

**ITEM 16:**

Vote on whether to amend the Natural Bridge Creek Florida Forever Project Boundary to add seven parcels totaling approximately 170.0 acres in Walton County with a tax assessed market value of \$259,083.

**LOCATION:**

Walton County

**DSL STAFF REMARKS:**

The Natural Bridge Creek Addition amendment proposed by the Conservation Advisors LLC, adds seven parcels in Walton County totaling approximately 170.0 acres to the Natural Bridge Creek Florida Forever project. The property consists of six parcels owned by Amos and Judy Hester. The parcels have a combined tax assessed value of \$259,083.

The property is within the Natural Bridge Creek Florida Forever boundary and is proposed for fee simple acquisition. The landowners have been contacted and are willing sellers. The Florida Forest Service has confirmed the property would be managed as part of the Natural Bridge Longleaf Preserve. The vast majority of the 170-acre project is forested and one parcel contains a small segment of Natural Bridge Creek, a sandy-bottomed seepage stream originating from the small springs and uplands of the Florida Forever site that winds over limestone outcrops before flowing into the upper Choctawhatchee River watershed. The addition would ensure the property remains a source and shelter for some of North America's rarest and most beautiful plants, wildlife and unique water resources.

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 it is being added. The proposal area should be designated as essential. After approval of this addition, the Hester family will own 1,967 acres within the Florida Forever project. The project will remain in the Critical Natural Lands category with the proposed addition.

*Project History:*

Acquisition would provide a buffer for Natural Bridge Creek, protect surface water, functional wetlands and aquifer recharge, and preserve underrepresented natural communities. On August 17, 2012 the current project was presented to ARC and accepted for review. It was added to the Florida Forever Priority List as a Critical Natural Lands projects on December 14, 2012. The project was submitted for acquisition in fee or conservation easement by the landowners, Mr. Benton Hester and Ms. Judith Hester. Their family has managed it as pinelands since World War II. The tax assessed value for the remaining acres to be acquired in this project per property appraiser information (2018) is \$1,971,331.

*FNAI Review:*

According to the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI), 100% of the proposal contributes to Surface Water Protection and 97% contributes to Aquifer Recharge. On all other measures the proposal contributes 15% or less.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:**

Vote on the proposed boundary amendment.

**ARC RECOMMENDATION:**

<b>Project</b>	<b>DHR</b>	<b>FFS</b>	<b>Lynetta Griner</b>	<b>FWC</b>	<b>Bill Palmer</b>	<b>Elva Peppers</b>	<b>DEP</b>	<b>Selected</b>
Natural Bridge Creek: Natural Bridge Creek Addition								



1018 Thomasville Road  
 Suite 200-C  
 Tallahassee, FL 32303  
 850-224-8207  
[www.fnai.org](http://www.fnai.org)

To: Deborah Burr, DEP/OES  
 From: Dale Jackson, FNAI  
 Date: May 21, 2020  
 Subject: Proposed Boundary Modification to the Natural Bridge Creek Florida Forever BOT project, Walton County

The Natural Bridge Creek Florida Forever BOT project (NBC) includes ca. 1,798 acres in northern Walton County along the Alabama state line. The property was proposed in 2012 by the owners for fee simple acquisition or a combination of acquisition and conservation easement. It is predominantly a contiguous piece of property but with one outlying tract separated by approximately 885 ft. This proposed addition (170 acres) constitutes three disjunct tracts (7 parcels) of various size and all contiguous with the existing project; owners are the same as for the original project.

NBC is situated roughly mid-way between the Yellow and Choctawhatchee rivers. There are no Florida managed areas within 10 miles. The original project consists of pine-covered uplands (mostly second-growth slash and longleaf pine depending on elevation and soil characteristics) reaching as high as 300 feet in elevation and dissected by numerous seepage streams and ravines; a small block in the northwest has been converted to plantation. The principal aquatic feature is Natural Bridge Creek, which flows northeastward across the property before entering Alabama. The creek is a white sand-bottomed creek, most likely a seepage stream, though perhaps with some blackwater characteristics.

