

Forest Legacy Project

Wolfe Creek Forest

Santa Rosa County, Florida

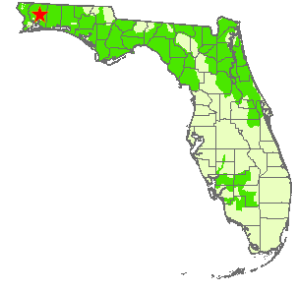


FUNDING HISTORY

FY 2023 Forest Legacy Program Funding \$9,155,000
FY 2023 Non-Federal Cost Share \$3,812,000
FY 2023 Project Costs \$12,967,000
FY 2023 Project Acres 4,270

Forest Legacy Funding To Date \$6,469,709
Total Project Costs \$31,621,266
Total Project Acres 11,638

★ Project Location
Forest Legacy Areas



Tract Name	Size (ac)	Tract Cost	FLP Funding	Non-Fed Cost Share	Status
Ellis Creek Tract	1,552	\$4,187,000	\$3,140,000	\$1,047,000	In Review 2023
Kingfisher Timber	1,272	\$3,356,080	\$1,781,780	\$1,574,300	Completed 2020
Navy Greenway Tract	760	\$2,280,000	\$1,140,000	\$1,140,000	In Review 2023
Paddle Trail Tract	1,958	\$6,500,000	\$4,875,000	\$1,625,000	In Review 2023
Springhill	799	\$2,156,328	\$1,006,286	\$1,150,042	Completed 2018
Springwater Blueway	3,598	\$8,233,000	\$4,088,000	\$4,145,000	In Review 2022
Tupelo Timberlands North	1,383	\$4,149,450	\$3,112,087	\$1,037,363	Completed 2021
Tupelo Timberlands South	316	\$759,408	\$569,556	\$189,852	Completed 2021

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

FEE acquisition of the revised 4,270-acre, two-landowner Springwater Blueway Phase containing the Ellis Creek, Navy Greenway, and Paddle Trail tracts (collectively ENP), is the final opportunity to protect large forested gaps within the world's largest contiguous longleaf forest landscape, preserve watersheds supplying 90% of county residents with drinking water, and buffer Naval Air Station (NAS) Whiting Field, the most active airfield in the world. Expanding Blackwater River State Forest (BRSF) will restore habitat supporting nearly 900 endemic plant species and 170 of 290 reptiles and amphibians occurring in the Southeastern US, including 29 longleaf pine-associated species federally-listed as threatened or endangered. A Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration conservation easement will preclude uses incompatible to NAS and support its annual \$1.4 billion local economic impact. Other project areas have been subdivided into residential use and portions of ENP are for sale now. Acquisition furthers federal and regional goals of the America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative, Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership, Florida State Forest Action Plan, Conecuh National Forest, two military bases, and other state lands.



Kayakers enjoying the Big Coldwater Creek state-designated paddling trail (Photo by Jack Sanborn)

