

Forest Legacy Project

Rainbow Lakes Forest

Marion County, Florida

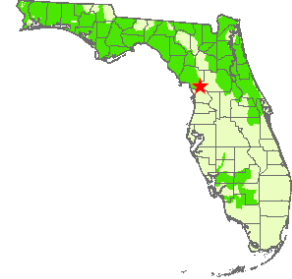


FUNDING HISTORY

FY 2023 Forest Legacy Program Funding	\$10,000,000
FY 2023 Non-Federal Cost Share	\$15,000,000
FY 2023 Project Costs	\$25,000,000
FY 2023 Project Acres	5,602

Forest Legacy Funding To Date	\$0
Total Project Costs	\$25,000,000
Total Project Acres	5,602

★ Project Location
■ Forest Legacy Areas



Tract Name	Size (ac)	Tract Cost	FLP Funding	Non-Fed Cost Share	Status
Sandhill	5,602	\$25,000,000	\$10,000,000	\$15,000,000	In Review 2023

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

FEE acquisition of Rainbow Lakes Forest Sandhill tract will protect significant recharge to the Floridan Aquifer that feeds nearby Rainbow Springs, the fourth-largest spring formation in Florida, producing over 490 million gallons of water per day (mgd) for the Rainbow River and Rainbow Springs Aquatic Preserve. The 5,602-acre tract at the junction of the Goethe State Forest, Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway, and Rainbow Springs State Park is pressured by ominous Dunnellon urban interface expansion. Once planned for thousands of homes and impervious infrastructure adjacent to Goethe State Forest, the tract presents the last opportunity for Florida to acquire, and the Florida Forest Service (FFS) to restore and manage, this large longleaf pine forest with stunning vistas overlooking lakes and ponds. Restoration of longleaf pine and sandhill habitat, once prevalent in these hills but now critically endangered because of conversion for development in rapidly growing Florida, will protect crucial springshed recharge for a Natural National Landmark spring otherwise threatened by intensive development, and expand recreational opportunities for Goethe State Forest and the tourism-dependent Florida Nature Coast economy.



Turner Lake, one of four large aquifer-sensitive sandhill lakes on the property (Photo by Keith Fountain)

PROJECT FEATURES

Important

- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS - TIMBER:** Regeneration and replanting of longleaf pine on the tract, where most of the pine timber was harvested 15 to 20 years ago when residential development was planned, will provide a future source of longleaf pine for area mills in the region.
- The forest products industry is significant in Marion County, where a 2016 forest industry economic study by the University of Florida identified 661 jobs with a direct relationship to the industry producing a direct economic output of more than \$140 million.

- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS - NON-TIMBER:** Public acquisition will protect the Rainbow Springs springshed and benefit Rainbow Springs State Park, identified in a 2019 Florida Park Service report as providing 436 local jobs, supporting 353,764 visitors, and creating an economic impact of more than \$31 million.
- The tract's unique landscape of rolling hills and lakes will provide increased opportunities for outdoor recreation at Goethe State Forest, including new hiking trails and paddling on the lakes and ponds.
- The tract will provide an opportunity for public hunting of plentiful and managed game populations such as white-tailed deer and Osceola turkey, a subspecies of the North American turkey prized by hunters seeking the "Grand Slam" because of its limited range and difficulty to call and hunt.
- **THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES HABITAT:** The federally endangered longspurred mint (*Dicerandra cornutissima*) growing on the tract is a 1.6 feet tall, strongly aromatic mint that is globally documented in only 15 locations in Marion County and Sumter County, Florida.
- Over 50% of the tract's uplands have been identified by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) as Priority 1 Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas (SHCA) based on the state or global ranking of species and their habitat, threats, and ecological fragility.
- Listed animal species documented on the tract by the FWC and others include the Eastern Indigo Snake (federally threatened), Florida Pine Snake, Striped Newt, Florida Sandhill Crane, Bald Eagle, Gopher Tortoise, Southeastern Fox Squirrel, Florida Black Bear, and Southeastern American Kestrel.
- The FWC has also identified the tract as important to SHCAs for the Striped Newt, Florida Mouse, Swallow-tailed Kite, and Cooper's Hawk.
- **FISH, WILDLIFE, PLANTS AND UNIQUE FOREST COMMUNITIES:** Sandhill habitat, a critically endangered forest community due to a 98% decline over its range, covers 40% of the tract and provides an unusual opportunity for large-scale restoration of longleaf pine in rapidly growing Central Florida.
- The tract straddles the northern extension of the Brooksville Ridge, one of Florida's ancient sand ridges known for high, rolling hills (elevations range from 130 to 70 feet) in an otherwise relatively flat landscape, and unique forest communities and endemic plants not found in other regions.
- **WATER SUPPLY, AQUATIC HABITAT AND WATERSHED PROTECTION:** Most of the tract provides high priority (Priority 1 or 2) recharge to the Floridan Aquifer, which supplies water flow from the first magnitude (discharge of 64.6 mgd or greater) Rainbow Spring and other springs located 1.4 miles to the east.
- The tract contains over 500 acres of lakes, ponds, and marshes, including Basin, Indian, Lindsey, Turner, and Section Sixteen lakes, that support a variety of fish and aquatic plants, including up to six focal species tracked by the FWC.
- The tract provides recharge to the Rainbow Springs Group basin, which includes Rainbow Spring, Florida's fourth largest springs group by volume. The group pumps 490 mgd through more than 85 spring vents into the Rainbow River, which flows 5.7 miles to its confluence with the Withlacoochee River.
- **PUBLIC ACCESS:** The tract shares almost a mile of boundary with Goethe State Forest, which contains an extensive trail network that can be easily linked for access to high elevation sandhills for hiking and lakes and ponds not generally available on the state forest for paddling.
- The tract will be managed and restored pursuant to an existing State Forester-approved ten-year land management plan for Goethe State Forest.
- **SCENIC:** The tract borders five miles of the proposed Nature Coast Regional Connector Trail, a multi-use recreational trail that will connect with Florida's Cross Florida Greenway and protect the proposed trail from residential and commercial development on the west side of Dunnellon.