The smallest of the three tracts proposed for addition is 1.7 acres of upland pine with moderately dense canopy of mature trees. The second-smallest tract is 8.5 acres bisected by Natural Bridge Creek and its associated narrow band of bottomland forest. Upland pine is present upslope on both sides of the creek; a small (1-acre) clearing is located on the north end. The largest (approximately 160 acres) tract is mostly covered by pine plantations in various stages of growth. There is a 35 acre field currently leased for farming located in the center of the tract. Two small ponds, possibly borrow pits, are visible on aerial photography. A small county road crosses the parcel near the northern end.

The FNAI database contains no records of rare species within the proposed addition. NBC itself does support gopher tortoises (*Gopherus polyphemus*: G3/S3, C, ST), and the creek may provide habitat for rare aquatic insects.

As summarized in the accompanying Florida Forever Measures Evaluation (FFME), nearly the entire proposed addition contributes to Aquifer Recharge and Surface Water Protection. Contribution to all other categories is low at 15% or less.



Florida Resources  
 and Environmental  
 Analysis Center

Institute of Science  
 and Public Affairs

*Tracking Florida's Biodiversity*

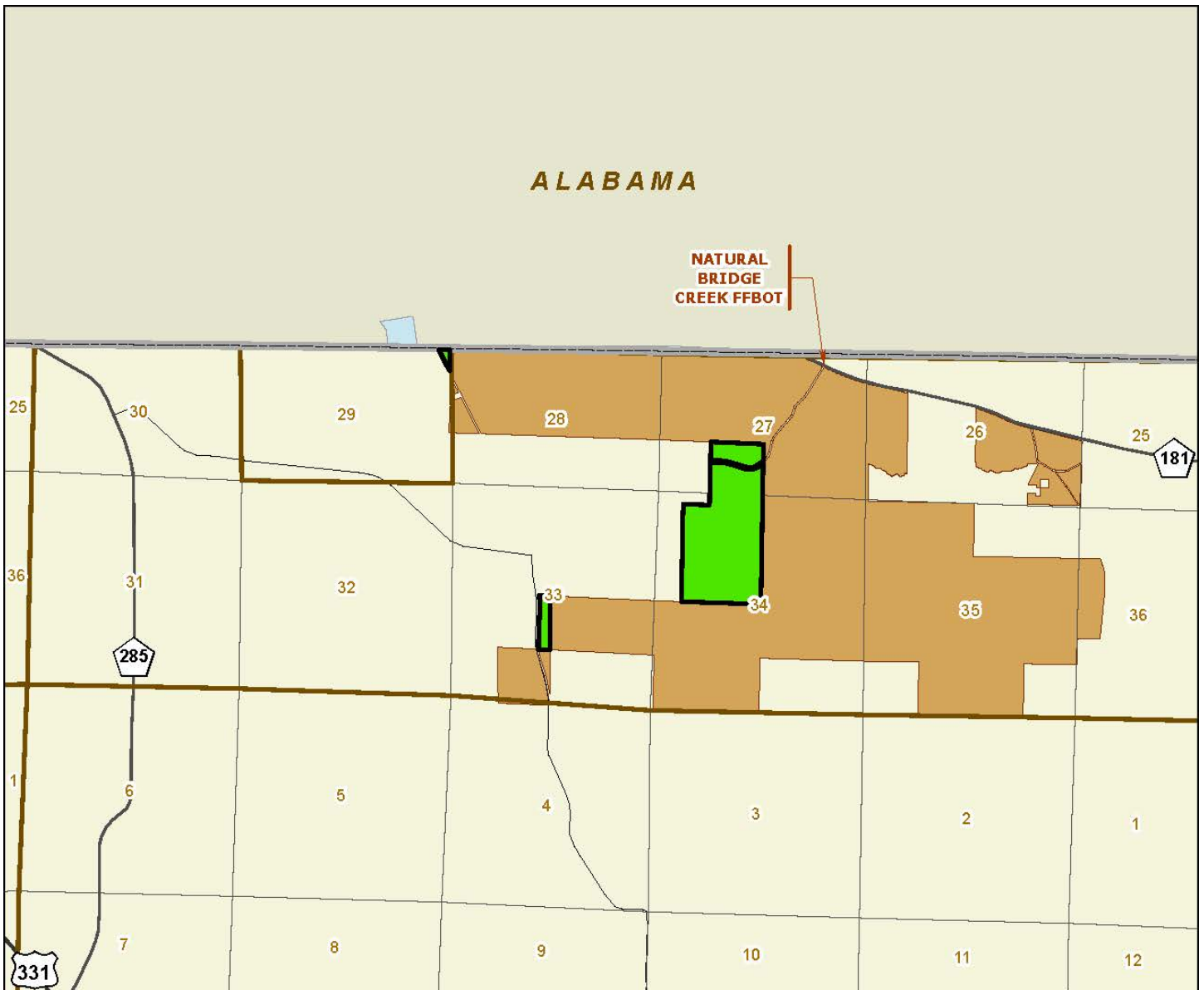
Natural Bridge Creek Addition: Florida Forever Measure Evaluation 20200515

