

ITEM 15:

Vote on whether to amend the Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem Florida Forever Project Boundary to add four parcels totaling approximately 431 acres in Highlands County with a tax assessed market value of \$136,352.

LOCATION:

Highlands County

DSL STAFF REMARKS:

The Ridgeland amendment, proposed by the Florida Conservation Group, adds four parcels in Highlands County totaling approximately 431 acres to the Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem Florida Forever project. The property is owned by the Ridgeland Ag Corp. The four parcels have a combined tax assessed value of \$136,352. The landowner has been contacted and is a willing seller. The project is proposed as a less-than-fee acquisition and land management responsibilities would remain with the landowner.

The property is dominated by improved and semi-improved pasture. Areas of open sand with native scrub oaks are present, however any former scrub habitat appears to have been converted to pasture. Notably, the project contains approximately eight acres of Josephine Creek and its associated floodplain, a natural flowing freshwater stream and one of two that feeds Lake Istokpoga. Remnant mixed hardwood forest that retains some characteristics of mesic flatwoods lies along Josephine Creek and a small isolated freshwater marsh is also documented on-site. Of note is a former wet prairie (now ditched) in the southeastern corner of the property that likely supports the state listed cut-throat grass (*Coleataenia absissum*). The property has been documented as habitat for the Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*) and bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*). The property is identified as Priority 2 within the Florida Ecological Greenways Network.

Boundary Amendment Criteria:

The proposal meets the criteria to be submitted as a boundary amendment. The parcels total less than 1,000 acres, have a tax assessed value of less than \$2 million, and are less than 10% of the size of the overall project to which they are being added. The proposal area should be designated as essential.

Project History:

The Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem project, located in Highlands, Lake, Osceola and Polk counties, was approved on the CARL list in 1992. Stretching from Orlando to Lake Okeechobee, much of the Lake Wales Ridge historic mosaic of scrub, flatwoods, wetlands, and lakes has been converted to citrus groves and housing developments. The Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem project is designed to protect the best remaining tracts of the Central Florida Ridge scrub and associated ecosystems, thereby preserving numerous imperiled species and allowing the public to see examples of the unique original landscape of the ridge. The Florida National Scenic Trail crosses this project.

The Lake Wales Ecosystem project currently identifies over 68,080 acres for acquisition with 29,702 acres remaining to be acquired. The project is ranked number two in the Critical Natural Lands category on the 2022 Florida Forever Priority List. The tax assessed value of the

remaining acres to be acquired in this project per property appraiser information (2020) is \$96,529,193.

FNAI Review:

According to the Florida Natural Areas Inventory Florida Forever Measures Evaluation, the proposed parcels contribute substantially to Aquifer Recharge (100%), Ecological Greenways (98%), Surface Water Protection (98%), Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas (97%), and FNAI Habitat Conservation Priorities (95%).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Vote on the proposed boundary amendment.

ARC RECOMMENDATION:

Project	DHR	FFS	Lynetta Griner	DEP	FWC	Bill Palmer	Elva Peppers	Selected
Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem: Ridgeland								



To: Sine Murray, DEP/OES
From: Dale R. Jackson, FNAI
Date: October 31, 2022
Subject: Proposed Boundary Modification (addition) to Florida Forever BOT Project:
Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem – Ridgeland, Highlands County

The major goal of the Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem Florida Forever Project (LWRE) is to protect the best remaining tracts of the mosaic of scrub, flatwoods, wetlands, and lakes that once covered the high, sandy Lake Wales Ridge, the backbone of Florida that stretches south from near Orlando almost to Lake Okeechobee. In particular, the unique scrub is inhabited by many plants and animals found nowhere else; many are now highly threatened from habitat loss and fragmentation that followed conversion to citrus groves and housing developments.

The Ridgeland property is proposed as an addition to LWRE. The property includes 431 acres in one tract in central Highlands County, ca. 1 mile west of Lake Istokpoga. It is contiguous with Sebring Scrub Conservation Bank, Lake Istokpoga Conservation Area, and Grassland Reserve Program Easement #105, which in turn connect to Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area. The property is proposed for less-than-fee-simple protection offered by a willing seller.

