

ITEM 5:

Consider a 10-year update to the Deep Creek Conservation Area Management Plan (Lease No. 4524).

LOCATION:

Putnam and St. Johns counties

APPLICANT:

St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD)

STAFF REMARKS:

Background

The Deep Creek Conservation Area (DCCA) comprises approximately 5,953 acres mostly in St. Johns County, with a small portion of the Property located in Putnam County. DCCA is comprised of two disjunct tracts, referred to as Deep Creek North and Deep Creek Yarborough. The Deep Creek Yarborough will be renamed Deep Creek South as part of this Land Management Plan update. In 2006, the SJRWMD Governing Board approved two land management plans – one for DCCA North and one for the DCCA Yarborough and Edgefield Tracts. This document combines the two land management plans into one plan covering both tracts. Of the 5,953 acres, 729.25 are titled to the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund.

The DCCA is managed by the SJRWMD for the conservation and protection of natural and cultural resources as well as nature-based public outdoor recreation. A wide range of resource management actions are conducted on DCCA each year including prescribed burning, habitat restoration and enhancement, invasive species maintenance and control, recreation management, and cultural resource monitoring and protection. Recreational opportunities include hiking, bicycling, photography, fishing, boating, paddling, and wildlife viewing.

Management Plan Overview

Hiking, biking, photography and wildlife viewing are allowed uses on DCCA. Horseback riding is not prohibited but infrastructure to allow horse trailer parking has not been developed. Three public parking areas serve as recreation access points on DCCA. An access point on County Road 13 connects to a 1.8-mile multiuse trail traversing the uplands within DCCA North. An access point on Cowpen Branch Road connects to a 2.2-mile multiuse trail within DCCA South. An access point on George Miller Road connects to a 1.1-mile multiuse trail that surrounds the Deep Creek West regional stormwater treatment facility, maintained by St. Johns County.

Fishing, boating and paddling opportunities are available on Deep Creek; however, there are no boat launches located on the DCCA. The DCCA contains ten natural communities and five altered landcover types. The predominant natural community is floodplain swamp, followed by mesic flatwoods and wet flatwoods. DCCA has a diverse assemblage of natural communities providing significant habitat for a variety of floral and faunal species. Bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) are known to have nested within the conservation area as recently as 2016. The area also provides habitat for the Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*). Numerous species of wading birds occur in the wetland portions of the conservation area. To date, 18 listed species have been recorded at DCCA, including hooded pitcher plant, wood stork (*Mycteria americana*), Gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*), and Florida wild indigo (*Baptisia calycosa*).

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has documented a wading bird rookery within the DCCA North floodplain swamp. The rookery has been active since the 1980s with a size range of 500-1000 birds. Species sighted include anhinga (*Anhinga anhinga*), great egret (*Ardea alba*), cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) and white ibis (*Eudocimus albus*). Its remote location within the floodplain swamp limits any impacts from management activities.

There is one documented Florida Master Site located on DCCA. This site is identified as a burial mound. The District will consult with the Department of State, Division of Historical Resources (DHR) before taking actions that may adversely affect archeological or historical resources. The District will conduct land management activities in a manner that will provide protection for this site and serve to reduce the potential for adverse impacts. District staff will document and report the discovery of any additional sites to the DHR. Additionally, detrimental activities discovered on these sites will also be reported to the DHR and appropriate law enforcement agencies.

The Florida Legislature requires that all land management plans include long and short-term goals. These goals must be measurable objectives, and short-term goals must be achievable within a two-year planning period. Pursuant to section 253.034, Florida Statutes, the Division of State Lands began compiling the short-term goals from each land management plan approved since July 1, 2016. The management plan identified objectives under the following short-term goals: habitat restoration and improvement, listed species management, public access and recreational opportunities, exotic and invasive species maintenance and control, capital facilities and infrastructure, and cultural resources.

Public Involvement

A management advisory group meeting was held June 22, 2022, to introduce the draft plan to the advisory group members. A noticed public meeting was held on July 27, 2022. The objective of the public meeting was to receive public input regarding the draft plan.

Surplus Lands

The evaluation of this site has determined that no portion of the DCCA is to be declared surplus.

State Land Management Review Team

The District has conducted two Management Review Teams (MRT) since the 2006 land management plans: March 2011 and March 2020. The consensus for both MRTs was that DCCA is being managed for the purposes for which it was acquired, it is being managed in accordance with its approved management plans, and the current management plans provide sufficient protection to the Property’s natural and cultural resources.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Approve the management plan.

ARC RECOMMENDATION:

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

LAND MANAGEMENT PLAN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LEAD AGENCY: St. Johns River Water Management District (District)

COMMON NAME OF PROPERTY: Deep Creek Conservation Area (DCCA or Property)

LOCATION: Putnam and St. Johns counties

ACREAGE TOTAL: 5,953 acres

ACREAGE BREAKDOWN:

Natural Community	Acres	Natural Community	Acres
Floodplain swamp	4,687	Dome swamp	6
Mesic flatwoods	381	Wet prairie	6
Wet flatwoods	326	Sandhill	5
Baygall	58	Altered Land	Acres
Blackwater stream	39	Agriculture	217
Mesic hammock	33	Stormwater Facility	101
Scrubby flatwoods	28	HWCTT Facility	66

LEASE/MANAGEMENT AGREEMENT NO.: Board of Trustees Lease #4524

USE: Single: Management Responsibilities:

Multiple: X Agency Responsibilities
 District Lead Manager
 Department of
 Environment Protection (FDEP)/Trustees Co-owner

DESIGNATED LAND USE: Conservation

SUBLEASES: Subleases on the District owned parcels include an intergovernmental management agreement with St. Johns County for management of the Deep Creek West Stormwater Treatment Facility, an intergovernmental lease with Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) for operation of a Hybrid Wetland Chemical Treatment Technology Facility and a ground lease and management agreement with the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Hastings Agricultural Extension Center for expansion of research and extension in the tri-county agricultural area. No subleases affect the Board of Trustees’ lease area.

