

ITEM 7:

Consider a 10-year update to the Watson Island State Forest Management Plan (Lease No. 3556).

LOCATION:

St. Johns County

APPLICANT:

Florida Forest Service (FFS)

STAFF REMARKS:

Background

Watson Island State Forest (WISF) is comprised of 505.58 acres located near the City of St. Augustine in St. Johns County, about 36 miles south of Jacksonville. The Watson Island Tract (275.5 acres) is located along the St. Johns River, which acts as the western boundary of the forest, while the Warner Tract (230 acres) is located just a few miles inland from the St. Johns River. The Watson Island Tract was acquired through a special warranty deed from a private landowner on November 18, 1976. The Warner Tract was acquired through the Florida Forever Program as part of the St. Johns River Blueway on November 14, 2005.

The primary mission of the FFS is to “protect Florida and its people from the dangers of wildland fire and manage the forest resources through a stewardship ethic to assure they are available for future generations.” Management strategies for WISF center on the multiple-use concept, as defined in sections 589.04(3) and 253.034(2)(a), Florida Statutes (F.S.).

Multiple-use management for WISF will be accomplished with the following strategies:

- Practice sustainable forest management for improved forest health and efficient generation of revenue in support of state forest management objectives;
- Provide for resource-based outdoor recreation opportunities for multiple interests;
- Restore and manage healthy forests and native ecosystems ensuring the long-term viability of populations and species listed as endangered, threatened or rare, and other components of biological diversity including game and nongame wildlife and plants;
- Protect known archaeological, historical, and cultural resources;
- Restore, maintain, and protect hydrological functions related to water resources and the health of associated wetland and aquatic communities; and
- Provide research and educational opportunities related to natural resource management.

Management Plan Overview

In 2019, the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) completed an inventory and natural community mapping project on WISF and created a current and historic natural community type maps. Eight natural community types are found on WISF. The predominant natural community types are wet flatwoods and floodplain swamp. FNAI also identified three altered landcover types. There are four rare, endangered, or threatened plant and animal species documented on WISF.

A cultural resource assessment for the existence of archaeological and historical resources has not been conducted on the tract. However, a January 2019 review of the Department of Historical Resources (DHR) Florida Master Site File confirmed that there are no archaeological or historical

sites recorded within WISF. The DHR has indicated there is potential for existence of such sites on both tracts, though neither seems promising. On the Watson Island Tract, the areas in which DHR indicates archaeological sites are most likely to occur are situated along the St. Johns River frontage and live oak hammock areas, and on the Warner Tract where portions of higher ground adjoin the stream that passes through the property.

Currently, recreational activities at WISF are limited. The Watson Island Tract has public river access, but no designated trails or facilities. The Warner Tract has public access, but no designated trails or facilities. Firelines can be used as hiking trails. New recreation opportunities and facilities, which are compatible with the primary goals and responsibilities of the FFS, will be considered only after FFS determines their compatibility with other forest uses and forest resources.

The WISF is a participant in a Firewise community program. Communities in wildfire prone areas must work together to be fully prepared for wildfire. A “Fire Adapted Community” incorporates people, buildings, businesses, infrastructure, cultural resources, and natural areas to prepare for the effects of wildfire. The Fire Adapted Community concept serves as an umbrella to the various programs that help communities become more fire adapted. The FFS has implemented the Fire Adapted Community concept for prevention statewide. Specifically, in the area adjacent to or nearby WISF, efforts will continue to identify communities at risk and to contact their representatives.

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, F.S., 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: Public Access and Recreational Opportunities and Hydrological Preservation and Restoration.

Public Involvement

FFS responds to public involvement through liaison panels, management plan advisory groups, public hearings, and through ongoing direct contact with user groups. The plan was developed with input from the WISF Management Plan Advisory Group and was reviewed at a public hearing on October 28, 2022. No comments from the public were received.

Surplus Lands

On conservation lands where FFS is the lead manager, FFS assesses and identifies areas for potential surplus land. This consists of an examination of resource and operational management needs, public access and recreational use, and GIS modeling and analysis. The evaluation of WISF by FFS has determined that all portions of the area are being managed and operated for the original purposes of acquisition, therefore, no portion of the WISF is recommended for potential surplus.

State Land Management Review Team

A Land Management Review (LMR) was conducted in July 2018. The review team found that the property is managed in accordance with the purposes for which it was acquired and the management practices, including public access, are in compliance with the management plan. Five consensus recommendations were offered:

- The team recommended the FFS have sites surveyed for FNAI community types.

- The team recommended the FFS identify and establish an appropriately sized parking facility to allow limited public access.
- The team recommended the FFS identify mountain mint populations and manage sandhill fire to benefit this species.
- The team recommended the FFS survey for listed plants and animals.
- The team recommended the FFS survey bottomland forest and alluvial forest during the dry season for invasive woody plants and climbing fern.

The 2018 LMR notes were reviewed as part of developing this plan and the agreed upon changes and recommendations were made to this management plan.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Approve the management plan.

ARC RECOMMENDATION:

APPROVE

APPROVE WITH MODIFICATIONS: _____

DEFER

WITHDRAW

NOT APPROVE

OTHER: _____

LAND MANAGEMENT PLAN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LEAD AGENCY: Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), Florida Forest Service
 COMMON NAME: Watson Island State Forest
 LOCATION: St. Johns County
 ACREAGE TOTAL: 505.58 acres

Historic Natural Communities	Approximate Acreage*
Floodplain swamp	142
Wet flatwoods	106
Bottomland forest	87
Wet prairie	59
Mesic flatwoods	32

Historic Natural Communities	Approximate Acreage*
Mesic hammock	28
Basin swamp	19
Scrubby flatwoods	3
Dome swamp	2

* A 25-acre area has not been surveyed

TIITF LEASE AGREEMENT NUMBER: 3556
 USE: Single Multiple

MANAGEMENT AGENCY
 Florida DACS, Florida Forest Service
 Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
 St. Johns River Water Management District
 Department of State, Division of Historical Resources

RESPONSIBILITY
 General Forest Resource Management
 Wildlife Resources and Laws
 Water Resource Protection and Restoration
 Historical & Archaeological Resource Management

DESIGNATED LAND USE: Multiple-Use State Forest
 SUBLEASES: None
 ENCUMBRANCES: None
 TYPE OF ACQUISITION: Watson Island Tract was acquired in 1976 through a special warranty deed from a private individual. Warner Tract was acquired in 2005 under the Florida Forever conservation program.
 UNIQUE FEATURES: Approximately one mile of frontage on St. Johns River; freshwater swamp, live oak hammocks, pine flatwoods, and sawgrass marsh.
 ARCHAEOLOGICAL / HISTORICAL: No (0) known sites
 MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Ecosystem restoration through prescribed fire, management of timber resources including timber inventory, and boundary line maintenance.
 ACQUISITION NEEDS: 8,369 Acres of Optimal Management Boundary
 SURPLUS ACREAGE: None
 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT: 2018 Land Management Review, St. Johns County Board of Commissioners, Management Plan Advisory Group and Public Hearing, Acquisition and Restoration Council - - - - -
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DO NOT WRITE BELOW THIS LINE (FOR DIVISION OF STATE LANDS USE ONLY)

ARC Approval Date: _____ TIITF Approval Date: _____

Comments: _____



























