

Forest Legacy Project

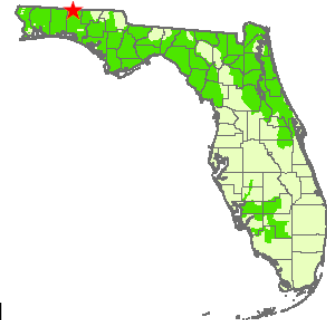
Natural Bridge Longleaf Preserve

Walton County, Florida



FUNDING HISTORY

FY 2016 Forest Legacy Program Funding	\$2,300,000
FY 2016 Non-Federal Cost Share	\$1,300,000
FY 2016 Project Costs	\$3,600,000
FY 2016 Project Acres	2,164
Forest Legacy Funding To Date	\$0
Total Project Costs	\$3,600,000
Total Project Acres	2,164



★ Project Location
Forest Legacy Areas

Tract Name	Size (ac)	Tract Cost	FLP Funding	Non-Fed Cost Share	Status
Creek	2,102	\$3,100,000	\$2,300,000	\$800,000	In Review 2016
Spring	62	\$500,000	\$0	\$500,000	In Review 2016

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Lying in the largest longleaf pine landscape identified by America's Longleaf, the Natural Bridge Longleaf Preserve stands as one of the most intact remaining privately-owned and managed sources of biodiversity and mature timber within the ecosystem's range. The 2,102-acre project, with another 1,451 acres in Alabama, sits at the crossroads of the most ambitious longleaf conservation effort in the Southeast. Many have envisioned a longleaf corridor stretching from Alabama's largest state forest, just a few miles north of the project, westward across timberlands to the largest continuous longleaf forest in North America – some 700,000 acres of military, state forest and national forest lands. The project also contains karst features and a rare creek swallet/spring system reported to be the westernmost spring flowing from the Floridan Aquifer. Threatened by the owner's need to convert or sell this remnant of the Jackson Lumber Company assembled after World War II, a CONSERVATION EASEMENT will ensure the Creek tract remains as a source and shelter for some of North America's rarest and most beautiful plants, wildlife and unique water resources. FEE acquisition of the Spring tract will restore the spring to more historic conditions.



Multi-aged longleaf pine with intact wiregrass understory and species diversity (Photo by Keith Fountain)

PROJECT FEATURES

Important

- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS - TIMBER:** The project is enrolled in the Florida Forest Stewardship Program and managed pursuant to a certified forester's management plan that preserves the ecological

integrity of this intact longleaf pine landscape.