ENCUMBRANCES: Two utility easements, three access easements and one drainage easement.

TYPES OF ACQUISITION: Ad Valorem, Florida Forever, and Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) mitigation donations and funds.

UNIQUE FEATURES: Over two miles of St. Johns River frontage. Natural communities include floodplain swamp, mesic flatwoods, wet flatwoods, basin swamp, baygall, blackwater stream, mesic hammock, scrubby flatwoods, dome swamp, wet prairie and sandhill.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES: One documented cultural site (burial mound) within the Conservation Area.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Habitat restoration and enhancement, exotic and invasive species management, public access, and recreation management.

ACQUISITION NEEDS/ACREAGE: Approximately 1,900 acres surrounding DCCA have been identified as potential acquisitions. If neighboring parcels become available which increase continuity between the two tracts, provide additional protection to Deep Creek or the St. Johns River, or allow for restoration of impacted land they will be evaluated for acquisition by District staff.

SURPLUS LANDS/ACREAGE: Since the 2006 Land Management Plan, the entire 212-acre Edgefield Parcel was surplus to Putnam County as a regional stormwater treatment facility (RSTF) and 166 acres of the Masters Parcel was surplus to St. Johns County for a RSTF. No land within the Board of Trustee’s Lease was surplus or exchanged.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT: Management Advisory Group meeting and Public Hearing.

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ARC Approval Date: _____ BTIITF Approval Date: _____