Endangered sandhill habitat with intact wiregrass groundcover and longleaf pine (Photo by Keith Fountain)

- **HISTORIC/CULTURAL:** Nineteen historical and archeological sites are documented on the tract in the Florida Master Site File managed by the Florida Department of State, with 12 sites evidencing 12,000 years of prehistoric occupation. At least one prehistoric site is designated as having pottery.
- A 1988 cultural resources survey of the tract noted occupation of North Central Florida by the federally-recognized Seminole Tribe until forced deportation west of the Mississippi River or dispersal by the Second Seminole War. Key battles occurred nearby and troops reportedly camped at Turner Lake.

Threatened

- **LACK OF PROTECTION:** The tract is located only 1.3 miles from downtown Dunnellon and 0.6 miles from a Walmart Supercenter along the growing U.S. Highway 41 corridor, and lacks any legal or regulatory restrictions to conversion, fragmentation, or parcelization for a wide variety of nonforest uses.
- **LAND AND LANDOWNER'S CIRCUMSTANCE:** The landowner is an Indiana family that invested in Florida real estate about 17 years ago that are now looking to divest of their Florida holdings. After selling another large property last year, their Dunnellon holdings are all that remain in Florida.
- The owner signed a contract in June 2021 for the sale of the tract and another 730 acres in land holdings to the representative of a large Central Florida timeshare company, but negotiated the termination of the contract to allow the state a final opportunity at acquiring the tract for conservation.
- The landowner has an open listing for the tract and relationships with various real estate brokers. While the landowner has a commitment to conservation and has provided a discounted pricing for a conservation sale, they continue to allow its showing to potential investors and developers.
- **ADJACENT LAND USE:** Immediately adjacent to the city of Dunnellon and its surging population, the tract is bounded on the east and north by large, heavily developed residential subdivisions named Villages of Rainbow Springs and Rainbow Lake Estates, respectively.
- Acquisition will complete the Goethe State Forest conservation corridor lying west of the residential/commercial urban interface along U.S. Highway 41. This area is experiencing surging growth related to the World Equestrian Center, the nation's largest equestrian complex 13 miles to the east.
- **ABILITY TO DEVELOP:** Approximately 3,945 acres of the tract was entitled in 1994 as part of a 5,057-acre Florida Quality Development known as Cold Springs Villages that permitted development of 7,500 residential homes and over 1 million square feet of retail, healthcare, and industrial use.
- While the "Florida Quality Development" development order has lapsed, the tract continues to have taxing authority for development through the legislatively created Cold Springs Improvement District, and the east and south portions remain zoned by Marion County for Planned Unit Development (PUD).
- The east 800 acres of the tract is zoned for a PUD known as The Ravines of Rainbow Springs that may be developed for up to 2,300 residential units, or a maximum gross density of 2.87 units per acre.
- The south 790 acres of the tract is zoned for 970 residential units (a gross density of 1.23 units per acre) and an 18-hole golf course, which would be a significant nonpoint source of aquifer contamination due to chemical turf management, as part of the Villages of Rainbow Springs.



