

ITEM 7:

Consider a 10-year update to the River Lakes Conservation Area Management Plan (Lease No. 3803).

LOCATION:

Brevard and Osceola counties

APPLICANT:

St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD)

STAFF REMARKS:

Background

River Lakes Conservation Area (RLCA) consists of approximately 41,011 acres and is located within the Upper St. Johns River Basin floodplain. The RLCA is managed by SJRWMD. The Property is dominated by floodplain marshes associated with the St. Johns River. This natural area provides significant water resource benefits and important habitat for a diverse assemblage of plants and animals. Recreational opportunities include camping, hiking, picnicking, paddling, boating, seasonal hunting, fishing, bicycling, horseback riding, and wildlife viewing.

Approximately 28 miles of the St. Johns River channel flows through the RLCA. SJRWMD manages one 2,655-acre parcel at RLCA through a lease agreement with the Board of Trustees, along the western shore of Lake Washington. Much of the property is in the Upper St. Johns River Marsh Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Recreation and public access at the WMA are cooperatively managed with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). The Board of Trustees parcel is incorporated into the RLCA as well as the WMA. The 41,011-acre conservation area is comprised of one land transfer, seven purchases, two donations, four mitigation donations, and one parcel the District manages through a lease agreement.

Management Plan Overview

RLCA lies almost completely within Brevard County. On the western boundary, approximately 1,184 acres falls within Osceola County. The Property is located just west of Rockledge, Viera and Melbourne, and east of County Road 419, between SR 520 to the north and U.S. 192 to the south. Access to the property is possible from Wickham Road to the east or via boat from the St. Johns River.

RLCA is host to a variety of natural and altered land cover types. The plant communities have been mapped under contract by SJRWMD three times in the past; in 2001, 2010 and 2017. Plant community designations have been reclassified to reflect FNAI natural community definitions. The majority of the property is comprised of wetland communities in the form of floodplain marsh, floodplain swamp, and hydric hammock. These wetlands are associated with the St. Johns River floodplain and tributaries. Uplands in the form of mesic flatwoods, mesic hammock and dry prairie account for a mere three percent of the total area. RLCA provides habitat for a variety of plant and animal species. SJRWMD maintains a database of species observations from the Property that are communicated by staff, contractors, volunteers, researchers, recreationists, and others.

To date, 10 listed species have been documented at the RLCA. Most of the listed species recorded on the site are avian species, largely wading birds associated with the river floodplain. In addition to the various wading birds, listed species on the Property include gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*), Florida sandhill

crane (*Grus canadensis pratensis*), roseate spoonbill (*Ajaia ajaja*), wood stork (*Mycteria americana*) and Audubon’s crested caracara (*Caracara cheriway audubonii*). There are two known active bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) nests on site.

There are currently 26 documented Florida Master Sites located on RLCA. A request for a 27th site has been submitted to the Division of Historical Resources (DHR). Ten of the sites are middens. Three of the sites are designated as eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. SJRWMD will consult with DHR before taking actions that may adversely affect archeological or historical resources. SJRWMD will conduct land management activities in a manner that will provide protection for these sites and serve to reduce the potential for adverse impacts. To meet this end, staff have been collaborating with archaeological professionals from the Florida Public Archaeology Network to assess known and record previously undocumented sites. If staff discovers any additional sites, they will document and report those sites to the DHR.

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, public access and recreational opportunities, hydrological preservation and restoration, exotic and invasive species maintenance and control, and capital facilities and infrastructure.

Public Involvement

A noticed virtual public hearing was held on February 8, 2023. The objective of the public hearing was to receive public input regarding the draft management plan. This plan was prepared with input from the RLCA Management Advisory Group. This group held a meeting on February 8, 2023.

Surplus Lands

There are no surplus lands identified, nor has any surplus action taken plan, on land owned by the Board of Trustees.

State Land Management Review Team

The District has conducted two Management Review Team (MRT) meetings since the 2011 land management plan – in March 2015 and in November 2022. The consensus for both MRTs was that the RLCA is being managed for the purposes for which it was acquired, it is being managed in accordance with its approved management plan, and the current management plan provides 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: River Lakes Conservation Area

LOCATION: Western Brevard and Eastern Osceola

ACREAGE TOTAL: 41,011 acres

ACREAGE BREAKDOWN:

Natural Community	Acres	Natural Community	Acres
Floodplain marsh	28,181	Floodplain swamp	751
Open water	5,078	Mesic hammock	537
Improved pasture	2,786	Hydric hammock	416
Wet prairie	1,934	Levees and roads	153
Mesic flatwoods	795	Dry prairie	41

LEASE/MANAGEMENT AGREEMENT NO.: 2,655 acres managed through Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund (Board of Trustees) lease #3803

USE:	Management Responsibilities:	
Single:	<u>Agency</u>	<u>Responsibilities</u>
Multiple: X	District	Co-owner and Lead Manager
	Board of Trustees	Co-owner
	Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)	Co-manager

DESIGNATED LAND USE: Conservation

SUBLEASES: The Board of Trustees parcel is incorporated into the Upper St. Johns Marsh Wildlife Management Area (WMA), hunting within the WMA is managed by FWC. A cattle grazing lease is active on District owned property.

ENCUMBRANCES: Two conservation easements, a power transmission line easement, two drainage easements and Trustees reservations.

TYPES OF ACQUISITION: Transfer Lands, Preservation 2000, Save Our Rivers, District Land Acquisition Funds, District Ad Valorem Funds, Donation, Exchange and Mitigation Donation.