Comments: _____

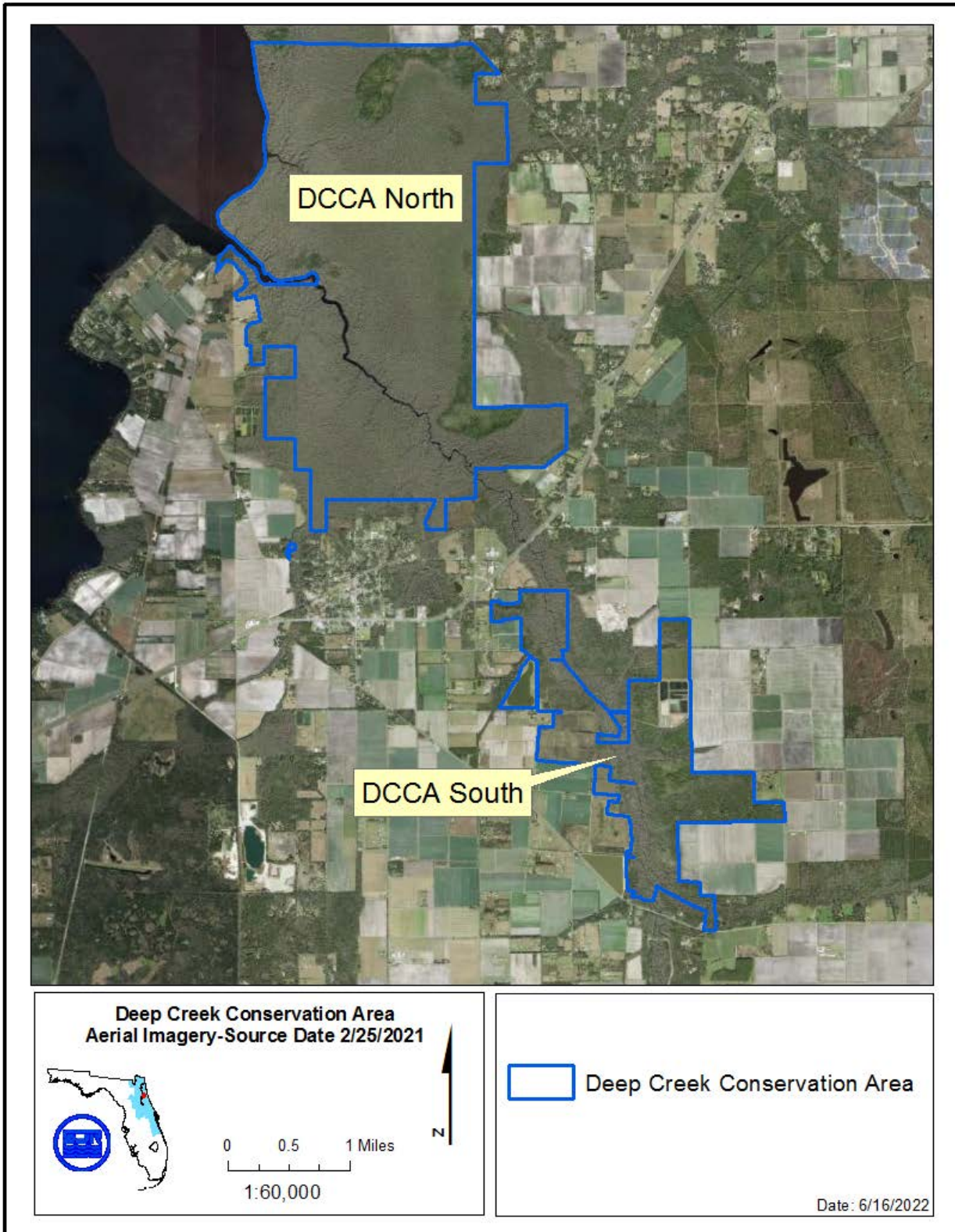


Figure 1: Deep Creek Conservation Area Aerial Imagery

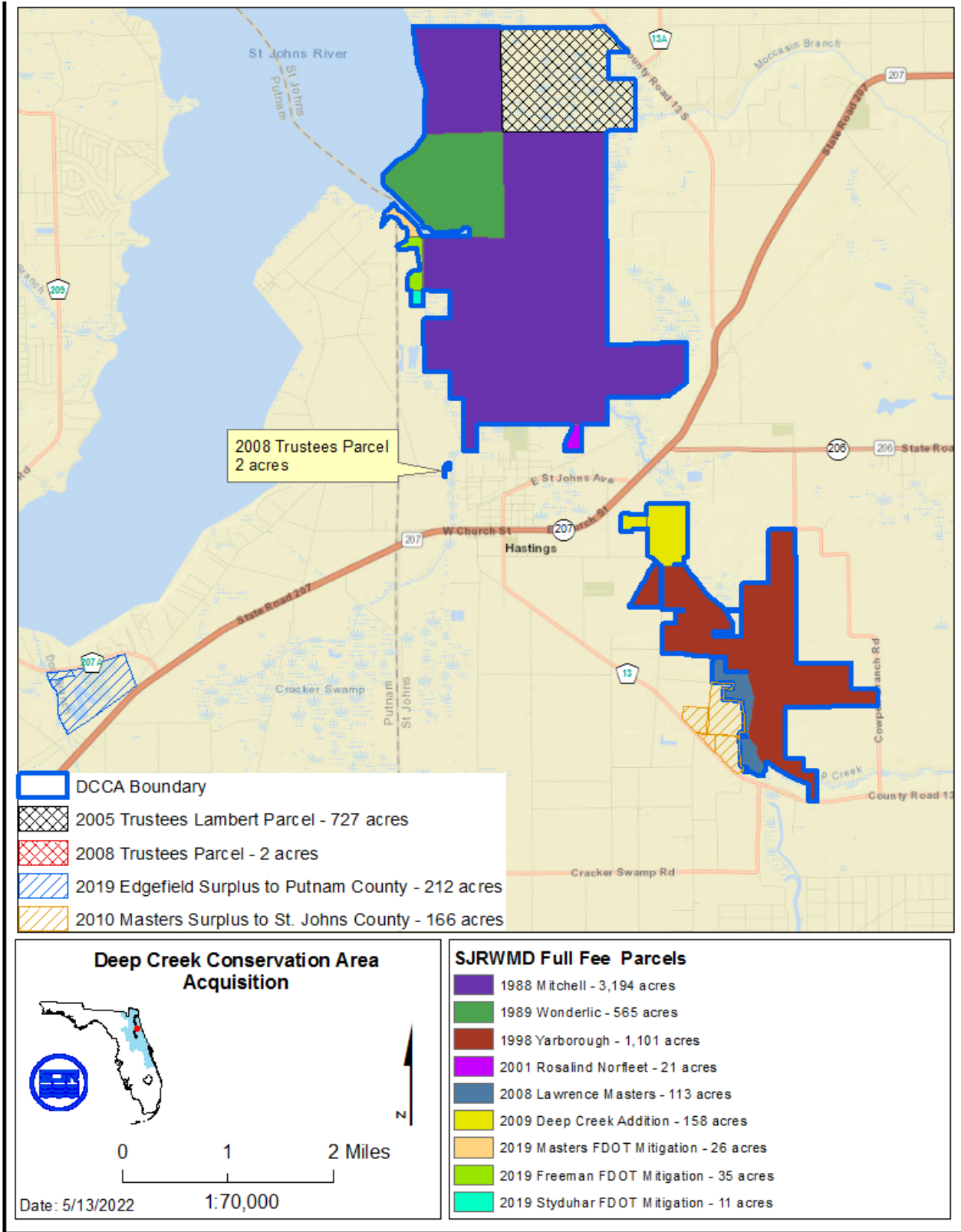