The Ridgeland property occurs within a landscape that is largely agriculture (including pasture) and forestry. The tract includes a small part of Tauchen Reservoir which appears to be an impoundment associated with a tributary of Josephine Creek, which flows roughly east-west through the center of the property. On either side of the creek are large patches of improved pasture with widely scattered trees. Tree growth is denser immediately adjacent to the creek. Within or adjacent to the pastures on each side is a single, somewhat circular patch of disturbed, apparently scraped, scrubland. Remote analysis identifies 12 acres (3% of proposal) as mesic/wet flatwoods, and 5 acres (1%) as sandhill upland lake (reservoir), considered under-represented natural communities on conservation lands. Significantly, the analysis does not identify habitat qualifying as scrub. Any former scrub habitat appears to have been converted to pasture. The application notes approximately 331 acres of improved pasture, 49 acres of unimproved/woodland pasture, 12 acres of mesic flatwoods, 10 acres of freshwater marshes, 8 acres of streams, 5 acres of mixed hardwood-coniferous, 5 acres of mixed scrub-shrub wetland, 4 acres of lakes and ponds (Tauchen Reservoir), and 3 acres of mixed wetland hardwoods. All of these systems have been affected by the primary use of the property as cattle land.

The FNAI database contains records of two rare species on site. The Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*, G5T4/S4, N, N) is considered abundant regionally by the FWC. Bald

eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, G5S3, N, N) at least formerly nested near the eastern edge of the site. Additionally, as noted in the proposal narrative, there is a possibility that some rare Lake Wales Ridge species survive on-site, although land disturbance may have extirpated or reduced such species. Of note is a large former wet prairie (now ditched) in the southeastern corner of the property that likely supports cut-throat grass (*Coleataenia absissum*; G3S3; state listed as Threatened).

The Florida Forever Measures Evaluation (FFME) at the end of this memo is based on the Florida Forever Conservation Needs Assessment developed by FNAI. The data used in that analysis represent a standardized, statewide perspective of natural community distributions based primarily on data from the Cooperative Land Cover Map. Nearly all of the property contributes to priority 1 and 2 Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas, priorities 4, 5, and 6 FNAI Habitat Conservation Priorities, priority 2 Ecological Greenways, priority 2, and 4 Surface Water Protection, and priority 2, 3, 4 Aquifer Recharge. See below for additional details.

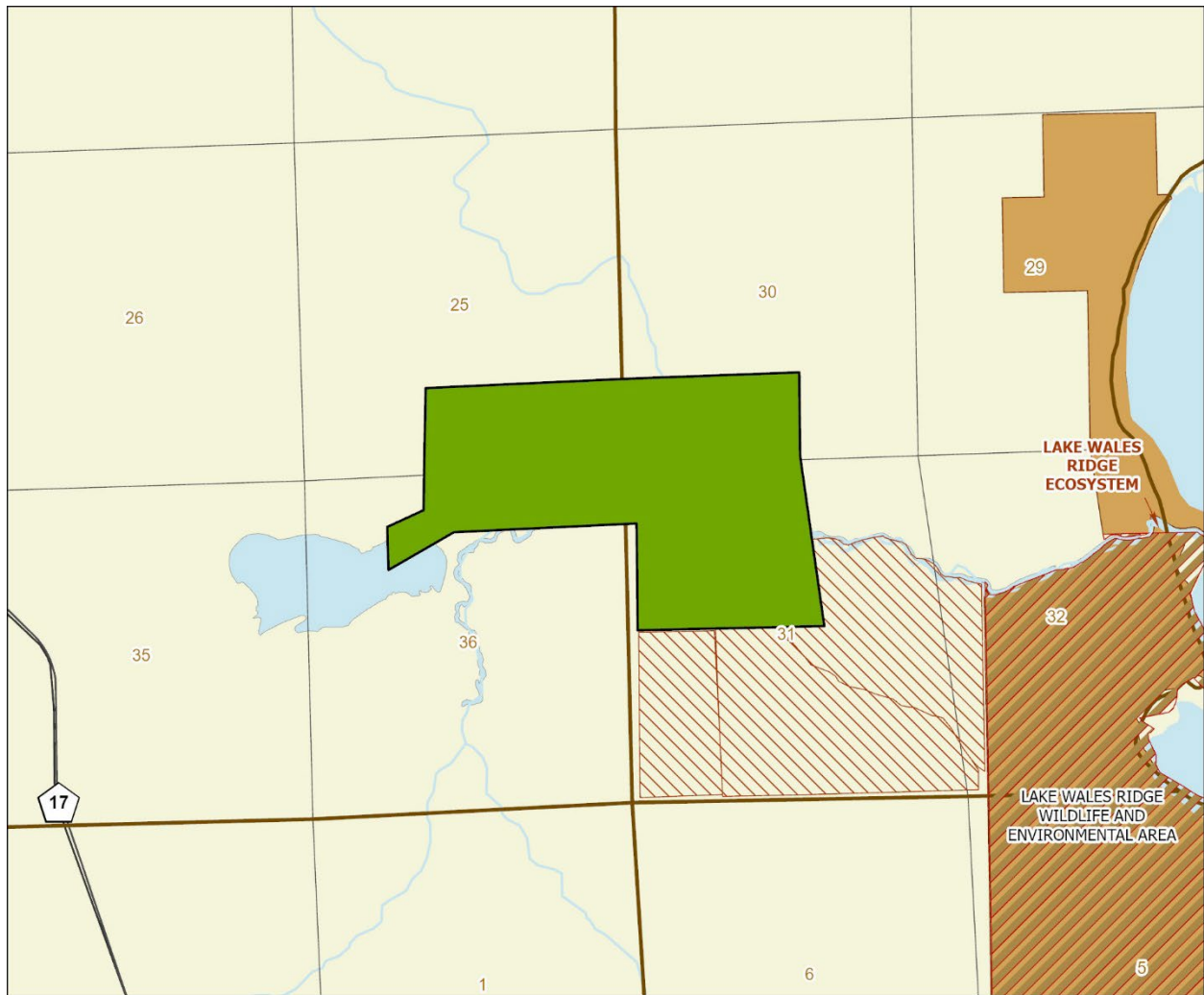
Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem (Ridgeland): Florida Forever Measure Evaluation 20221026

