of their lands, with assistance from The Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Department of Defense and other programs as they become available for applications.

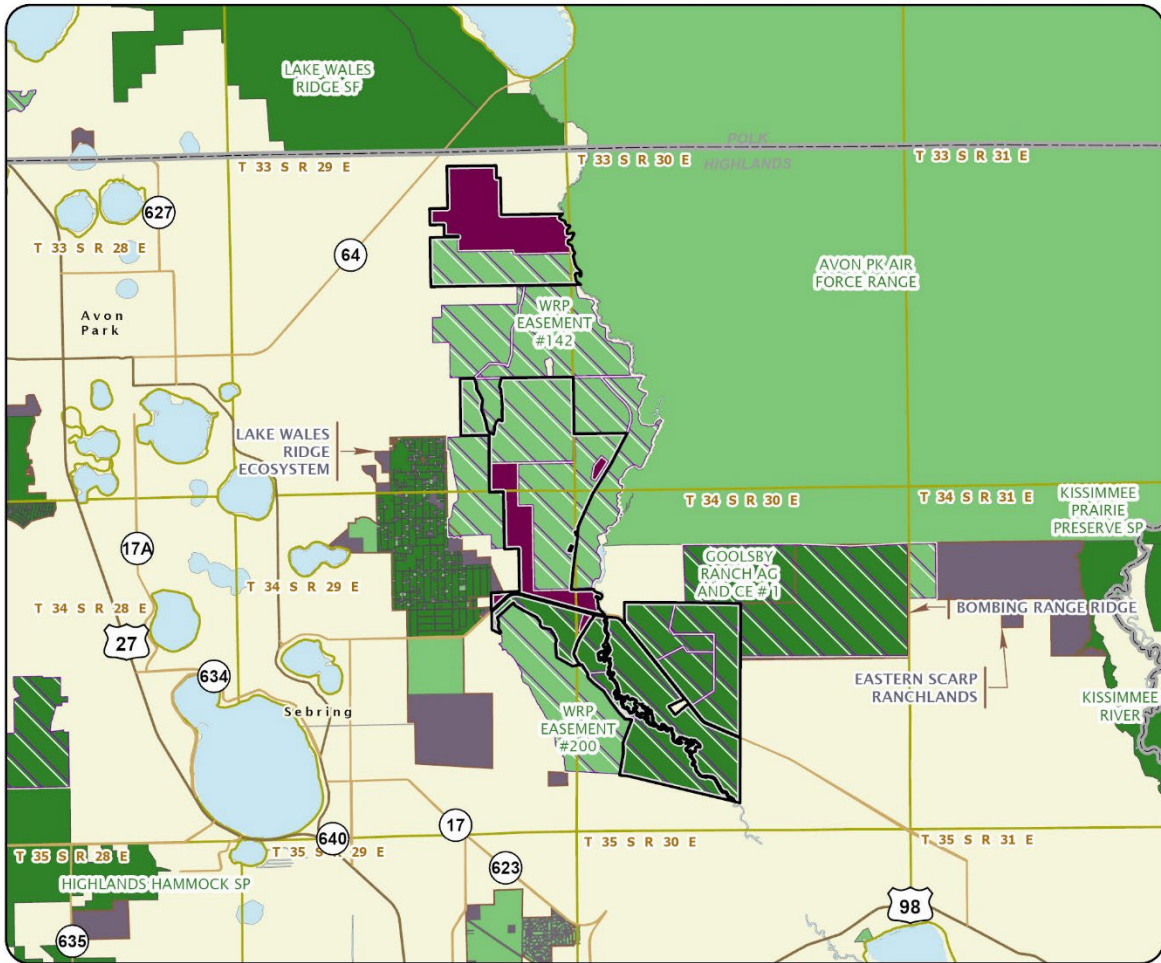
Manager(s)

If acquired as less-than-fee, management responsibility of the Arbuckle Creek Watershed 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 by the Division of State Lands.

Management Prospectus

The Division of State Lands will periodically monitor the conservation easement, while the management will be conducted by the property owner.





ARBUCKLE CREEK WATERSHED

HIGHLANDS COUNTY

