

Forest Legacy Project

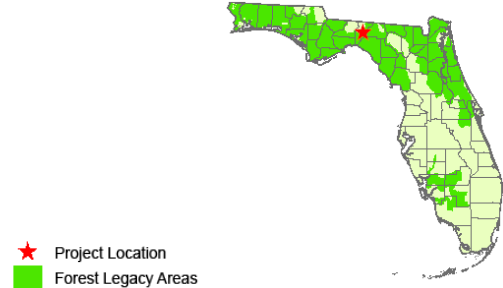
Avalon Woodland Ravines

Jefferson County, Florida



FUNDING HISTORY

FY 2024 Forest Legacy Program Funding	\$4,740,000
FY 2024 Non-Federal Cost Share	\$1,580,000
FY 2024 Project Costs	\$6,320,000
FY 2024 Project Acres	5,495
Forest Legacy Funding To Date	\$0
Total Project Costs	\$9,840,000
Total Project Acres	8,101



Tract Name	Size (ac)	Tract Cost	FLP Funding	Non-Fed Cost Share	Status
Phase 1	5,495	\$6,320,000	\$4,740,000	\$1,580,000	In Review 2024
Phase 2	2,606	\$3,520,000	\$2,640,000	\$880,000	In Review 2025

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The Aucilla River watershed contains some of the most significant archaeological and paleontological sites in the United States, unique geologic features, and a robust foundation of public and private conservation lands. A CONSERVATION EASEMENT (CE) on the 5,495-acre Avalon Woodland Ravines – Phase 1 (AWR-1) property complements state and national efforts to create a conservation corridor throughout the watershed by protecting one of the largest properties within its boundaries. AWR-1's substantial size and habitat diversity supports a wide range of Florida State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP)-listed animal species while also directly benefitting the Wacissa Springs Group, which collectively make up a first-magnitude spring. The 12-mile-long spring run forms the largest tributary of the Aucilla River. From endemic cave crayfish foraging in



*Loblolly stands provide revenue and support local economy.
(Photo by Preston Ballard)*

subterranean waters to human paddlers seeking a serene experience on a spring-fed river, a spectacular range of species will benefit from the water quality and quantity improvements afforded by this project. A CE will ensure that these benefits remain in perpetuity and the sustainably-managed working forests on AWR-1 will continue to be maintained and restored forever.

PROJECT FEATURES

Important

- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS – TIMBER:** 15.7% of jobs in Jefferson County, Florida relate to agriculture and forestry according to a study produced by The Conservation Fund. A CE on AWR-1 will support forest-related jobs and help to maintain sustainable timber markets in the region.
- The forests on AWR-1 are certified through the Forest Stewardship Council, ensuring that harvested timber comes from land managed with economic, social, and environmental sustainability as the foremost goals. Best Management Practices are employed onsite, per the existing resource management plan.