GIS ACRES = 170

MEASURES	Resource Acres <sup>a</sup>	% of project
<b>B1: Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	0	0%
Priority 4	0	0%
Priority 5	24	14%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>14%</b>
<b>B2: FNAI Habitat Conservation Priorities</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	0	0%
Priority 4	0	0%
Priority 5	0	0%
Priority 6	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>B3: Ecological Greenways</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	0	0%
Priority 4	0	0%
Priority 5	0	0%
Priority 6	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>B4: Under-represented Natural Communities</b>		
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)	0	0%
Upland Pine (G3)	0	0%
Mesic/Wet Flatwoods (G4)	9	5%
Upland Hardwood Forest (G5)	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>B6: Occurrences of FNAI Tracked Species</b>		
G1	0	
G2	0	
G3	0	
G4	0	
G5	0	
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	
<b>C4: Natural Floodplain Function</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	3	2%
Priority 3	1	< 1%
Priority 4	5	3%
Priority 5	0	0%
Priority 6	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5%</b>



MEASURES (continued)	Resource Acres <sup>a</sup>	% of project
<b>C5: Surface Water Protection</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	0	0%
Priority 4	132	78%
Priority 5	38	22%
Priority 6	0	0%
Priority 7	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>C7: Fragile Coastal Resources</b>		
Fragile Coastal Uplands	0	0%
Imperiled Coastal Lakes	0	0%
Coastal Wetlands	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>C8: Functional Wetlands</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	14	8%
Priority 3	4	3%
Priority 4	6	4%
Priority 5	0	0%
Priority 6	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>D3: Aquifer Recharge</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	0	0%
Priority 3	2	1%
Priority 4	20	12%
Priority 5	142	83%
Priority 6	0	0%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>97%</b>
<b>E2: Recreational Trails (miles)</b> <small>(prioritized trail opportunities from Office of Greenways and Trails &amp; Univ. Florida)</small>		
Land Trail Priorities	0.0	
Land Trail Opportunities	0.0	
<b>Total Miles</b>	<b>0.0</b>	
<b>F2: Arch. &amp; Historical Sites (number)</b>		<b>1 sites</b>
<b>G1: Sustainable Forestry</b>		
Priority 1	0	0%
Priority 2	57	33%
Priority 3	21	12%
Priority 4	0	0%
Priority 5 - Potential Pinelands	49	29%
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>74%</b>
<b>G3: Forestland for Recharge</b>		<b>2 1%</b>