Figure 2: Deep Creek Conservation Area Acquisition History

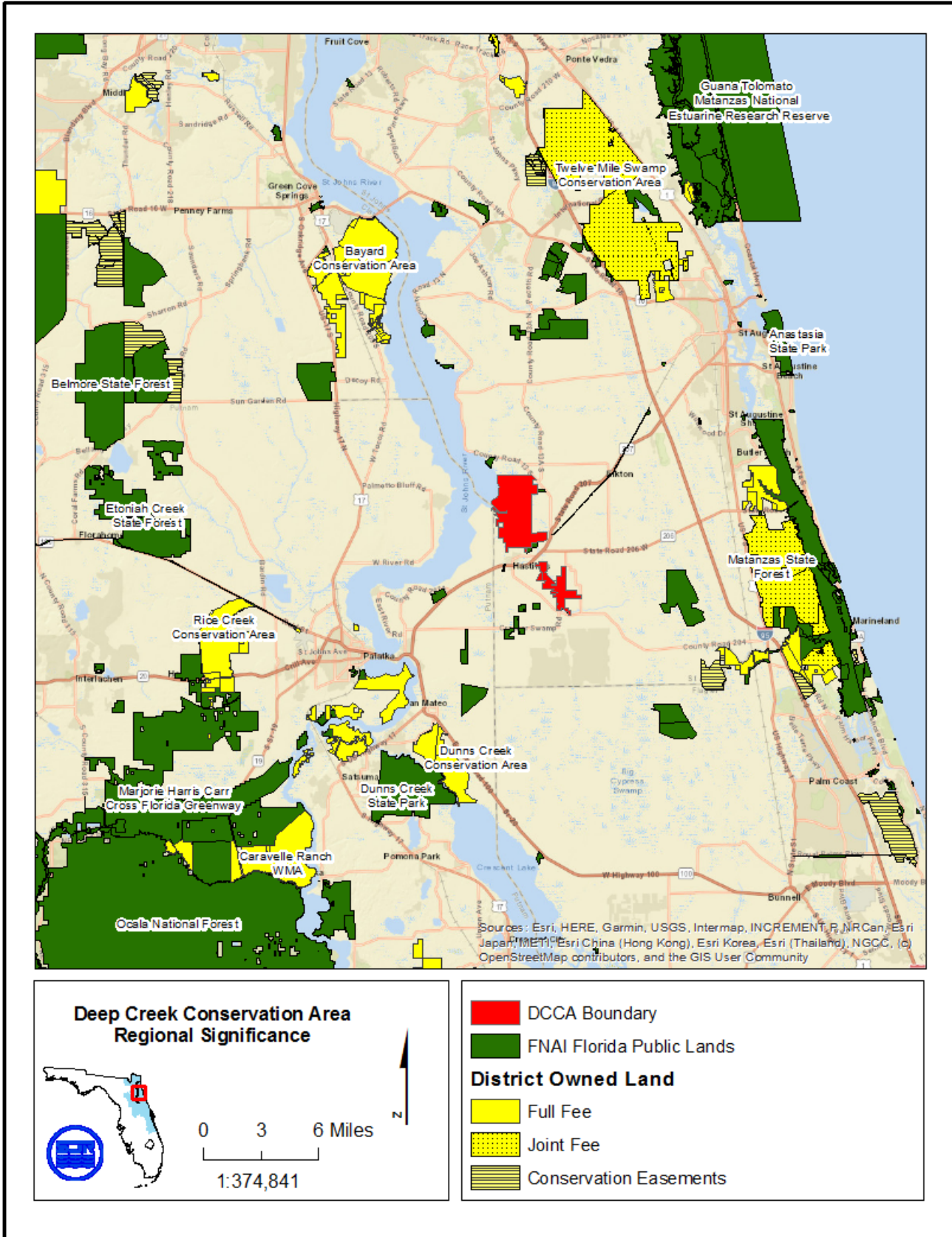


Figure 3: Deep Creek Conservation Area Regional Significance