PROJECT FEATURES

Important

- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS - TIMBER:** ENP forest management follows adopted management plans certified by the Sustainable Forestry Initiative.
- In 2016, Santa Rosa County-based forest industries contributed over \$346 million to the local economy, supporting 243 directly related and 1,713 indirectly related jobs. ENP will create/retain critical forest-related jobs and expand markets for longleaf pine lumber, poles, and specialty products.
- ENP contains soils considered superior by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) for forestry and agricultural uses, with the largest groups being Dothan, Troup, and Fuquay soil types.
- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS FROM NON-TIMBER PRODUCTS:** ENP provides recreational hunting and fishing opportunities for several local hunt clubs, generating revenue for local vendors. Popular game onsite includes deer, turkey, and hogs.
- Six miles of creeks traverse ENP, including the spring-fed, navigable Big Coldwater Creek on the Paddle Trail (PT) tract. Two commercial nature tourism vendors dependent on resource conservation report over 60,000 customers per year supporting 60 jobs and \$2 million in direct revenue.
- Conservation of the PT and Navy Greenway (NG) tracts furthers base buffering efforts of the NAS Whiting Field, the county's largest employer with over 14,500 jobs in 2018 and an annual regional impact of over \$1.4 billion.
- Federal military facility NAS Whiting Field, to which this phase provides strategic buffering, provides all helicopter pilot training for the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard and 60% of all primary pilot fixed-wing training.
- **THREATENED/ENDANGERED SPECIES/HABITAT:** ENP is a biodiversity hotspot (Florida Natural Areas Inventory) and Strategic Habitat Conservation Area (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission) with habitat ideal for the Eastern Indigo Snake (FT) and Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) (FE).
- Documented occurrences include: Hummingbird-flower (SE), White Fringed Orchid (ST), White-top Pitcherplant (SE), Panhandle Lily (SE), Primrose-flowered Butterwort (SE), Small Flowered Meadowbeauty (ST), Spoonleafed Sundew (ST), Crested Fringed Orchid (ST), Gopher Tortoise (FC), and RCW (FE).
- High quality seepage slopes (G2) and streams with associated wetlands are located throughout the phase. Unusual hydrology and frequent fires combine to support a variety of more rare carnivorous and other sun-loving herbaceous plants.
- Gopher Tortoise burrows are documented throughout ENP and a foraging RCW was documented on the Ellis Creek (EC) tract, indicating RCW families from the adjacent BRSF likely utilize EC for foraging. Restoration will expand foraging and nesting opportunities on EC
- **FISH, WILDLIFE, PLANTS, AND UNIQUE FOREST COMMUNITIES:** The Florida Forest Service's Assessment of Need identifies restoration of longleaf pine forest as a priority and crucial to threatened and endangered species.
- Longleaf pine forests are the most threatened and ecologically diverse ecosystems in the world, containing 30 federally listed species and 900 species found nowhere else in the world. Restoration and management of ENP as part of BRSF will add to the nation's largest contiguous longleaf landscape.
- **WATER SUPPLY, AQUATIC HABITAT AND WATERSHED PROTECTION:** A shallow sand and gravel aquifer under ENP supplies drinking water to 90% of the county's population. The Northwest Florida Water Management District Water Resource Plan notes drinking water resources are inadequate and need protection.



Crested fringed orchid adapted to acidic seepage bog soils (Photo by Vernon Compton)

- The flatwoods forested wetlands of EC and Big Coldwater Creek (PT) flow into the Big Juniper Creek and Blackwater River, both Outstanding Florida Waters, then to the Yellow River Marsh Aquatic Preserve. These are critical habitats for the federally endangered Gulf Sturgeon.
- PUBLIC ACCESS: County Road 191, located on PT, is designated as the regionally significant priority overland trail. Acquisition enables trail relocation off-road, providing a safe, dedicated route and connecting with both the existing Blackwater Heritage and Military Heritage State Trails.
- ENP has considerable public road frontage providing public access to Big Coldwater Creek (PT), a state paddling trail, and the riparian hardwood forested wetlands and traversable terrestrial uplands of EC and PT.
- ENP will be incorporated into BRSF management, including numerous public recreation activities such as fishing, hiking, paddling, hunting, wildlife viewing, and horseback riding. In 2020, the BRSF hosted 3 million visitors.
- SCENIC: PT straddles and NG drains into the scenic state-designated Big Coldwater Creek paddling trail. EC straddles Ellis Creek, which drains into the state-designated Big Juniper Creek paddling trail. Also, NAS Whiting Field personnel can access ENP via the Military Heritage or Florida Trails.
- HISTORIC/CULTURAL/TRIBAL: The ENP is located on historic Muskogee/Creek (a federally-recognized Native American tribe) lands.