Kayaking the Rainbow River (Photo by Margaret Waggoner)

Strategic

- **CONSERVATION INITIATIVE-NATIONAL:** Acquisition of the tract protects recharge to the Floridan Aquifer that is the source of freshwater flow from Rainbow Springs, recognized by the U.S. National Park Service in 1971 as a Natural National Landmark for being Florida's second ranked great artesian spring based on its rate of discharge and first ranked single outlet spring.
- The tract supports 2019-2022 strategic outcomes outlined by the America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative - a national initiative to increase longleaf pine to 8 million acres by 2025 - particularly those outcomes related to establishing new longleaf forests and protecting existing longleaf habitat.
- **CONSERVATION PLAN-NATIONAL:** Lying in the Brooksville Ridge conservation focal area of the 2019 Draft Eastern Indigo Snake Recovery Implementation Strategy, acquisition of the tract advances recovery of this federally-threatened species by "maintaining and enhancing existing populations via habitat conservation." The habitat restoration will promote increased populations of other listed species.
- **CONSERVATION PLAN-STATE:** As documented in the Rainbow Springs Group Basin Management Action Plan - Florida's latest tool for restoring impaired waters by reducing pollutant loads - the entirety of the tract lies within the Rainbow Springs Management Area and the Rainbow Springs springshed, and supports plan goals by reducing impacts to highly permeable soils critical to the Floridan Aquifer.
- By protecting high aquifer recharge lands in the Rainbow Springs springshed, the tract contributes to state and water management district plans related to the Rainbow Springs Group and the Rainbow River by preserving the quality and quantity of fresh water recharging the aquifer and ultimately flowing from the spring.
- **CONSERVATION STRATEGY-STATE:** The tract's importance to water flows from Rainbow Springs advances protection of the Rainbow River intended by the (now) Florida Department of Environmental Protection when the river was designated an Outstanding Florida Water in 1987. This designation is afforded to waters worthy of special protection because of natural attributes and existing good water quality.
- **CONSERVATION INITIATIVE-STATE:** The tract supports the Florida Springs Initiative for the Rainbow Springs Group by allowing better management and restoration to sustain Floridan Aquifer recharge and prevent nonpoint source pollution of the spring by residential development. Acquisition complements the FY16 Silver Springs Watershed and FY18 Wakulla Caves Forest USFS Forest Legacy Program projects.
- The tract presents another opportunity for Florida to purchase a large property planned for intensive residential development in the heart of a major spring's springshed for longleaf pine habitat restoration, but at a price much less than what Florida paid in 2006 when, together with partners, the state purchased the 4,400-acre Indian Lake State Forest just north of Silver Springs for \$76 million.
- **COMPLEMENT PROTECTED LANDS:** The tract is a keystone parcel in efforts to protect a mosaic of properties critical for a recreation connection among the 53,238-acre Goethe State Forest, 1,472-acre Rainbow Springs State Park, and the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway, while protecting watersheds at the confluence of the Rainbow River and Withlacoochee River.
- The tract is within the Optimal Management Boundary established by the FFS for Goethe State Forest in its 2015 state forest management plan and is an essential parcel in the South Goethe Florida Forever Program land acquisition project.



Overlooking Lindsey Lake (elevation 70 feet) from a hill (elevation 130 feet) (Photo by Keith Fountain)

Readiness

Pre-Appraisal/Market Analysis	1
Easement or Fee Conditions	1
Non-Federal Cost Share Commitment	1
Signed Purchase Agreement	0
Title Search	1
Mineral Determination	1
Stewardship Plan (or equivalent)*	1
Readiness Total Tally Score	6

Supporting Parties

Florida Forest Service; Florida Department of Environmental Protection; Florida Springs Institute; Florida Springs Council; Rainbow River Conservation; and The Felburn Foundation.