GIS ACRES = 431

MEASURES	Resource Acres ²	% of project
B1: Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas		
Priority 1	228	53%
Priority 2	190	44%
Priority 3	0	0%
Priority 4	0	0%
Priority 5	1	< 1%
Total Acres	419	97%
B2: FNAI Habitat Conservation Priorities		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	0	0%
Priority 4	32	7%
Priority 5	211	49%
Priority 6	168	39%
Total Acres	411	95%
B3: Ecological Greenways		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	424	98%
Priority 3	0	0%
Priority 4	0	0%
Priority 5	0	0%
Total Acres	424	98%
B4: Under-represented Natural Communities		
Upland Glade (G1)	0	0%
Pine Rockland (G1)	0	0%
Scrub and Scrubby Flatwoods (G2)	0	0%
Rockland Hammock (G2)	0	0%
Dry Prairie (G2)	0	0%
Seepage Slope (G2)	0	0%
Sandhill (G3)	0	0%
Sandhill Upland Lake (G3)	5	1%
Upland Pine (G3)	0	0%
Mesic/Wet Flatwoods (G4)	12	3%
Upland Hardwood Forest (G5)	0	0%
Total Acres	17	4%
B6: Occurrences of FNAI Tracked Species		
G1	0	
G2	0	
G3	0	
G4	1	
G5	1	
Total	2	
C4: Natural Floodplain Function		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	18	4%
Priority 4	92	21%
Priority 5	56	13%
Priority 6	0	0%
Total Acres	166	38%





MEASURES (continued)	Resource Acres ²	% of project
C5: Surface Water Protection		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	296	69%
Priority 3	0	0%
Priority 4	125	29%
Priority 5	0	0%
Priority 6	0	0%
Priority 7	0	0%
Total Acres	421	98%
C7: Fragile Coastal Resources		
Fragile Coastal Uplands	0	0%
Imperiled Coastal Lakes	0	0%
Coastal Wetlands	0	0%
Total Acres	0	0%
C8: Functional Wetlands		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	4	< 1%
Priority 4	17	4%
Priority 5	3	< 1%
Priority 6	0	0%
Total Acres	24	6%
D3: Aquifer Recharge		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	78	18%
Priority 3	262	61%
Priority 4	87	20%
Priority 5	4	< 1%
Priority 6	0	0%
Total Acres	431	100%
E2: Recreational Trails (miles) (prioritized trail opportunities from Office of Greenways and Trails & Univ. Florida)		
Land Trail Priorities	0.0	
Land Trail Opportunities	0.0	
Total Miles	0.0	
F2: Arch. & Historical Sites (number) 0 sites		
G1: Sustainable Forestry		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	11	3%
Priority 4	0	0%
Priority 5 - Potential Pinelands	263	61%
Total Acres	274	64%
G3: Forestland for Recharge 4 1%		

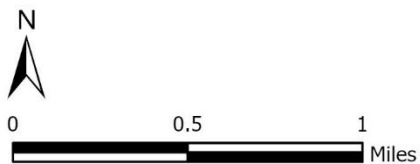
*Acres of each resource in the project and percentage of project represented by each resource are listed except where noted. This analysis converts site boundary into pixels, which causes slight differences from GIS acres; this effect is most noticeable on small sites.