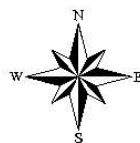
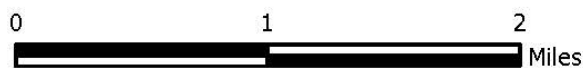
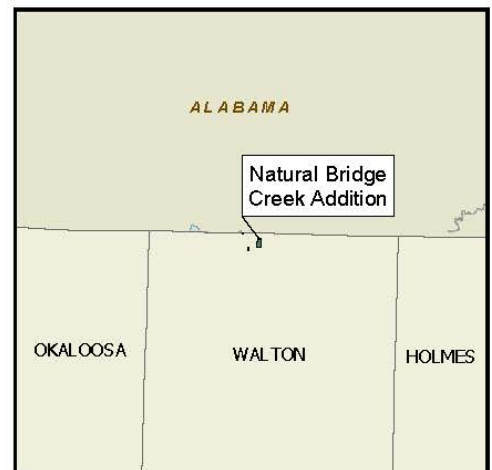
<sup>a</sup>Acres of each resource in the project and percentage of project represented by each resource are listed except where noted. This analysis converts site boundary into pixels, which causes slight differences from GIS acres; this effect is greatest on small sites.



### NATURAL BRIDGE CREEK PROPOSED ADDITION

#### WALTON COUNTY

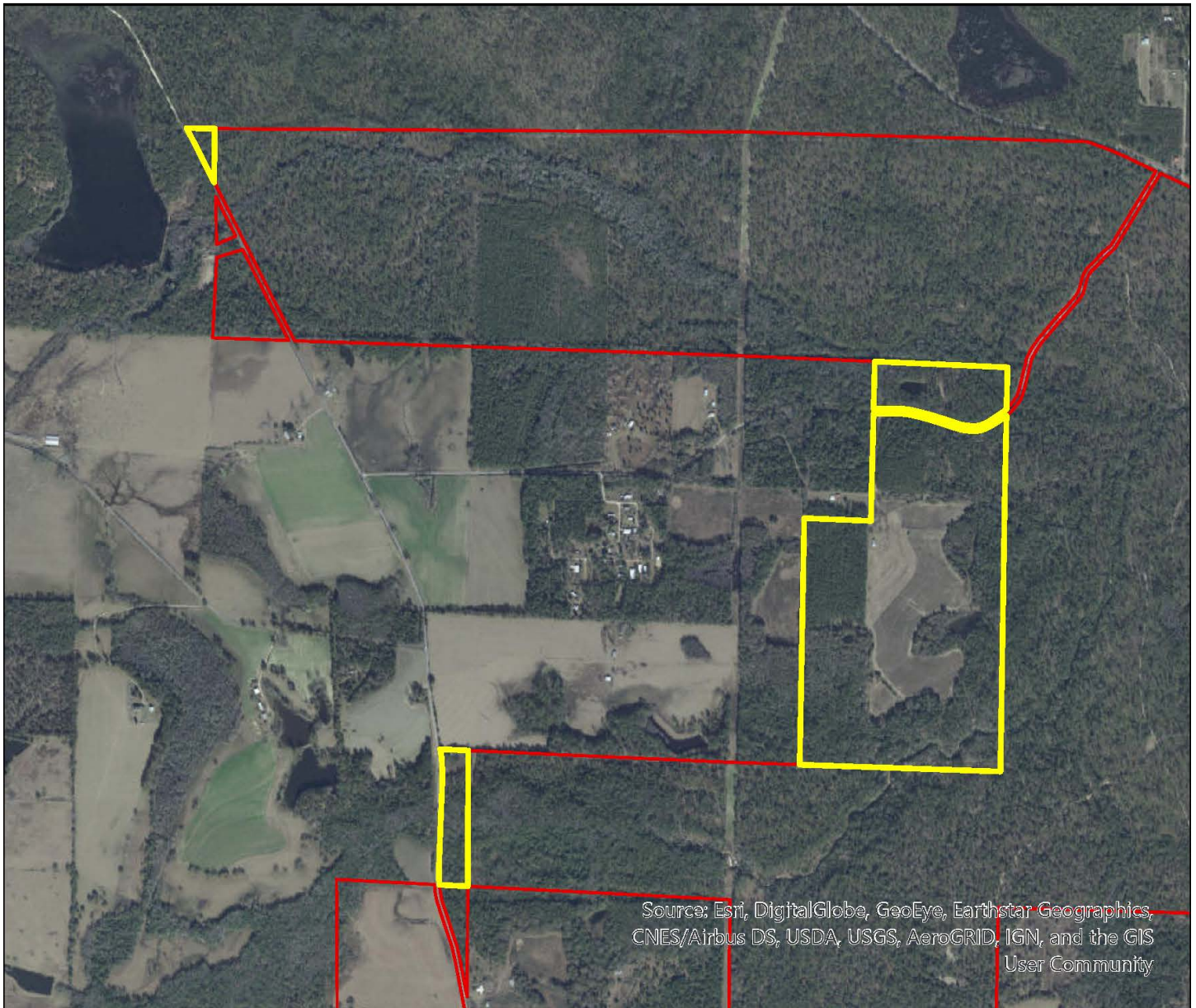
-  Proposed Florida Forever BOT Project Addition
-  Florida Forever BOT Projects