UNIQUE FEATURES: Expansive wetland restoration areas, St. Johns River floodplain marsh, floodplain swamp, significant shoreline on three separate large and primarily undeveloped lakes. Approximately 28 miles of the St. Johns River channel.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES: Twenty-six documented cultural sites

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

ACQUISITION NEEDS/ACREAGE: An optimal boundary has been developed. Within the optimal boundary, approximately 15,660 acres have been identified as potential acquisition.

SURPLUS LANDS/ACREAGE: There are no surplus lands identified. No surplus actions have taken place on land owned by the Board of Trustees. In 2006 the District entered into a purchase agreement for a 573.67-acre conservation easement over the Greenbaum East parcel. The perpetual conservation easement over this parcel limits the development rights on Greenbaum East.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT: Management Advisory Group meeting and Public Hearing

DO NOT WRITE BELOW THIS LINE (FOR DIVISION OF STATE LANDS USE ONLY)

=====

ARC Approval Date: _____ BTIITF Approval Date: _____

Comments:

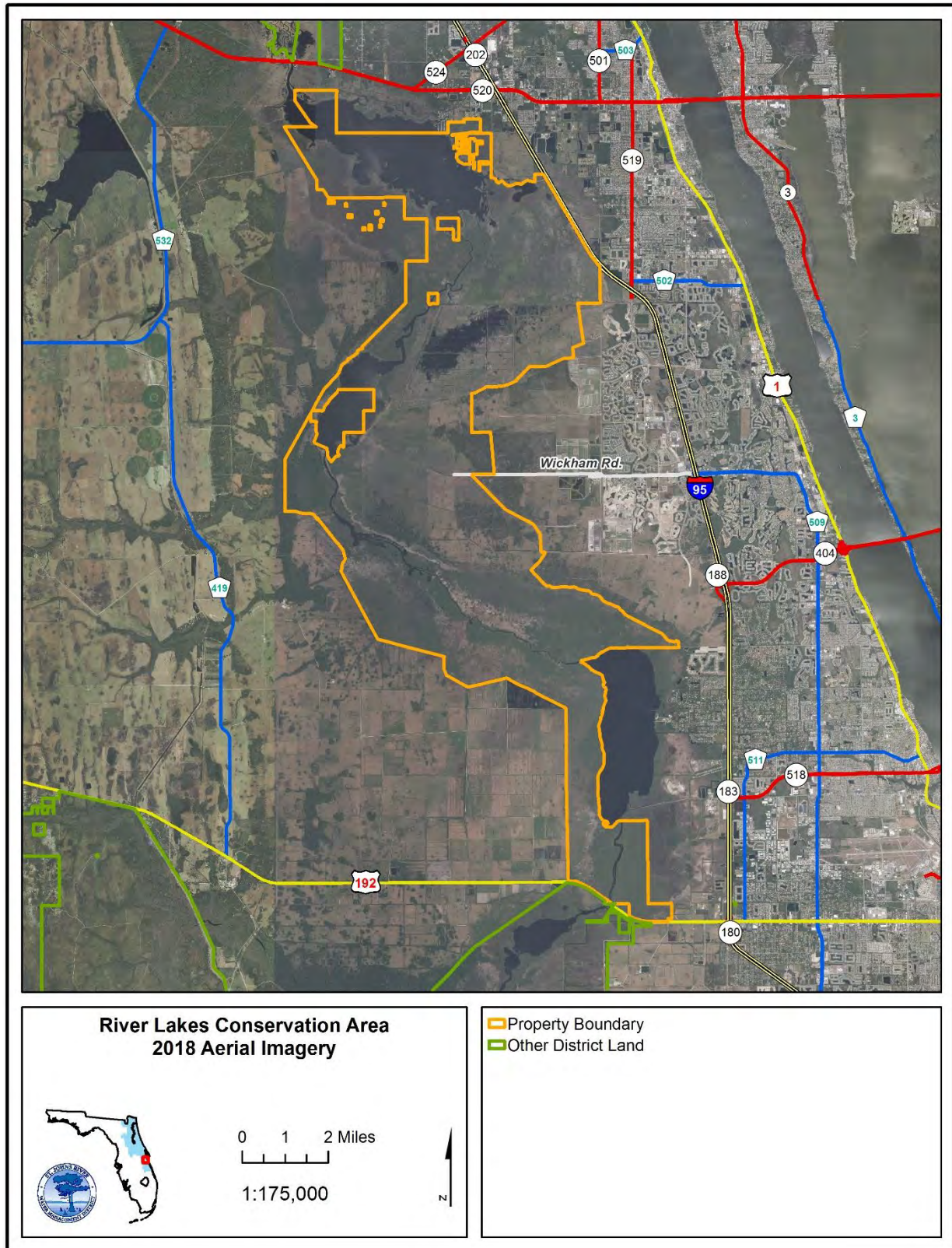


Figure 1: Aerial Map – 2018 Imagery

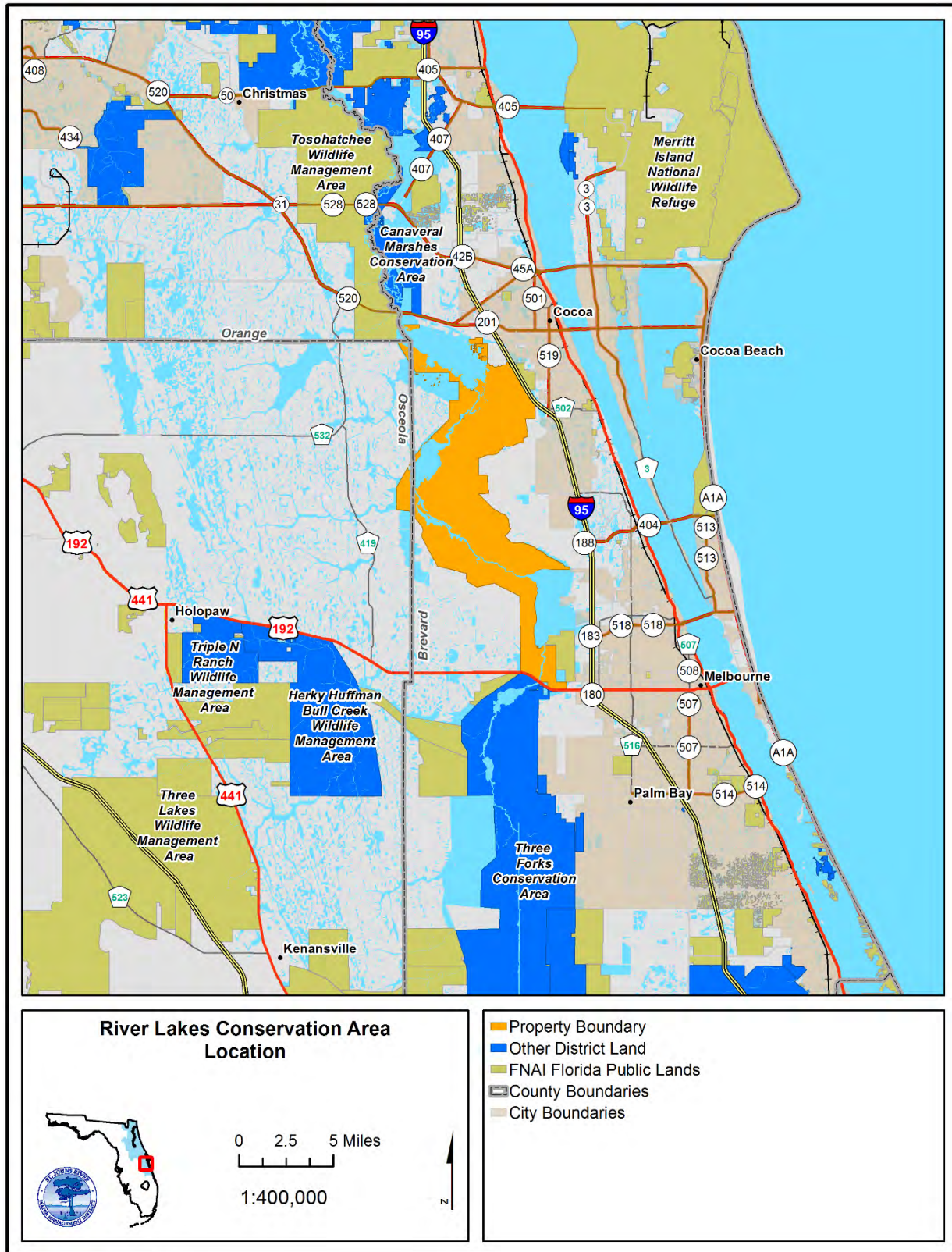


Figure 2: Location Map

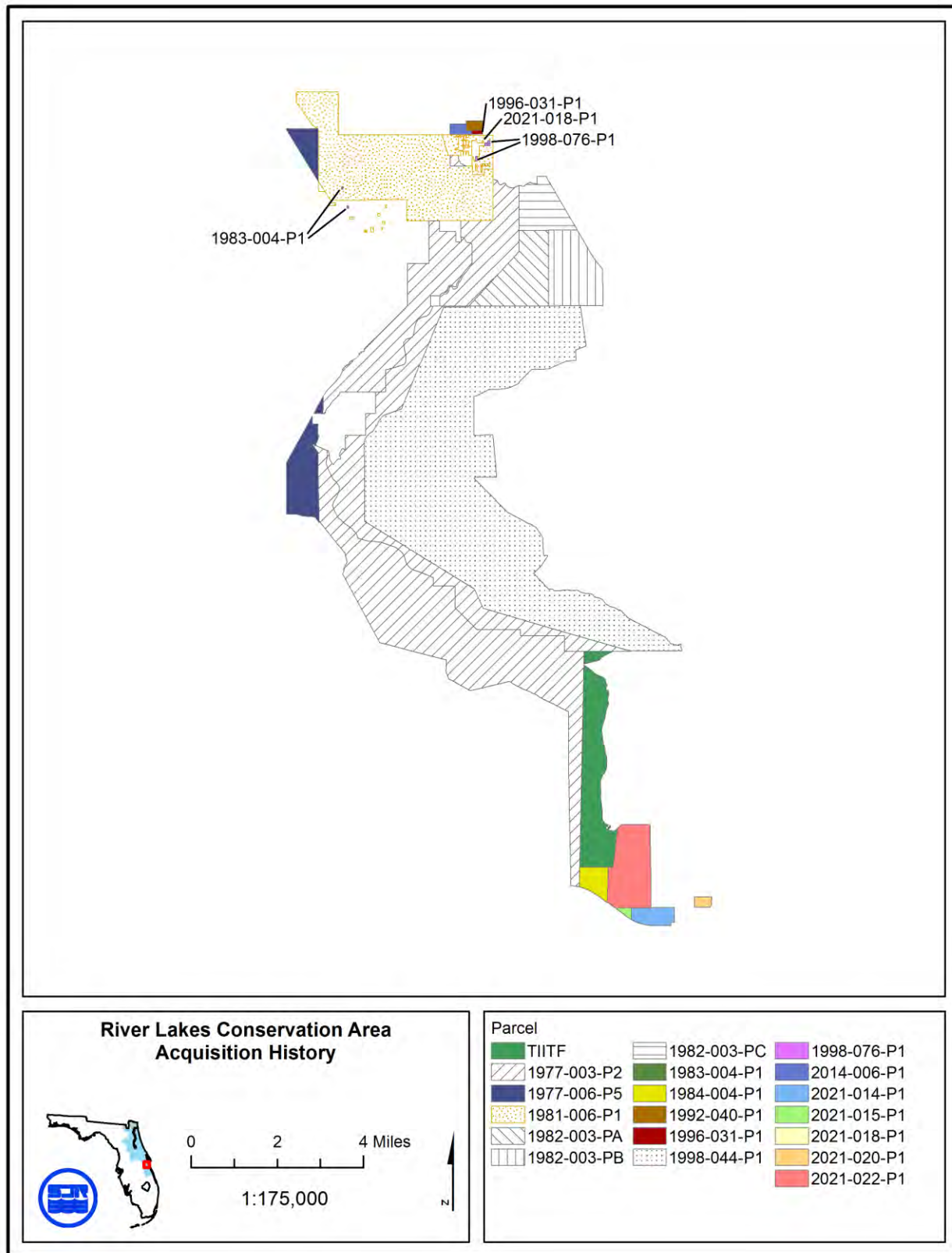