LAKE WALES RIDGE ECOSYSTEM PROPOSED ADDITION (RIDGELAND)

HIGHLANDS COUNTY

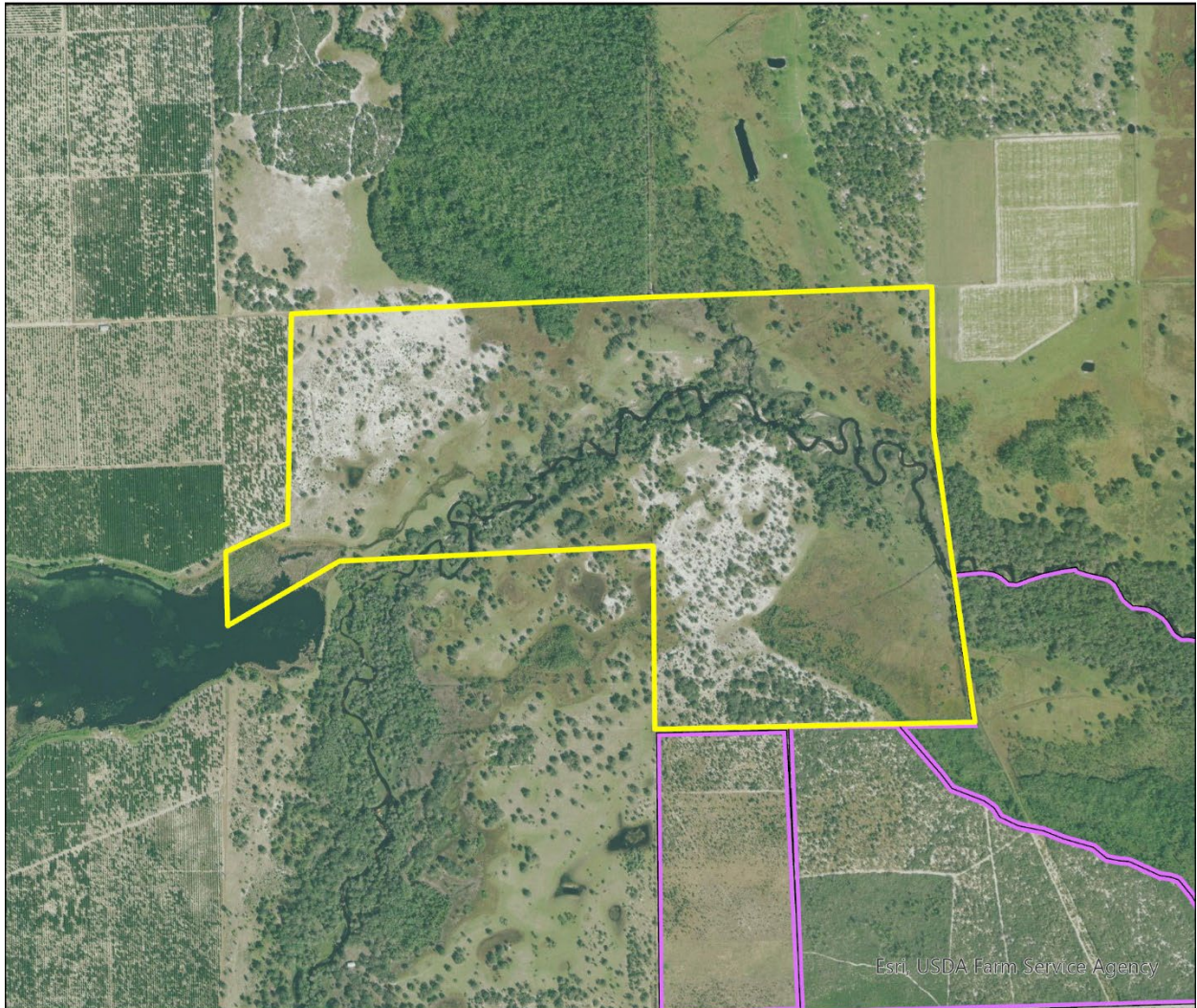
-  Proposed Addition
-  Florida Forever BOT Projects
-  State Owned Lands
-  Other Conservation Lands



MAP BY FL NATURAL AREAS INVENTORY OCTOBER 2022

Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem Proposed Addition (Ridgeland)

FLORIDA FOREVER BOARD OF TRUSTEES PROJECT PROPOSED ADDITION AS OF OCTOBER 2022



Map Produced by: FL Natural Areas Inventory, N. Pasco, October 2022

Background: USA NAIP Imagery Resolution = 1.0 meter