MAY 2020

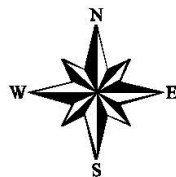
# Natural Bridge Creek Proposed Addition

FLORIDA FOREVER BOARD OF TRUSTEES PROJECT PROPOSED ADDITION BOUNDARY AS OF MAY 2020

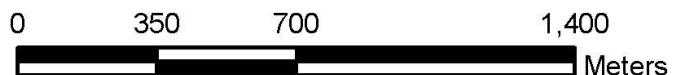


Map Produced by: N. Pasco, May 2020

Background: World Imagery Resolution = 0.3 meter



1018 Thomasville Road  
Suite 200-C  
Tallahassee, Florida 32303  
850-224-8207  
fax 850-681-9364  
www.fnai.org



FLORIDA FOREST SERVICE  
(850) 681-5800



THE CONNER BUILDING  
3125 CONNER BOULEVARD  
TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA 32399-1650

**FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND CONSUMER SERVICES**  
**COMMISSIONER NICOLE "NIKKI" FRIED**

---

May 15, 2020

Ms. Callie DeHaven, Director  
Division of State Lands  
Department of Environmental Protection  
3900 Commonwealth Boulevard  
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-3000

Dear Ms. DeHaven:

Please accept this message of support for the proposed Natural Bridge Creek Florida Forever project boundary amendment recently submitted for Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) consideration. This approximately 1,969-acre, well-managed, highly biodiverse longleaf pine ecosystem located in northern Walton County is strategically connected to the Conecuh National Forest to the north across the Alabama state line. Protection of this project would ensure perpetual expanded conservation of the forest habitat already anchored in the region by Conecuh.

The Florida Forest Service has secured a federal Forest Legacy Program acquisition grant award (Keystone Longleaf Preserve) for the purposes of conservation purchase of this property. ARC approval of this item will further secure the Florida Forever Program as funding partner for this project. Additionally, the property is an approved Rural and Family Lands Protection program project. The Florida Forest Service looks forward to the day when we may take on management of this property as a new state forest, in partnership with the County.

We express our thanks to the Division of State Lands for its continued partnership in conservation acquisition. Should you need further assistance, please contact Keith Rowell at (850) 681-5818.

Sincerely,

Erin Albury, Director and State Forester  
Florida Forest Service

KR/

cc: Keith Rowell, Land Programs Administrator  
Cat Ingram, Intergovernmental Liaison

**Florida Forest Service (FFS)  
Management Prospectus  
Natural Bridge Creek  
Walton County, Florida**

**Florida Forest Service Management:**

Florida Forest Service (FFS), as the lead manager of the Natural Bridge Creek Florida Forever project (Project), will coordinate state forest and any potential Wildlife Management Area (WMA) boundaries with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). The FFS may additionally coordinate potential local community park boundaries for public access near the natural limestone bridge formation and aquifer-fed spring, "Spring Tract," as pertinent to the Forest Legacy Program (FLP) Keystone Longleaf Preserve project brief, contingent upon usage of FLP acquisition grant for Property purchase in line with the brief, with Walton County. FFS management of the Property will allow for further protection and expansion of the forest habitat corridor in the area anchored by adjoining conservation unit, Conecuh National Forest, to the north in Alabama. FFS management will provide continued restoration and re-establishment of the Longleaf pine forest ecosystem once historically dominating the local area.