- The project supports the Pensacola region forest products industry that provides over 5,100 jobs and produces annual revenues exceeding \$1.0 billion by satisfying market demand with its sustainable harvests of high quality pole and saw timber.
- Since World War II, the project has been managed using the Stoddard-Neel methodology, which considers the health and beauty of the living longleaf pine forest while combining frequent prescribed fire, highly selective harvesting for sustainable management, and a commitment to woodland aesthetics.
- Managed with a frequent fire interval as a high-value, multi-aged longleaf forest with an intact understory, the project presents a sustainable resource of fine mature sawtimber, planking, poles, masts and other high grade and hard-to-find timbers sought by boatwrights and other fine builders.
- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS - NON-TIMBER:** The project is a highly sought hunting preserve that is leased annually for its burgeoning populations of deer, turkey and rabbit, and it offers some of the best remaining quail habitat in Florida.
- **THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES HABITAT:** The project advances the Florida State Wildlife Action Plan by preserving habitat for at least four Species of Greatest Conservation Need: the federally-listed Eastern indigo snake, gopher tortoise, Florida pine snake and Southeastern pocket gopher.
- Natural Bridge Creek is a priority watershed in the Bluenose Shiner Species Action Plan and, since most of the creek's principal drainage and adjacent uplands are in the project, its preservation will facilitate the strategy to establish conservation areas and implement best management practices.
- State-listed endangered species occurring on the project include the White-topped pitcher plant, Thread-leaf sundew, Panhandle lily and Florida flame azalea, and the state-threatened Spoon-leaved sundew is documented as well.
- Other species likely to occur on site include the federally-endangered Reticulated flatwoods salamander and state-special concern Alligator snapping turtle, Little blue heron and White ibis.
- **FISH, WILDLIFE, PLANTS, AND UNIQUE FOREST COMMUNITIES:** Two-thirds of the project is naturally regenerated longleaf pine in good condition with predominantly well-spaced second-growth longleaf pines and a diverse, intact herbaceous groundcover with wiregrass.
- The project has been on a two-year burn rotation for 15 years, trending toward growing season burns that are more effective for hardwood control, understory diversity, longleaf regeneration and wildlife. Low fuel loads and extensive fire breaks permit growing season burns on most of the project.
- Hillside seeps and pitcher plant bogs are common on the project and remain unplanted and fire managed, resulting in a naturally treeless state with extraordinary herbaceous diversity including at least four species of pitcher plants and other rare carnivorous plants.
- **WATER SUPPLY, AQUATIC HABITAT AND WATERSHED PROTECTION:** Over 2.75 miles of Natural Bridge Creek, a sandy-bottomed seepage stream originating from the small springs and uplands of the project, winds over limestone outcrops before flowing into the upper Choctawhatchee River watershed.
- The project's predominantly moderate to well-drained soils provide high recharge to the Floridan Aquifer, one of the most productive aquifers in the world. Protection of the project is important given its vulnerability to groundwater contamination only three miles from a public wellfield.
- The Spring tract contains a swallet and spring where Natural Bridge Creek flows under a natural limestone bridge. The spring west of the bridge also functions as a swallet when there is sufficient creek drainage from the west, while the spring "rises" to the east of the bridge into the creek.
- **PUBLIC ACCESS:** Acquisition of the Spring tract will allow for public recreation at the spring and



Natural Bridge Spring east of the natural limestone bridge (Photo by Keith Fountain)

surrounding longleaf forest, removal of Natural Bridge Road from the limestone natural bridge and clearing of the debris and sedimentation from the road that impair the spring.

- **HISTORIC/CULTURAL:** There are three historic buildings on site and the swallet/spring was used by both Native American and 19th century historic cultures, with evidence including arrowheads and pottery fragments, and the remains of a grist mill and turpentine still.

Threatened

- **LACK OF PROTECTION:** Walton County will allow the subdivision of the project into 210 residential units on lots as small as one-half acre in size.
- Walton County permits many agricultural, forestry and residential uses of the project. There are no local, state or federal restrictions on the conversion of any of the project to more intensive forest or non-forest uses that would destroy the understory of this special, intact longleaf habitat.
- **LAND AND LANDOWNER'S CIRCUMSTANCE:** The project will help satisfy the financial and family needs of the owners, Judith Hester and her son Benton Hester, that require the project be sold or alternative land uses that destroy habitat, such as pine plantation, be implemented.
- Judith Hester listed the project for sale in April 2012 for the first time since World War II to provide for her financial retirement needs rather than continuing her 95% ownership interest in land located more than 500 miles from her home in Naples, Florida.
- Benton Hester's family obligations require that he divest ownership and responsibility for the project that he has managed since the mid-1980s so that he can spend more time at his home in Punta Gorda, Florida.
- As the family entertains purchase offers, Benton Hester seeks a buyer that will continue the Stoddard-Neel management ideal and maintain the ecological integrity of this flagship longleaf tract that he has almost single-handedly managed for almost three decades.
- **ADJACENT LAND USE:** The project is surrounded and bordered by increasing conversion of natural forests with native groundcover elements to intensive pine plantation with groundcover absent, farmland and rural residential development.
- **ABILITY TO DEVELOP:** The project contains more than 80% uplands with an unique creek amenity, stunning forest vistas and over ten miles of road frontage with electrical utilities, making residential development or agricultural conversion of the project very feasible and attractive.