Threatened

- LACK OF PROTECTION: Over the past five years, 4,143 acres have been rezoned to a higher density and 1,704 residential building permits have been issued within the ENP market area.
- ENP's zoning allows subdivision, residential and commercial development, agriculture, recreational hunting and conservation uses. Most of ENP is zoned AG, which allows one dwelling unit per acre, and a smaller portion is zoned AG-2, which allows 1 dwelling unit per 15 acres.
- LAND AND LANDOWNERS CIRCUMSTANCES: Both landowners employ an economically opportunistic business model in order to gain financial returns via investing in commercial timberlands where the real estate market supports sale and conversion to other land uses.
- The 3,604-acre purple property on the map included within the FY22 Springwater Blueway proposal is not included in this FY23 proposal because the Florida Forest Service, working with partners, is addressing the high development threat by currently working to acquire it immediately.
- The most recent sale occurred on PT in 2019. Now, large portions are listed for sale as rural subdivided lots. ENP is highly marketable for its desired creek frontage and forests, especially since urban dwellers have been moving in droves to more rural regions in the time of a worldwide pandemic.
- ADJACENT LAND USE: From 2010-2020, Santa Rosa County had the 9th highest growth rate (27%) in Florida, which is 2nd nationally for numerical population growth (US Census). According to the county extension office, about 4,000 acres of timberland were converted to farmland over the past three years.
- Santa Rosa County, with 188,000 people and 27% population growth since 2010, approved 1,129 new lots in 2020 and, through July 2021, 623 new lots.
- Other than the adjacent BRSF into which this project phase will be added, ENP is nearly surrounded by small cleared private lands, making this phase critical to the completion of a forested connection between NAS Whiting Field and the BRSF.
- ABILITY TO DEVELOP: Well drained soils with gentle slopes of 1-5%, several creeks offering water frontage, zoning for residential subdivision, and considerable frontage on paved roads make development on ENP inexpensive and attractive to buyers.
- Electricity is available on ENP and septic and well water are readily available. ENP recharges the underlying aquifer that not only provides drinking water to the region, but will also support rural development and cash crop farming if converted.



Locating active gopher tortoise burrows
(Photo by Vernon Compton)

Strategic

- CONSERVATION INITIATIVE, STRATEGY OR PLAN: Acquisition of this project phase will allow for implementation of four conservation plans and two initiatives to restore the historic range of the longleaf pine ecosystem on ENP. The phase will be managed under an existing State Forester-approved ten-year land management plan for BRSF.
- ENP is identified as a priority area within the America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative Range-wide Conservation Plan, with the Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership as the local implementation team and endorsement by the US Departments of Agriculture, Defense, and Interior.
- ENP is identified within the Santa Rosa County Comprehensive Plan as a priority conservation and restoration area. Restoration of ENP into a longleaf forest consistent with the BRSF management plan furthers the US Fish and Wildlife Service RCW Recovery Plan.
- The Natural Resources Conservation Service is focusing its conservation programs toward restoration of longleaf pine forests memorialized in the Longleaf Pine Restoration Plan's Implementation Strategy. ENP is within an identified geographic priority area, part of the larger regional goal to restore 8 million acres back to the longleaf pine ecosystem.
- Conservation acquisition of ENP supports the Florida Forest Service's 2020 Statewide Forest Action Plan by reducing further fragmentation of longleaf pine ecosystems, meeting the challenges of climate change, improving the economic viability of forests, protecting water quality and quantity, and supporting sustainable forest markets.
- The Florida Office of Greenways and Trails designates Big Coldwater Creek as a state paddling trail and, separately, a priority overland trail segment along a road through PT. Acquisition of ENP offers flexible siting of a preferred off-road route connecting the priority overland trail to the Military Heritage and Blackwater Heritage State Trails and the Florida National Scenic Trail.
- NAS Whiting Field identifies PT and NG within its area of concern for potential land use conflicts. Federal military Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration funding is pledged for PT and NG acquisition. ENP is within a 2021 proposal to establish the federally-designated Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape.
- ENP falls within the Florida Ecological Greenways Network Priority corridor representing a series of hubs, or core areas, of large, landscape-scale ecological significance, and a network of corridors connecting the hubs into a statewide ecological greenways system.
- COMPLEMENT PROTECTED LANDS: Acquisition of this project phase would employ a third Wolfe Creek Forest US Forest Legacy Program grant award to the region to purchase strategic conservation gaps for management by the Florida Forest Service as part of BRSF, and importantly buffer our national military facilities necessary for our freedoms in this country as we know it.
- ENP ties into a multi-state assemblage of conserved lands including Conecuh National Forest (Alabama), Northwest Florida Water Management District conserved lands, the Eglin Air Force Base and NAS Whiting Field totaling over 1 million acres of contiguous longleaf pine forests, the largest in the world, and protects core habitat benefitting State Wildlife Action Plan priority species.