Figure 3: Acquisition Map

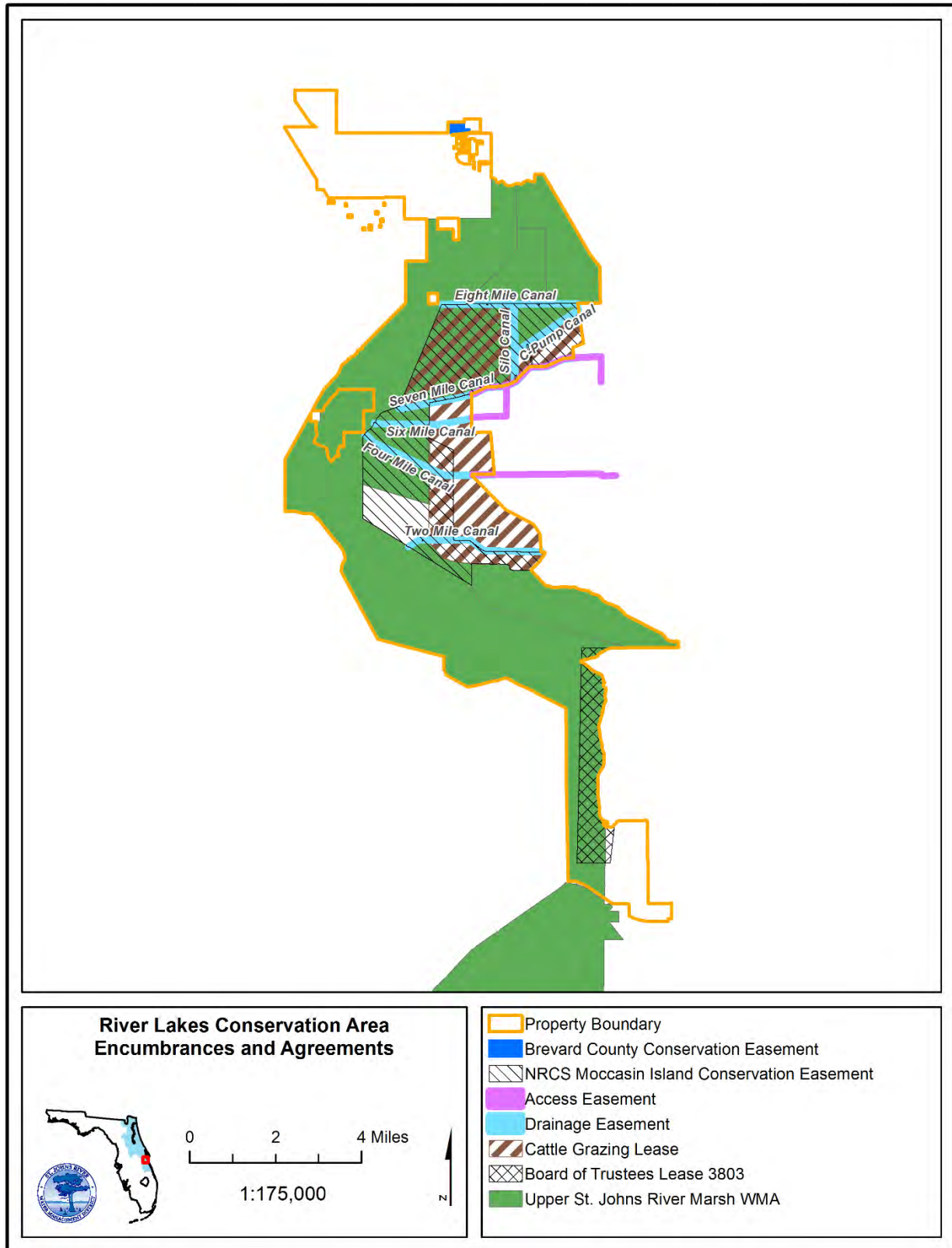


Figure 4: Encumbrances Map

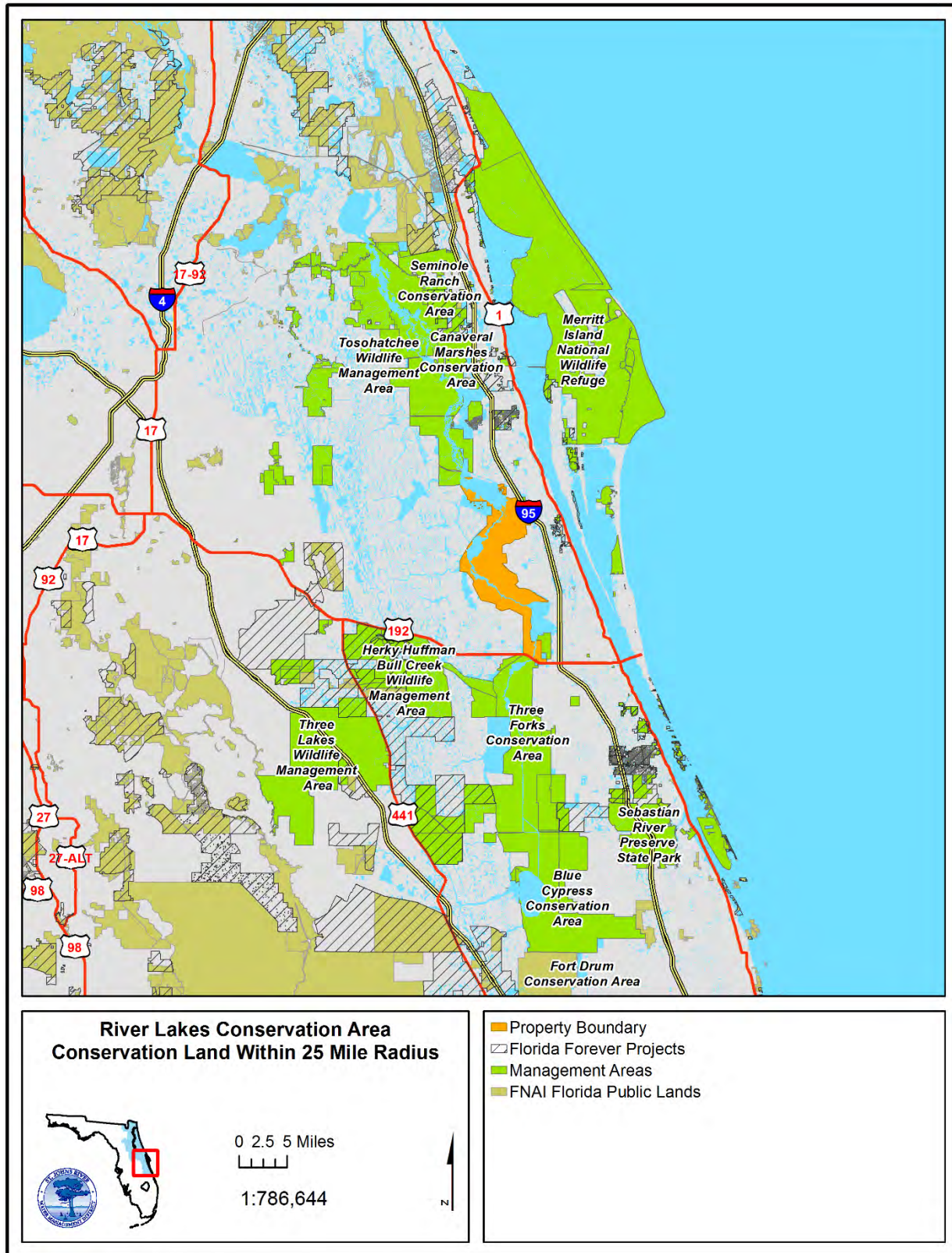


Figure 5: Proximity to Public Land Map

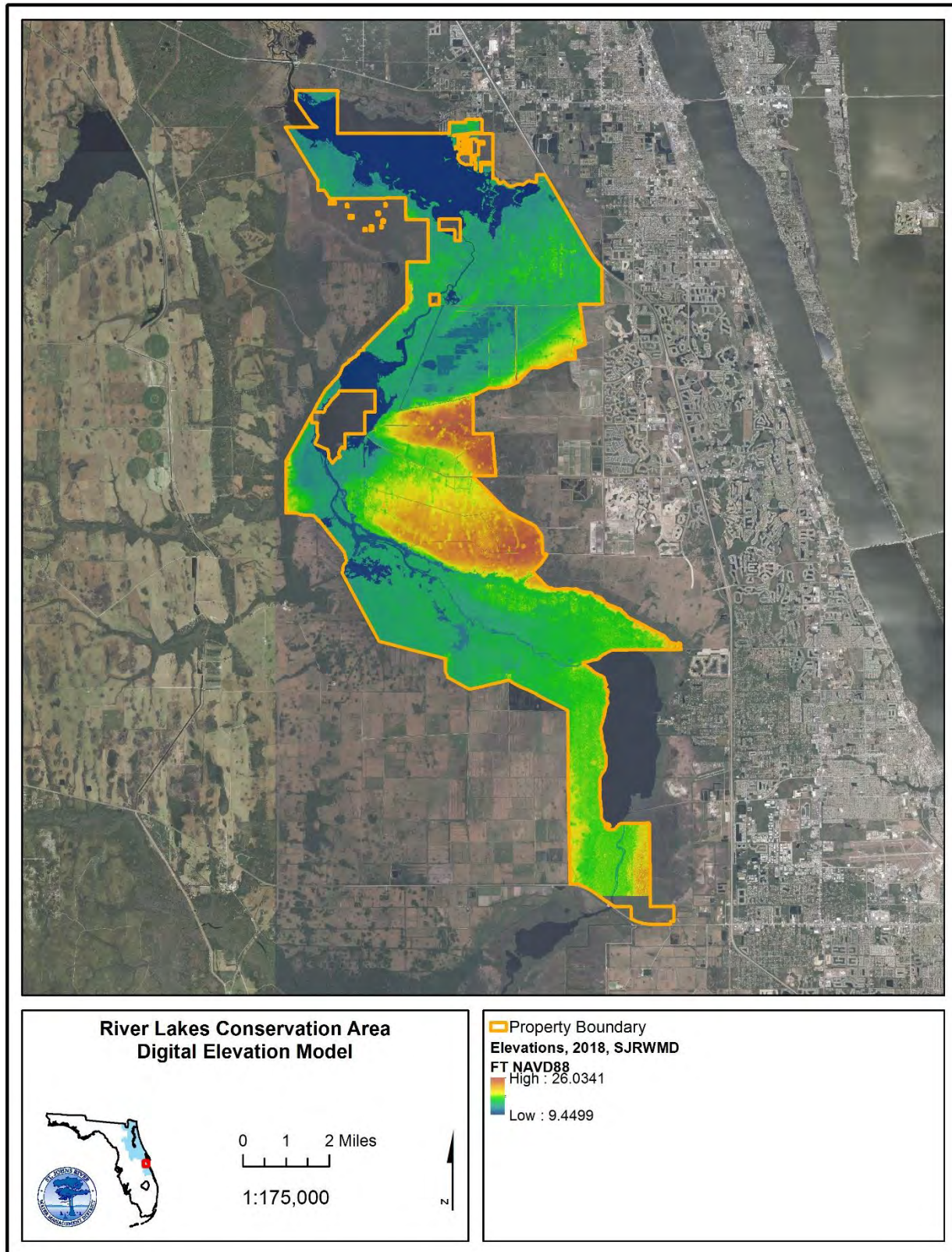


Figure 6: Topography Map

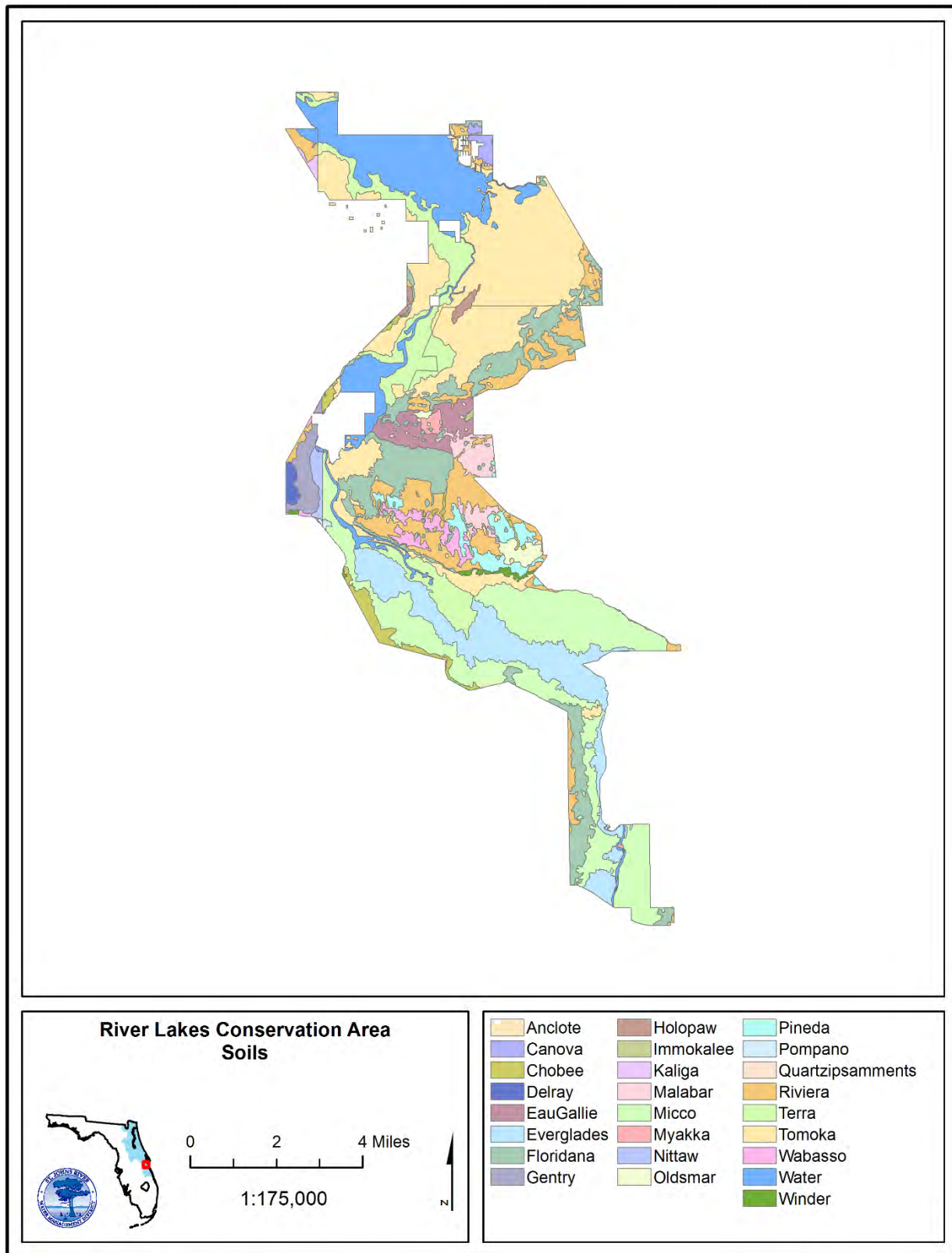