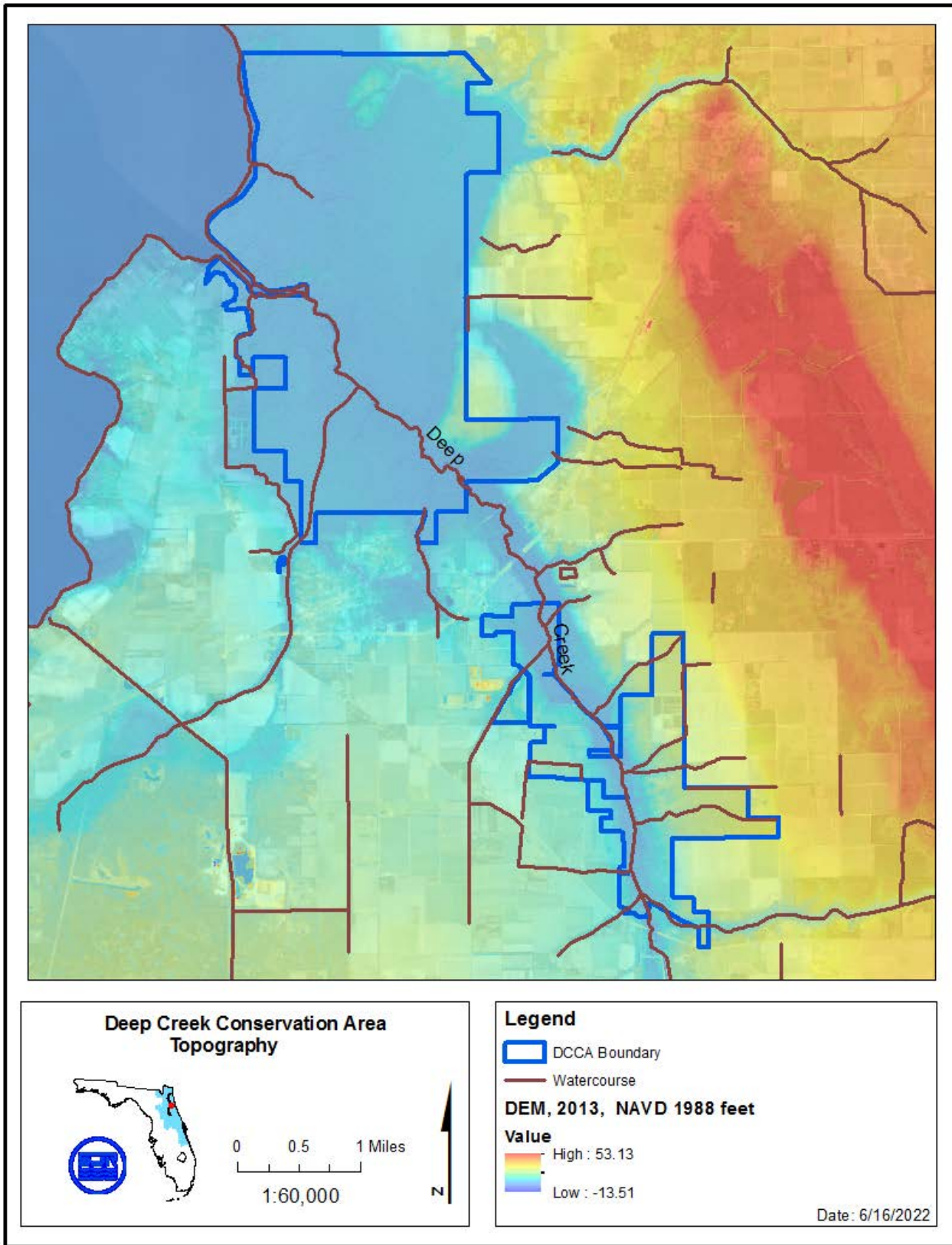


Figure 4: Deep Creek Conservation Area Topography

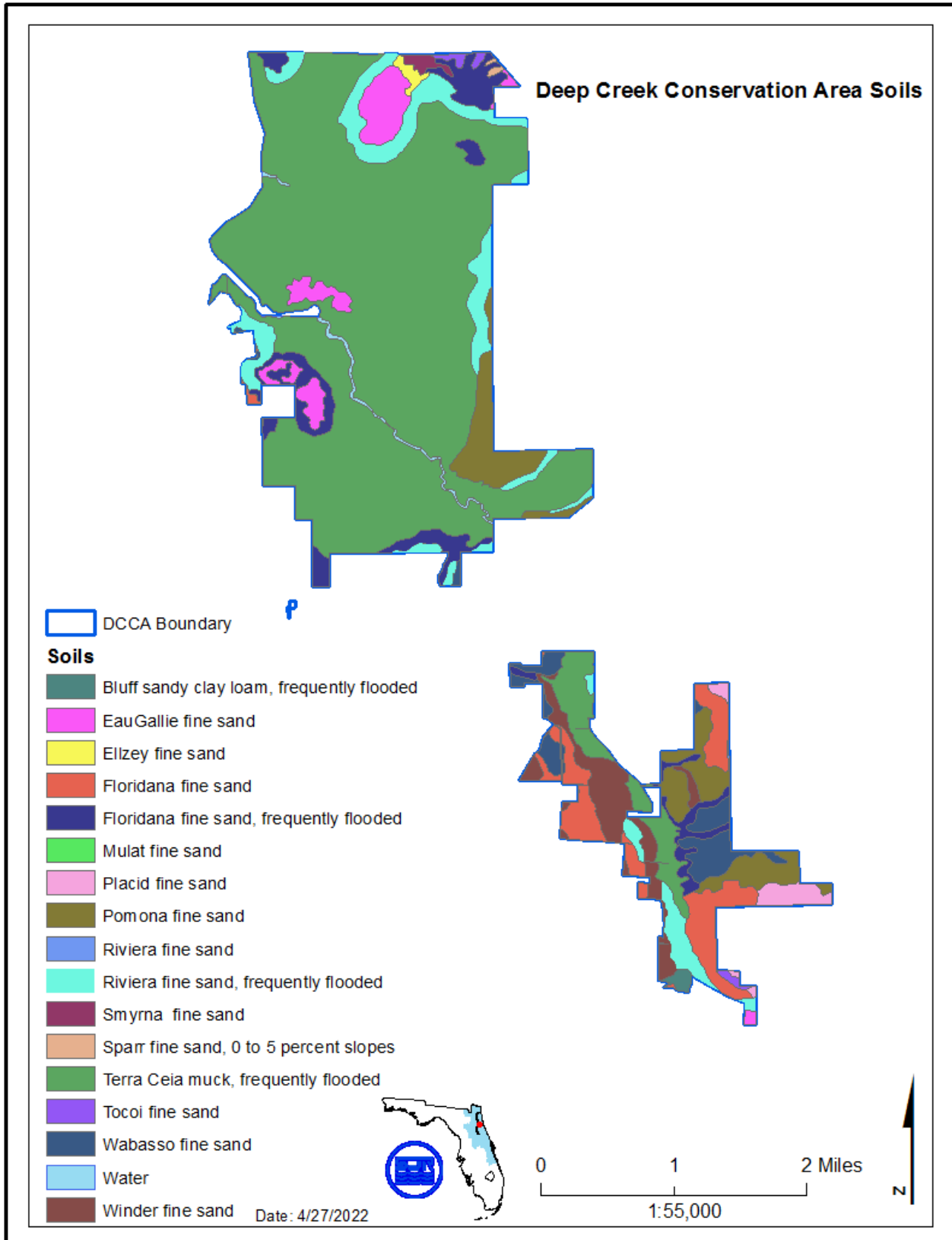