Hiking in forest (Photo by Robert Coveney)

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

The Trust for Public Land; Florida Forest Service; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Santa Rosa County; Naval Air Station Whiting Field; Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership; National Fish and Wildlife Foundation; Florida Defenders of Wildlife; Longleaf Alliance; and Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

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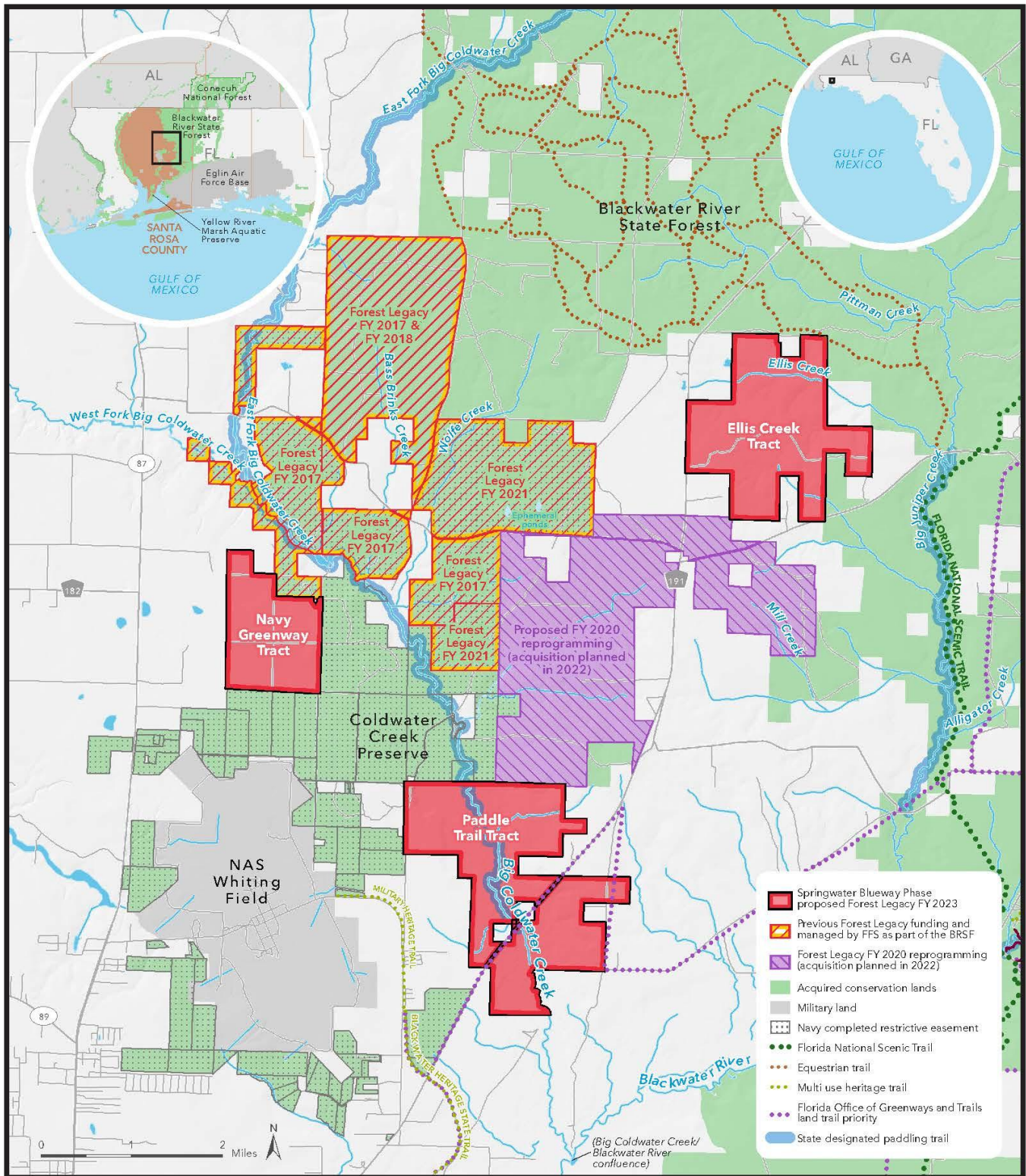
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Wolfe Creek Forest

SPRINGWATER BLUEWAY PHASE

FY 2023 FOREST LEGACY PROGRAM PROPOSAL

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