Figure 7: Soils Map

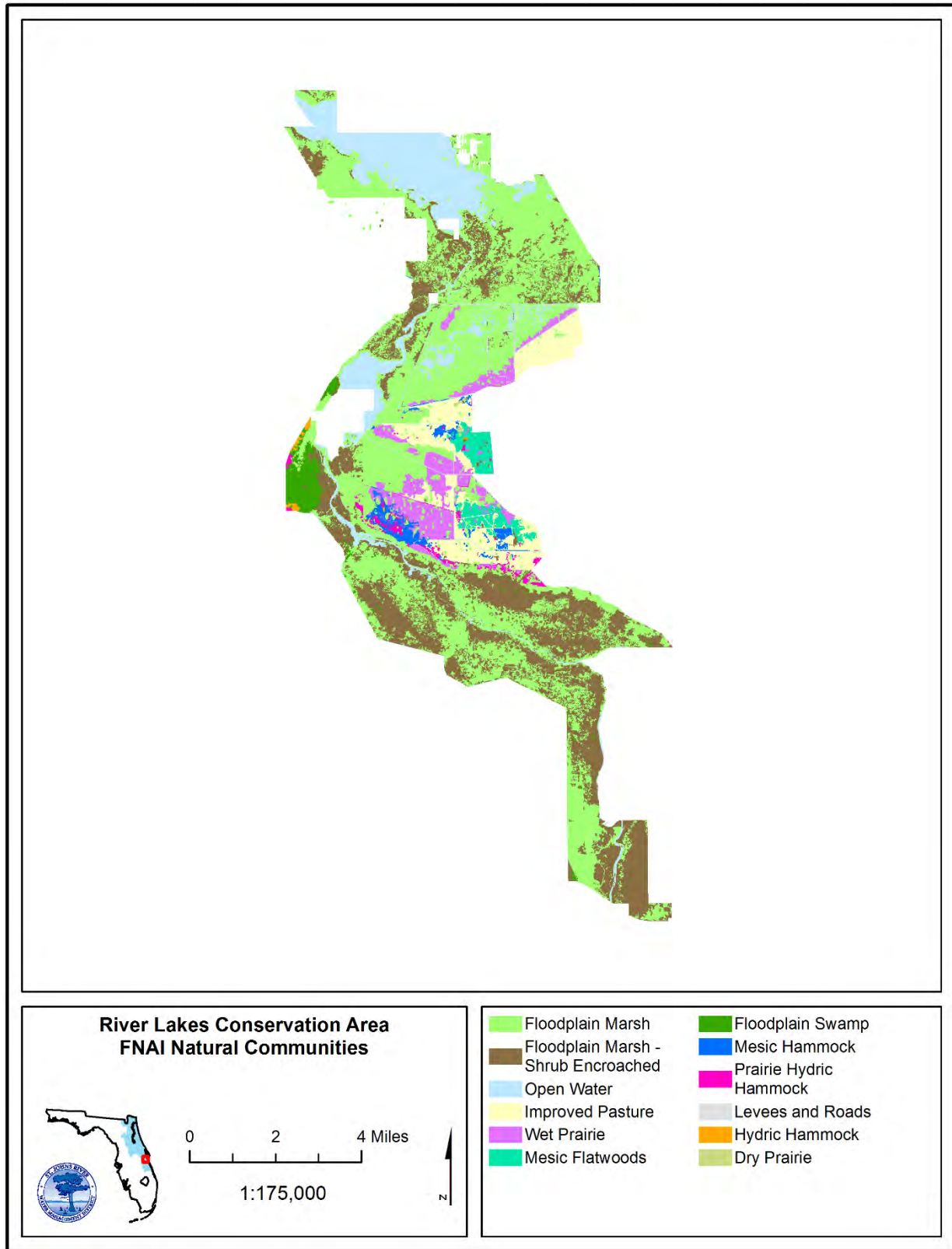


Figure 9: Natural Communities Map

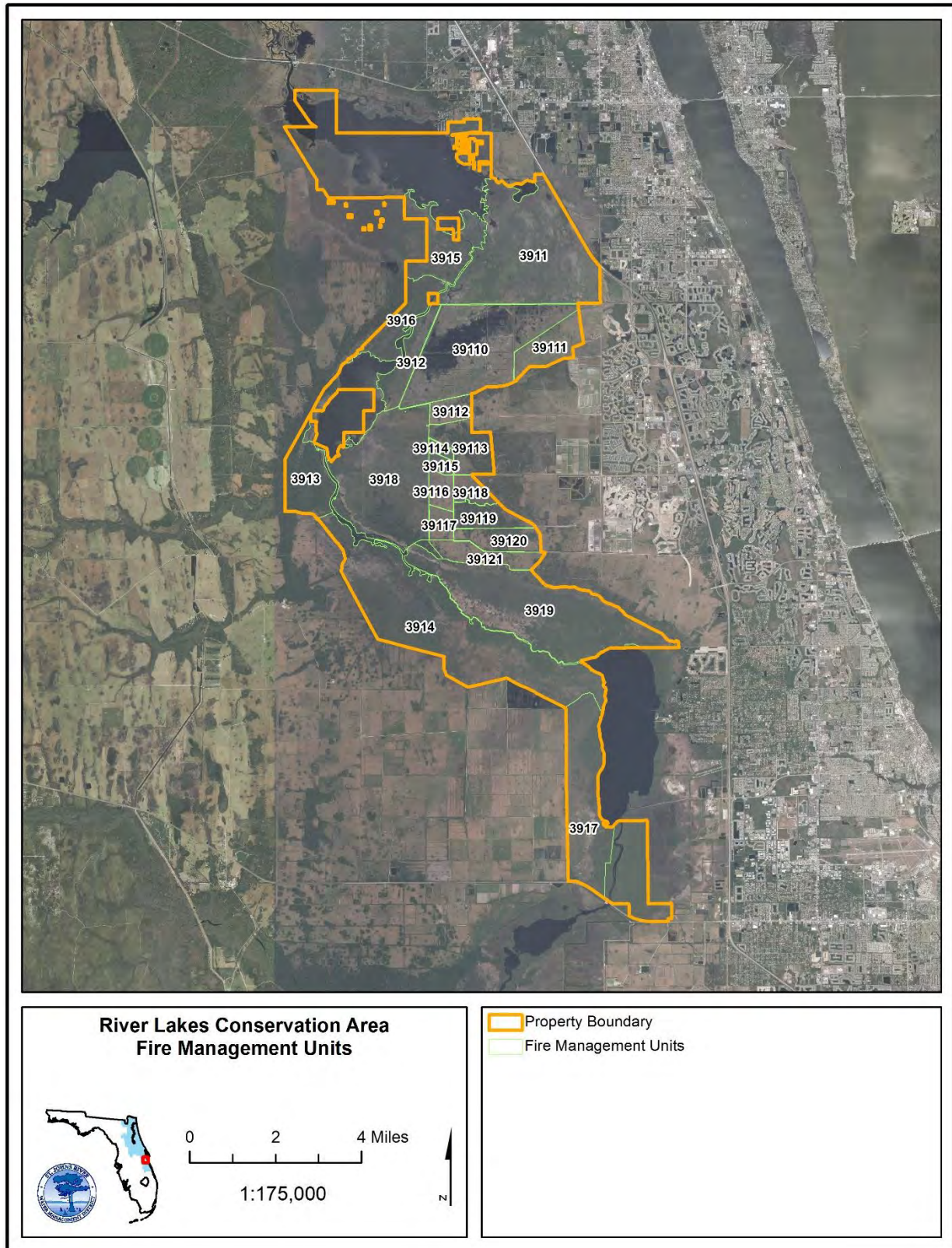


Figure 16: Fire Management Units Map

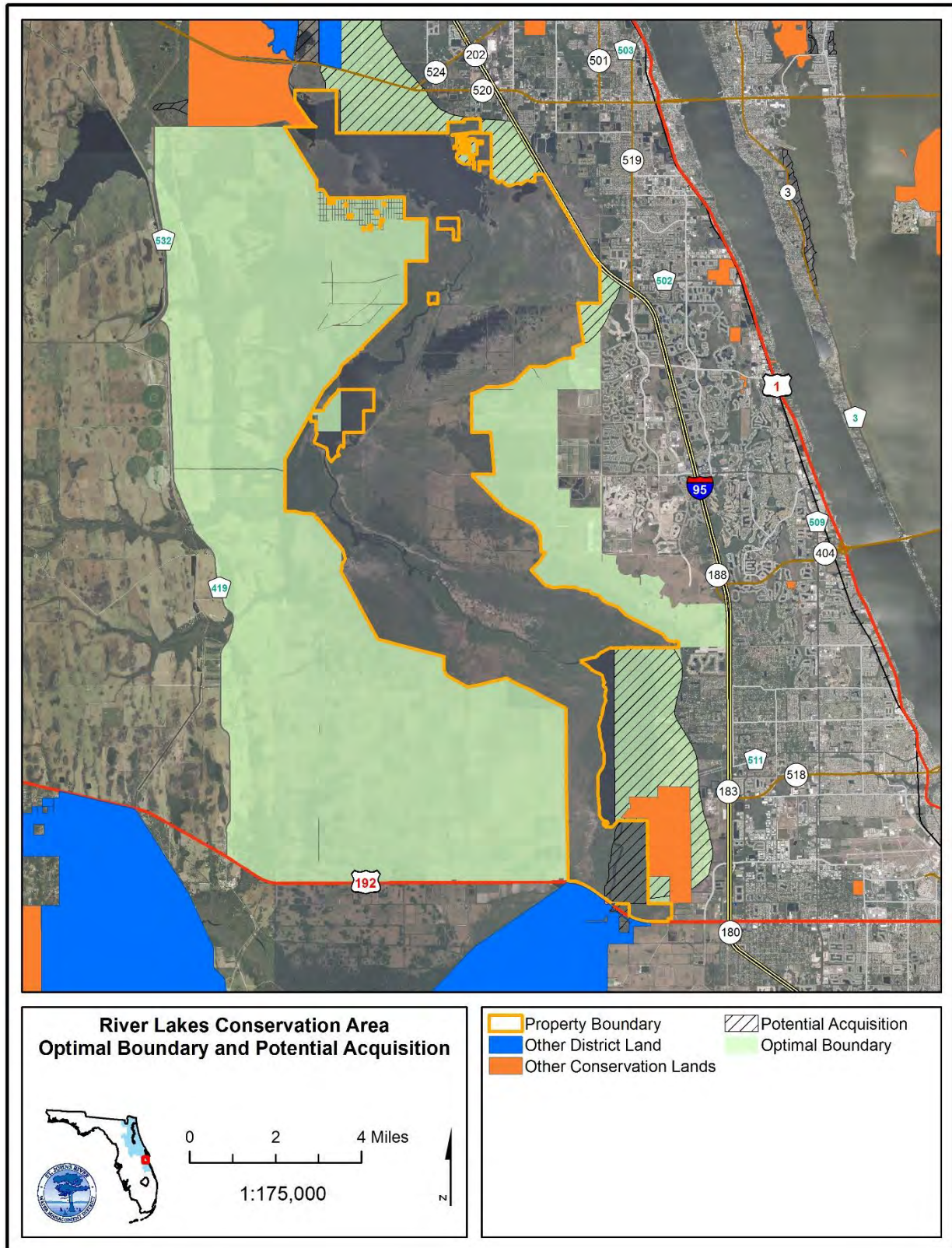


Figure 19: Optimal Boundary Map