Figure 5: Deep Creek Conservation Area Soils

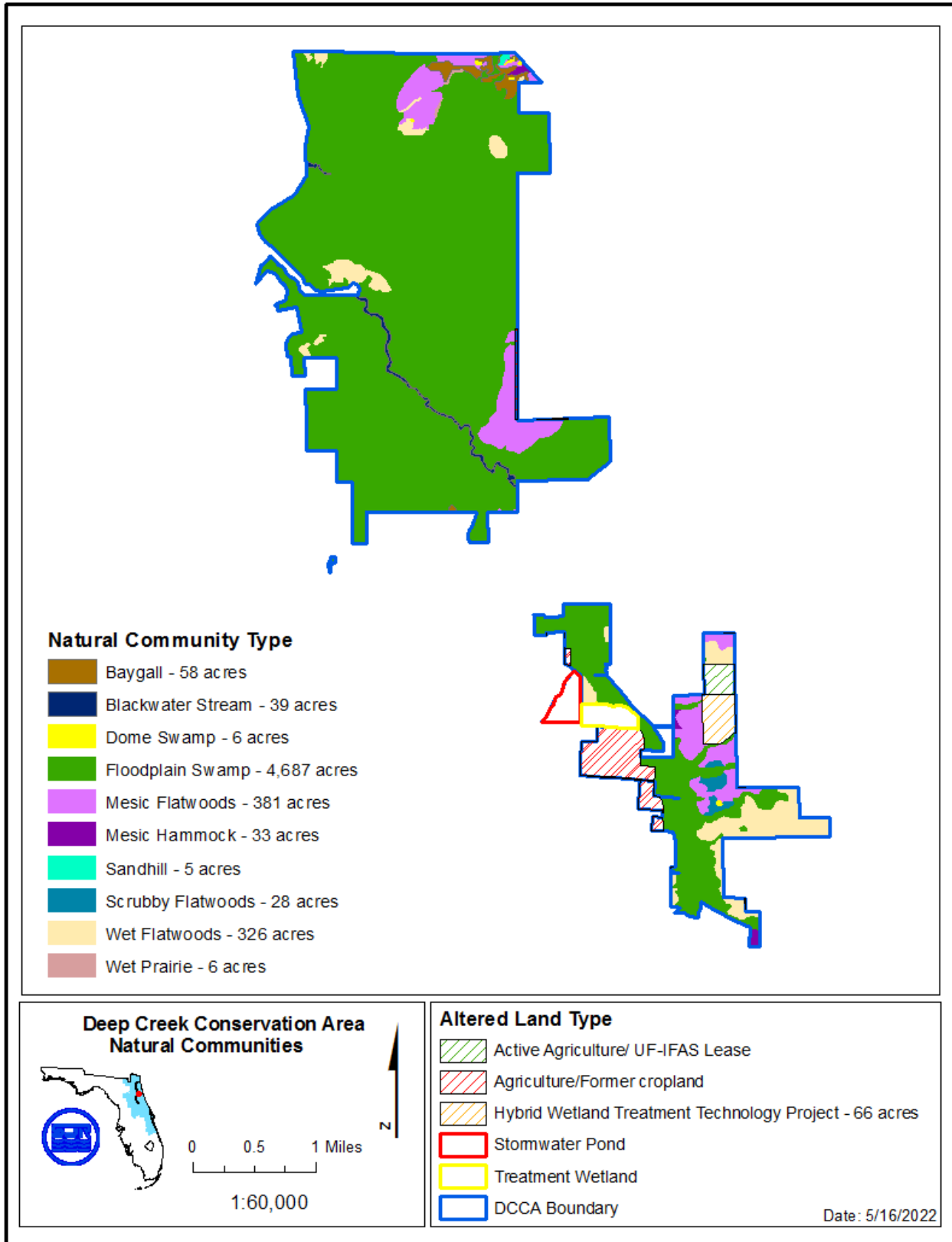


Figure 6: Deep Creek Conservation Area Natural Communities