- Much of the upland acreage on AWR-1 is being, or will be, converted to Longleaf Pine over time. Harvested timber from the property will help sustain markets for Longleaf Pine products, create/retain jobs related to its use as a timber commodity, and encourage additional Longleaf Pine restoration.
- Forest restoration activities such as brush management, forest thinning, and prescribed burning will continue to require and support private contractors in perpetuity if application of a CE is achieved. 22 local companies currently provide forestry-related land management services in the region.
- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS – NON-TIMBER:** The landowner seeks to transition AWR-1 into a quail-hunting property. 255 jobs in Jefferson County related to quail-hunting properties in a 2017 study. These jobs generated nearly \$22.5 million in economic impact in 2017 and a labor income of \$8.3 million.
- AWR-1 is leased to 29 hunters each year, generating direct revenue of over \$62,200 per year. White-tailed Deer and Wild Turkey are the most desired game species on the property. Many of the hunters have harvested game from the property for multiple generations.
- Maintaining AWR-1 in a natural state will bring water quality and quantity benefits to the first-magnitude Wacissa Springs Group. The springs support a thriving outdoor recreation economy, valued at over \$450,000, based upon fishing, paddling, scuba-diving, boating, and wildlife-viewing.
- Tributaries flowing through AWR-1 flow into the Aucilla River, a designated Outstanding Florida Water. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection classified the river as a "Special Water" as well, reserved for select waterbodies with exceptional recreational or ecological significance.
- A "Heritage Roads" program was developed to encourage tourists to spend time and money in rural sections of Jefferson County. The Spanish Trace Trail, a designated Heritage Road, borders the property for 0.8 miles, offering visitors the chance to view the natural habitats and wildlife of AWR-1.
- **THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES HABITAT:** Federally-threatened Wood Storks frequently forage in AWR-1's marshes. AWR-1 falls between two rookeries located less than 20 miles away in either direction, offering critical feeding areas for parents raising young and improving rookery fecundity.
- AWR-1 offers dispersal habitat for a population of federally-threatened Red-Cockaded Woodpeckers (RCW) located 2.3 miles away. As prescribed burning occurs more frequently in the maturing pines, RCW use of the property will increase. The site will support nesting clusters within 20 years.
- State-endangered Coastal Plains Pogonia was recently found on AWR-1. This dainty orchid is blooming in an area that was newly exposed to sunlight from forest thinning. Future prescribed burning will reveal additional imperiled plants that exist within the seedbank by reducing hardwood density.
- 17 SWAP-listed species have been documented on the property which include Northern Bobwhite, Brown-Headed Nuthatch, Red-Headed Woodpecker, Great Egret, Green Heron, Little Blue Heron, Snowy Egret, Swallow-Tailed Kite, Rusty Blackbird, Prothonotary Warbler, and Round-Tailed Muskrat.
- **FISH, WILDLIFE, PLANTS AND UNIQUE FOREST COMMUNITIES:** AWR-1 contains 3,326 acres of healthy wetlands that buffer important tributaries to the Aucilla River and provide breeding/stopover habitat for 18 declining migratory bird species, as well as the federally-threatened Wood Stork.
- After full restoration to Longleaf Pine and the reintroduction of prescribed fire, numerous state and federally-listed species such as the RCW, Bachman's Sparrow, Florida Pine Snake, Gopher Tortoise, and Southeastern Pocket Gopher will likely recolonize AWR-1 from adjacent populations.
- **WATER SUPPLY, AQUATIC HABITAT AND WATERSHED PROTECTION:** AWR-1 falls within the Wacissa Springs Group Priority Focal Area, providing critical recharge to the 15 springs it contains. The springs house endemic Big Blue Springs Cave Crayfish, a Regional Species of Greatest Conservation Need.



AWR-1 perpetual conservation will protect the Aucilla River.
(Photo by Peter Kleinhenz)

- 1.1 miles of Dixie Branch and 0.7 miles of Beasley Creek flow through AWR-1 before reaching the Aucilla River, a state-designated paddling trail that sees frequent use. The Aucilla flows into the Gulf, forming an estuary where federally-listed species like Florida Manatee and Gulf Sturgeon reside.
- SCENIC: AWR-1 offers 3.2 miles of scenic views from public roads, allowing the public to view fire-maintained uplands, large wetlands, and bottomland forests found on the tract. Views of the wetlands, especially, offer wildlife viewers the chance to spot a variety of bird and mammal species.
- HISTORIC/CULTURAL: AWR-1 contains 8 sites recorded in the State's Master Site File, including artifacts dating back at least 8,000 years and a village occupied by the Apalachee Tribe. Another site relates to a historic railroad line that transported POWs and wounded soldiers during World War II.
- CARBON SEQUESTRATION/CLIMATE RESILIENCE, ADAPTATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE: AWR-1 sits in a conserved climate corridor that nearly connects the Gulf to Georgia. This provides a future route for plants and animals moving inland from the coast and buffers storm impacts, all while sequestering CO₂.

Threatened

- LACK OF PROTECTION: Zoning on the property is AG20, which allows for agriculture, forestry, subdivision, and residential development at 1 unit/20 acres. There are no legal restrictions preventing future development and, if unprotected, development will likely occur on AWR-1's uplands.
- The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) identifies 344 acres as having prime soils for crop production, which could prompt conversion of the pine uplands to row-crop agriculture. In addition to the land-use change, associated nutrient inputs would negatively impact Wacissa Springs Group.
- LAND AND LANDOWNER'S CIRCUMSTANCE: AWR-1 was acquired in 2021 by a Timber Investment Management Organization. Due to its obligations to investors, the landowner is willing to sell a CE on AWR-1, contingent upon Legacy grant receipt.
- The landowner has successfully completed Forest Legacy Program (FLP) transactions in the past related to the Wolfe Creek Forest project, and owns an adjacent, 2,606-acre tract (Avalon Woodland Ravines – Phase II) that is intended to be a future Forest Legacy project.
- ADJACENT LAND USE: While large land holdings border AWR-1, several landowners nearby have converted their lands to cattle pastures. Run-off from these operations has resulted in additional harmful inputs into the Wacissa Springs Group Basin and other local creeks and rivers.
- A major utility company is actively engaging nearby landowners to install industrial-scale solar facilities on their lands. At least one neighbor plans to install such a facility within the next year.
- Many longtime owners of rural land in the immediate area have recently listed their properties for sale, as property values in Jefferson County increased by 23% between 2021 and 2022. Land-use alterations are likely to result from these changes in ownership.
- ABILITY TO DEVELOP: Given AWR-1's proximity to I-10, a major interstate, and Highway 19/27, a significant state highway, as well as its upland acreage, AWR-1 will be highly desirable for residential development in the future.
- SB 896 passed in 2021, limiting local governments from restricting solar facility placement in areas designated as agricultural. This limitation will likely lead to conversion of rural forests and farmland in Florida into solar cell "farms" that no longer offer habitat for most native wildlife.
- An energy right-of-way borders AWR-1, increasing the likelihood of a future commercial solar installation. A property 2.7 miles to the north along the same right-of-way planned to convert 270 acres into an industrial solar field, but this was voted down before SB 896 went into effect.