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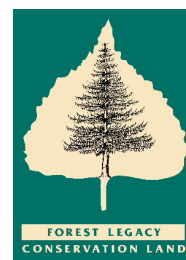
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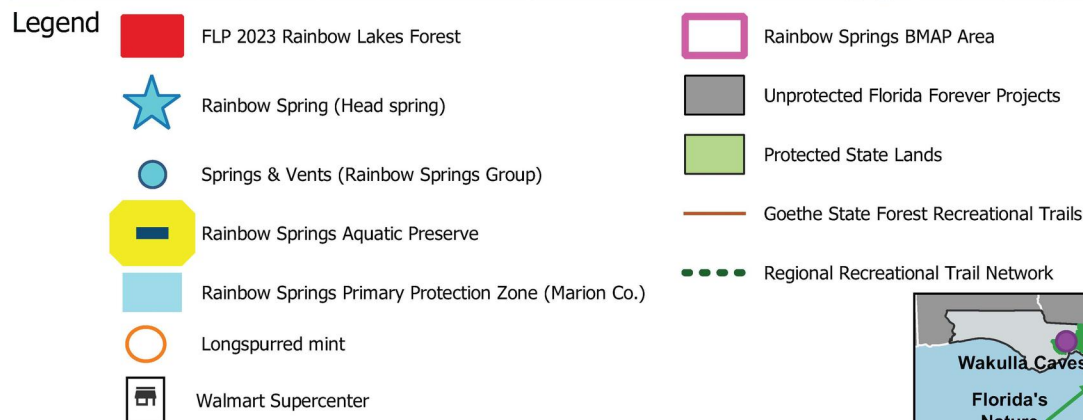
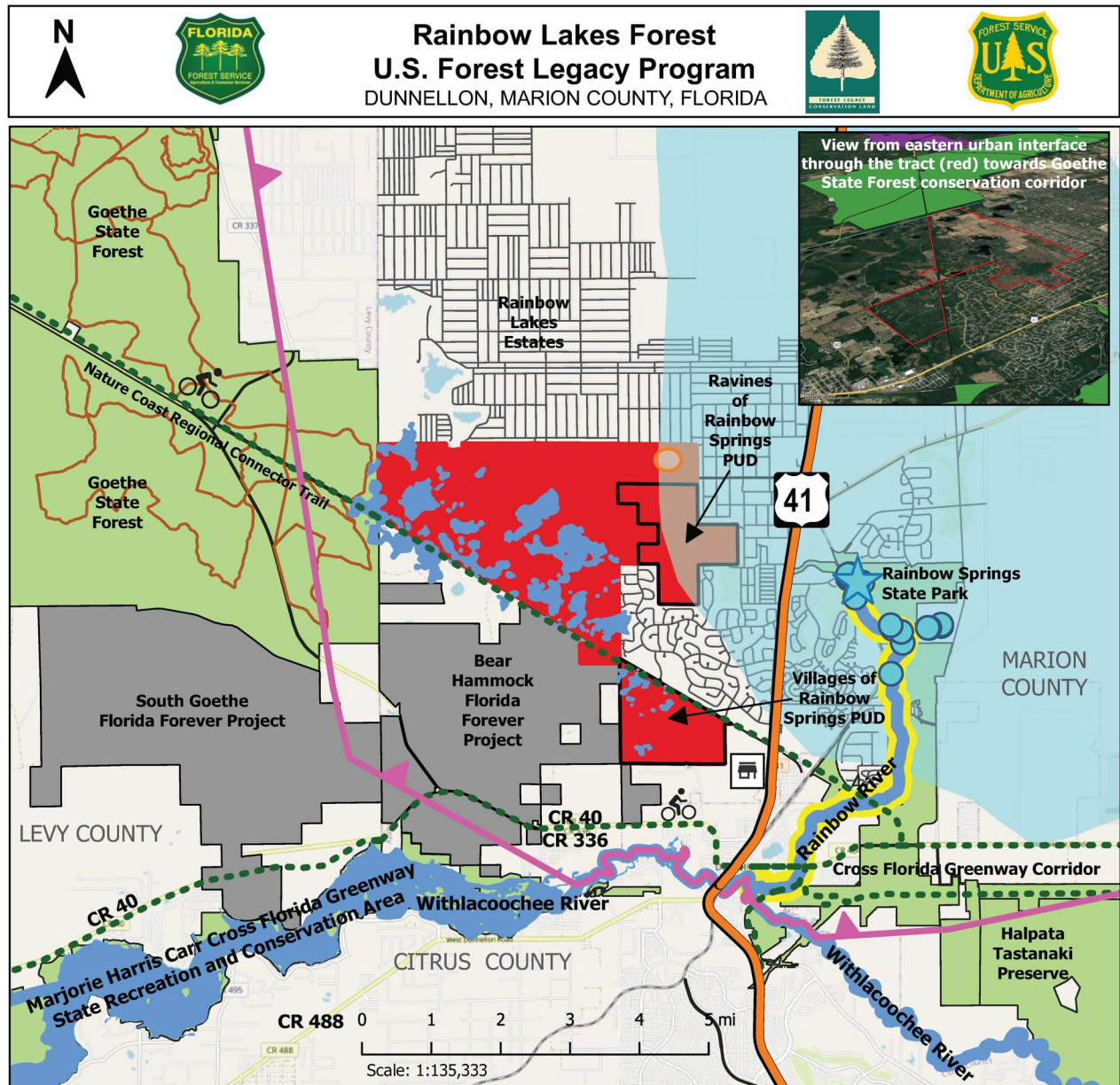
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Data: Florida Natural Areas Inventory: Florida
Conservation Lands June 2020
Florida Forever Board of Trustees Projects June 2020
All other data: FGDL. Basemap: Open Street Map
Projection: EPSG 3087