Seepage slope community with state-endangered White-topped pitcher plants (Photo by Beth Young)

Strategic

- **CONSERVATION INITIATIVE, STRATEGY OR PLAN:** The project is in the largest longleaf pine Significant Geographic Area defined by America's Longleaf and furthers the 15-year goal to increase acreage from 3.4 to 8.0 million acres, with over half occurring in these areas. It furthers the private lands strategy and avoids restoration costs by protecting intact understory with a conservation easement.
- The project's intact longleaf habitat supports efforts of the Presidential Strategy to Promote the Health of Honey Bees and Other Pollinators and the U.S. Forest Service International Program to address threats to the migration of the Monarch butterfly across the range of its migration by maintaining habitat used by the Monarch in its southeast U.S. migration corridor.
- The project exemplifies three goals of the America's Great Outdoors Initiative: support community-based recreational access, conserve rural working forests and protect community waters. Forest

Legacy Program funding complements coalition efforts to protect an 800,000-acre working longleaf landscape, while supporting local acquisition of the Spring tract for restoration and recreation.

- The project serves as a flagship for the America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative, the collaborative efforts of more than 20 state and federal agencies, stakeholders and organizations, by engaging federal, state and nonprofit partners in the protection of a large, intact, managed longleaf pine woodland that will advance longleaf conservation and market-based strategies in the South.
- The project enables implementation of the Northwest Florida Water Management District's Spring Stabilization Alternatives Report by acquiring the 62-acre Spring tract for removal of Natural Bridge Road from the limestone natural bridge, removal of the sedimentation and debris impairing spring flow, and restoration of the spring habitats for an improved public recreation experience.
- The Florida Springs Initiative seeks to effectuate springs preservation by acquiring lands in the springshed to be left in its natural state. The project advances this Governor-led initiative by acquiring the spring itself for restoration and protecting over 2,000 acres of the Natural Bridge Creek watershed and springshed recharge area.
- The project supports an initiative of the Northwest Florida Water Management District to maximize aquifer recharge through private landowner groundcover restoration. The project protects an open longleaf woodland with intact groundcover and frequent fire in an area of high aquifer recharge and a public wellfield without the significant costs associated with groundcover restoration.
- The project supports Forest Action Plan elements related to enhancement of economic opportunities for landowners, particularly as related to uneven-aged management and premium timber products; maintenance of longleaf pine forests with intact ground cover; and protection of valuable working forests by preserving a single large tract of intact longleaf habitat while maintaining sustainable forestry.
- **COMPLEMENT PROTECTED LANDS:** The project is six miles from Geneva State Forest and 12 miles from Conecuh National Forest, and linked to both public lands through more than 60,000 acres of timberlands owned and managed by Rayonier. Protection of the project and Rayonier lands can result in a continuous forest landscape with longleaf pine prevalent exceeding 800,000 acres across Alabama and Florida.
- The project is adjacent to the Hester family's Alabama ownership that is within the original 1939 Conecuh National Forest proclamation boundary. Acquisition of a conservation easement will complement Alabama's efforts to protect the 1,431 acres that is an acquisition priority in that state's Forever Wild Program, which has initiated efforts to appraise the property.



Farmland bounded by the project on two sides indicative of adjacent land uses (Photo by Keith Fountain)

Readiness

Pre-Appraisal/Market Analysis	1
Easement or Fee Conditions	1
Non-Federal Cost Share Commitment	0
Signed Purchase Agreement	1
Title Search	0
Mineral Determination	0
Stewardship Plan (or equivalent)*	1
Readiness Total Tally Score	4

Supporting Parties

Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Florida Forest Service; Florida Department of Environmental Protection; Northwest Florida Water Management District; Conecuh National Forest; Walton County; Conservation Trust for Florida; Longleaf Alliance; Nokuse Plantation; and Gulf Coast Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit.

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