Powerline ROW through AWR-1 may facilitate solar array install onsite. (Photo by Preston Ballard)

Strategic

- **CONSERVATION INITIATIVE – NATIONAL:** AWR-1 falls entirely within an active NRCS-Regional Conservation Partnership Program project area that provides cost-share funds to landowners that implement prescribed burning, invasive plant treatment, hydrologic improvements, and Longleaf Pine planting. Additionally, 70.8 acres of AWR-1 falls within the Gress Swamp NRCS Sourcewater Protection Area.
- AWR-1 is included within the boundary of the Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape. Designated by a consortium of federal partners, Sentinel Landscapes support military readiness, conserve natural resources, and bolster forestry and agricultural economies simultaneously. The designated area includes nine military bases that collectively inject over \$21 billion into the Northwest Florida economy.
- **CONSERVATION PLAN – NATIONAL:** AWR-1 will support the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Wood Stork Recovery Plan by conserving known foraging habitat and likely roosting habitat for the species. The adjoining land, that is to be submitted as AWR-Phase II for FLP FY 2025, will additionally support this plan, as it includes documented foraging habitat as well.
- By enhancing inputs into the Aucilla River, AWR-1 supports the health of the estuarine ecosystem where the Aucilla River meets the Gulf. This helps to achieve identified goals in the USFWS recovery plans for Gulf Sturgeon, Eastern Black Rail, Florida Manatee, and Loggerhead Sea Turtle. Each species has been recently documented from the Aucilla River estuary.
- **CONSERVATION PLAN – STATE:** This project advances the goals of the 2019 Florida SWAP by permanently protecting and restoring habitat for at least 17 SWAP-listed species. The project will also conserve a number of species being actively tracked by the Florida Natural Areas Inventory due to their imperiled status in Florida.
- The project supports the Florida Forest Service's 2020 Forest Action Plan by protecting water quality and quantity, improving the economic vitality of forests, reducing forest fragmentation, implementing prescribed fire on private lands, and supporting sustainable forest markets.
- **CONSERVATION STRATEGY – STATE:** The whole property is included in the Aucilla Corridor Florida Forever Program project, borders two other Florida Forever projects, and is within 5 miles of several other parcels within existing Florida Forever projects. Florida Forever is the nation's premier state conservation land buying program, legislatively funded at \$400M in 2021 and \$100M in 2022.
- SB 976 was passed in 2019, authorizing \$300 million to be spent on lands identified as being critical to completion of the Florida Wildlife Corridor. The entire project falls in Priority 2, the State's second highest rating out of five priorities, within the Florida Ecological Greenways Network, a state initiative with a goal to link existing conservation lands to facilitate wildlife movement.
- **COMPLEMENT PROTECTED LANDS:** AWR-1 is adjacent to 3,307 acres of land conserved via conservation easements and fits into a connected corridor of public conservation lands that include the 50,549-acre Aucilla Wildlife Management Area and the 68,000-acre St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. AWR-1 is next to 5,268 acres of land proposed to be conserved through the Florida Forever Program.
- **OTHER LANDSCAPE SCALE GOALS AND PUBLIC BENEFITS:** Jefferson County, Florida is considered to be a Rural Community of Economic Opportunity with a poverty rate of 17.2%. Most residents rely upon well-water and the project will help to safeguard its quality. The other social, economic, and environmental advantages of this project will bring significant benefits to the local underserved community.



*Loblolly stands will be converted to Longleaf Pine in the future.
(Photo by Preston Ballard)*

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

United States Fish and Wildlife Service; Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape; Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services; Florida Forest Service; Florida Department of Environmental Protection; Division of State Lands; Suwannee River Water Management District; Tall Timbers Research Station and Land Conservancy; Apalachee Audubon Society; and Aucilla Research Institute.

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