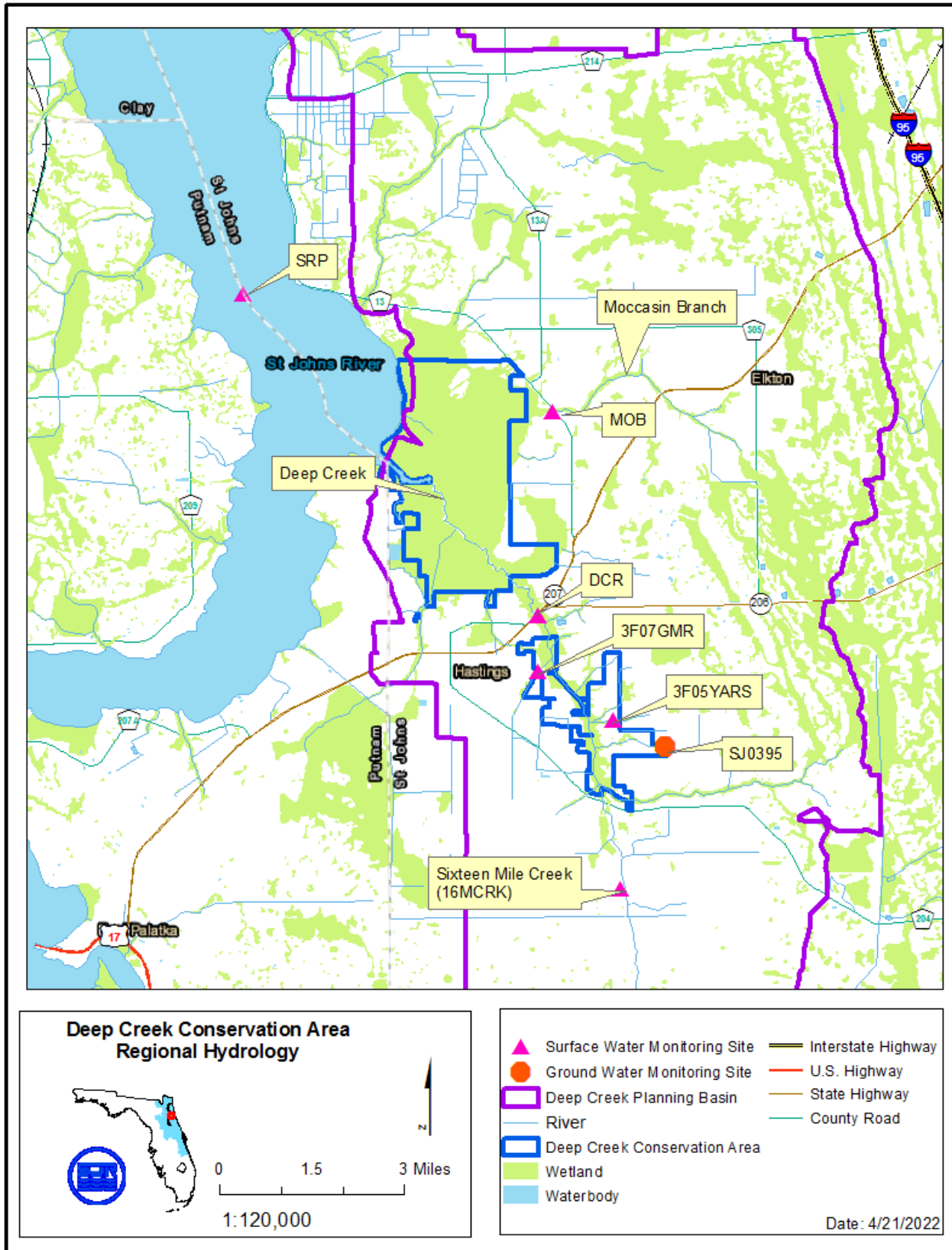


Figure 7: Deep Creek Conservation Area Regional Hydrology

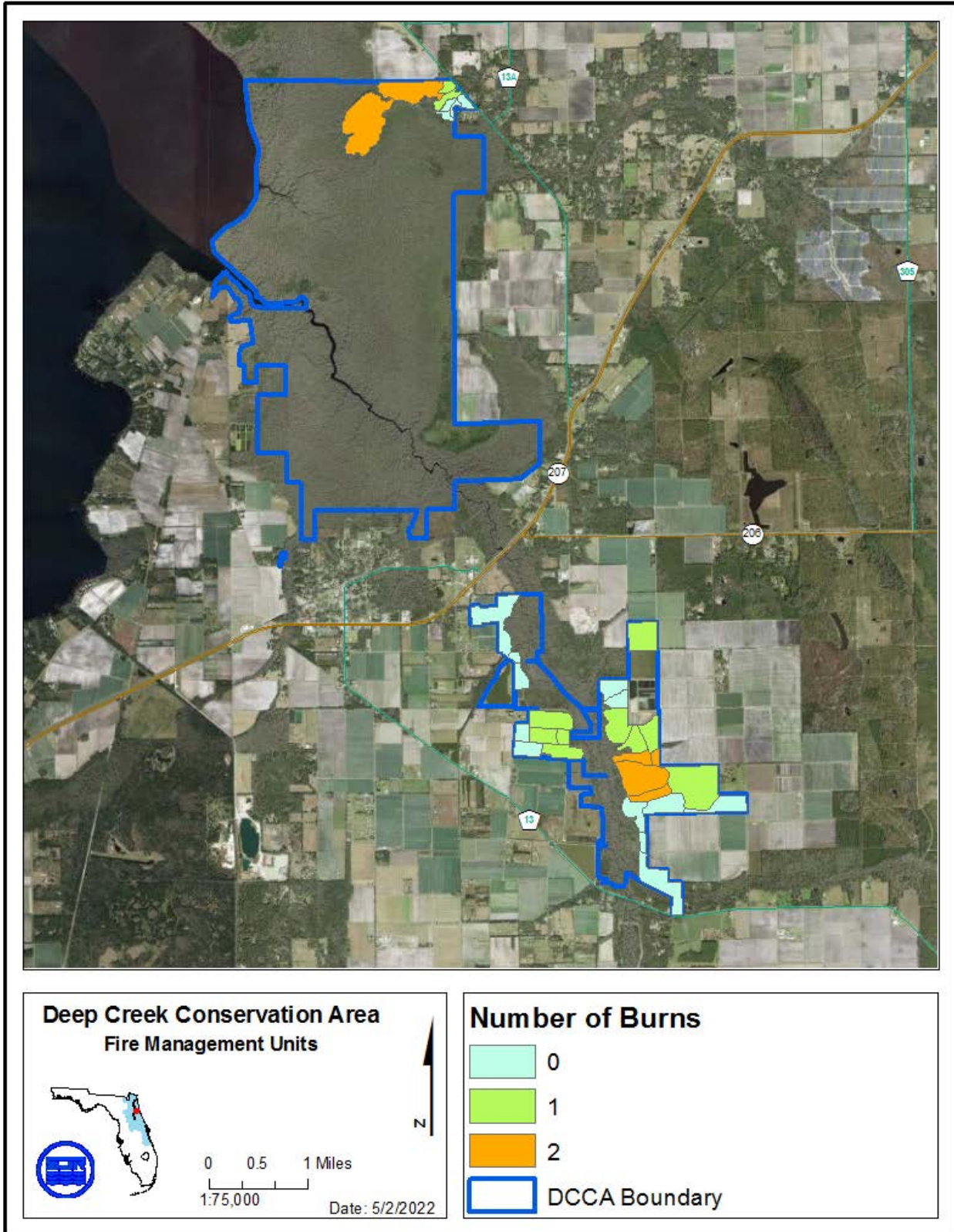