The primary management objective of the Property is to enhance connectivity, restore and manage forest lands as forests, preserve the water quality in the region, and ensure that the resource-based outdoor recreational opportunities of the property will continue to be enjoyed by the community, as well as youth groups, disabled American veterans through events hosted by the FFS Operation Outdoor Freedom program, and others in the public. FFS will promote recreational activities on the Property that enhance the value of the natural resources and protect imperiled species and sensitive habitats.

Further, FFS management will allow for restoration and sustainable management of the timber resources, provide protection to the aquifer and approximately 3 miles of Natural Bridge Creek as it rises to the surface on Spring Tract before it flows south into the upper Choctawhatchee River watershed, and provide for a diverse array of dispersed, resource-based recreational opportunities. The FFS will seek to continue maintenance of the property by continuing implementation of prescribed fire to manage fire-dependent communities, control and removal of invasive species, harvesting off-site pine species and replanting site-appropriate species.

The FFS will utilize a multiple-use management regime on this Property, similar to other FFS-managed lands. The FFS has a nationally recognized prescribed burning program that is a model for land management agencies across the country. The FFS will implement this cost effective and ecologically sound program on the Property at the appropriate frequency and intensity. Landscape-scale restoration and management conducted by the FFS will allow for re-vegetation or re-population by rare, threatened, and/or endangered plants and animals otherwise native to the Property.

**Conditions affecting intensity of management:**

The Property should not require intensive management in the short term. Over the long term, the intensity of management and related costs may increase as management emphasis shifts from protection and planning, to restoration efforts and a broader public use.

**Revenue generating potential:**

The FFS foresees revenue generation from the management of this property. The amount of future revenue generated from silviculture will be minimal and depend on the acreage that is managed as such. Due to the high recreational potential of the Property, visitor fees will be the primary revenue generated on the property and will increase significantly as time progresses and opportunities are established.



**Timetable for implementing management, and provisions for security and protection of infrastructure:**

Once the Property is acquired and assigned to the FFS, short term management efforts will concentrate on site security, control of vehicle access, and management planning. Consideration will be given during the management planning process to accommodate a variety of recreational developments. The magnitude and diversity of future resource-based recreation opportunities offered will depend on establishment of a management plan for the Property and funding for positions. The FFS will expedite short-term management on portions of the Property that are near other FFS-managed lands including potentially, Blackwater River State Forest, Point Washington State Forest, and Pine Log State Forest, by utilizing existing resources. Additional equipment required to manage the property includes, but is not limited to, one 4x4 pickup, one farm tractor with implements, and one UTV.

**Public Use:**

The Property lends itself to diverse recreational opportunities, including but not limited to camping, hunting, fishing, paddling, trails (hiking, off-road bicycling, equestrian), picnic pavilions and group recreational opportunities. Wildlife viewing, birding, and nature study are other passive nature-based recreation opportunities. Potentially, the subject property could have a very strong component featuring specialty youth hunting and Operation Outdoor Freedom events.

**Management costs and sources of revenue:** It is anticipated that management funding will come from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund. Estimated budget needs for interim management are as follows:

**Salary: \$30,000** (1 FTE; Park Ranger)

**Expense: \$20,000** (Annual operating costs)

**OCO: \$175,000** (1 - 4x4 pickups, 1 farm tractor with implements, and 1 UTV)

**Outsourcing: \$25,000**

**TOTAL: \$225,000**

**Cooperators in management activities:**

FFS, acting as lead manager, will work with FWC as cooperating manager, local governments, and the Northwest Florida Water Management District, as well as perhaps the State of Alabama, USDA Forest Service, and the Department of Defense, as appropriate, to further resource management, recreational and perhaps educational opportunities.