Figure 10: Deep Creek Conservation Area Fire Management Units

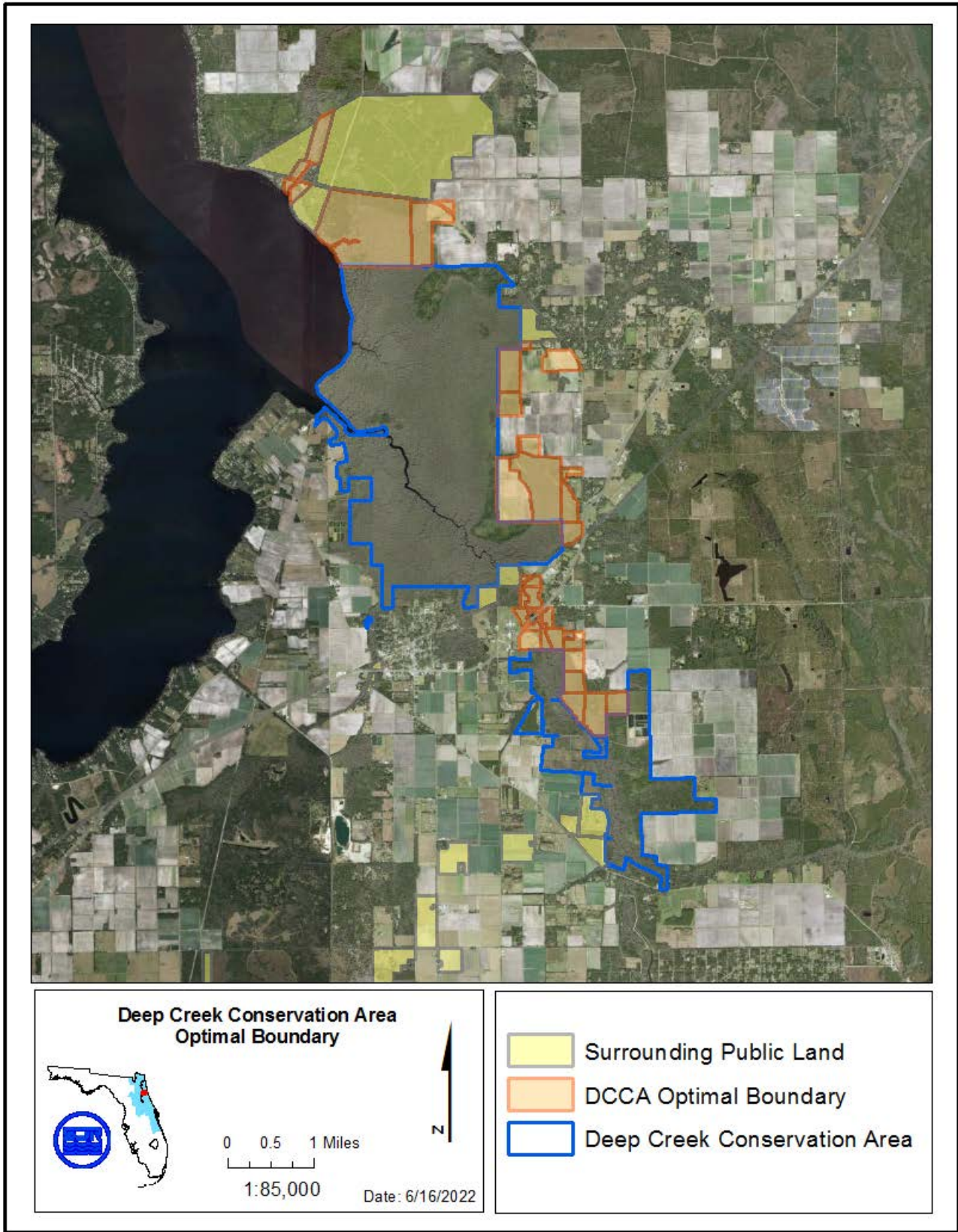


Figure 12: Deep Creek Conservation Area Optimal Boundary