

Forest Legacy Project

Rainbow Lakes Forest

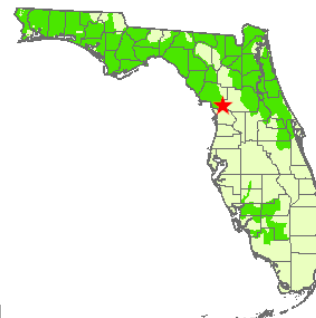
Marion County, Florida



FUNDING HISTORY

FY 2022 Forest Legacy Program Funding \$5,000,000
FY 2022 Non-Federal Cost Share \$20,000,000
FY 2022 Project Costs \$25,000,000
FY 2022 Project Acres 5,600

Forest Legacy Funding To Date \$0
Total Project Costs \$25,000,000
Total Project Acres 5,600



★ Project Location
Forest Legacy Areas

Tract Name	Size (ac)	Tract Cost	FLP Funding	Non-Fed Cost Share	Status
Sandhill	5,600	\$25,000,000	\$5,000,000	\$20,000,000	In Review 2022

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Rainbow Lakes Forest is comprised of the 5,600-acre Sandhill Tract just outside Dunnellon, Florida at the junction of the 54,238-acre Goethe State Forest, Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway and 1,472-acre Rainbow Springs State Park. FEE acquisition of the Tract complements prior state springs-related purchases with Forest Legacy Program funds: the 4,900-acre Silver Springs Watershed in 2015 and 700-acre Wakulla Caves Forest in 2019. Once entitled for the development of thousands of homes in this rapidly growing region, the Tract now presents an opportunity for the Florida Forest Service (FFS) to acquire, restore and manage a large longleaf pine forest with stunning vistas overlooking lakes and ponds. It provides 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 daily to the Rainbow Springs Aquatic Preserve. Restoration of longleaf pine and sandhill habitat once prevalent in these hills 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 Florida's Nature Coast.



Turner Lake, one of four large 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:** The Tract's unique landscape of rolling hills and lakes will provide a significant increase in outdoor recreational opportunities at Goethe State Forest, including new hiking trails and paddling on the lakes and ponds.
- Public acquisition of the Tract will protect the Rainbow Springs springshed and benefit Rainbow Springs State Park, identified in a 2019 report by the Florida Park Service as providing 436 local jobs supporting 353,764 visitors with a resulting economic impact of more than \$31 million.
- The Tract will provide an opportunity for public hunting of game such as whitetail deer and turkey, which are plentiful and currently managed by the landowner's property manager.
- **THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES HABITAT:** The federally endangered longspurred mint (*Dicerandra cornutissima*), documented on the Tract, is a 1.6 feet tall strongly aromatic mint that is known from only 15 locations in Marion and Sumter counties.
- 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 federally threatened Eastern Indigo Snake, 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 importance to SHCAs for the Striped Newt, Florida Mouse, Swallow-tailed Kite, and Cooper's Hawk.
- **FISH, WILDLIFE, PLANTS AND UNIQUE FOREST COMMUNITIES:** Almost 40% of the Tract is covered with sandhill habitat, which is one of Florida's more threatened natural habitats and home to many endemic species.
- Sandhill habitat, a forest community largely converted by development throughout much of Florida, is prevalent on 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 with 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 in turn is supplying water for the flow from the 1st magnitude 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 and is Florida's fourth largest springs group by volume. The group pumps 490 million gallons of water daily into the Rainbow River, which flows 5.7 miles to its confluence with the Withlacoochee River.
- The large area and permeable soils of the Tract provide high priority recharge to the Floridan Aquifer, which in turn supports freshwater flows from more than 85 identified spring vents into the Rainbow Springs Aquatic Preserve.
- **PUBLIC ACCESS:** The Tract shares almost a mile of boundary with Goethe State Forest and its extensive trail network, which can be easily linked for access to high elevation sandhills for hiking and



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

lakes and ponds for paddling that are not generally available at the 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.
- **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.

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 15 years ago that are now looking to divest of their Florida holdings. After selling another large property several months ago, their Dunnellon holdings are all that remain in Florida.



Kayaking the Rainbow River (Photo by Margaret Waggoner)

- 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:** Lying just on the outskirts of Dunnellon, 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.
- The Tract lies in close proximity to the commercial U.S. Highway 41 corridor where the landowner has additional adjacent land holdings that are not included in this Forest Legacy project.
- **ABILITY TO DEVELOP:** Approximately 3,945 acres of the Tract was entitled in 1994 as part of a 4,200-acre Florida Quality Development known as Cold Springs Villages that vested the right to develop 7,500 residential homes and over 1,000,000 square feet of retail, healthcare and industrial use.
- While some Florida Quality Development entitlements have 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 is vested for 2,300 residential units, or a 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 as part of the Villages of Rainbow Springs.

Strategic

- **CONSERVATION INITIATIVE-NATIONAL:** Acquisition of the Tract protects a large, high priority recharge area for the Floridan Aquifer, 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 8,000,000 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, the Tract advances the species' recovery by "maintaining and enhancing existing populations via habitat conservation." Additionally, habitat restoration will promote increased populations of other state or federally 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.
- 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 aligns with the Florida Springs Initiative as it relates to the Rainbow Springs Group, where it improves conditions by better managing and restoring forest resources to increase recharge to the Floridan Aquifer and reduce the threat of increased nonpoint source pollution of the spring and local rivers that would occur with residential development.
- The Tract presents an opportunity for Florida to purchase for longleaf restoration yet another large property entitled for intensive residential development in the heart of the springshed for a major spring. In 2006, the state and partners 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 that are critical to connecting Goethe State Forest, 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	0
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	5

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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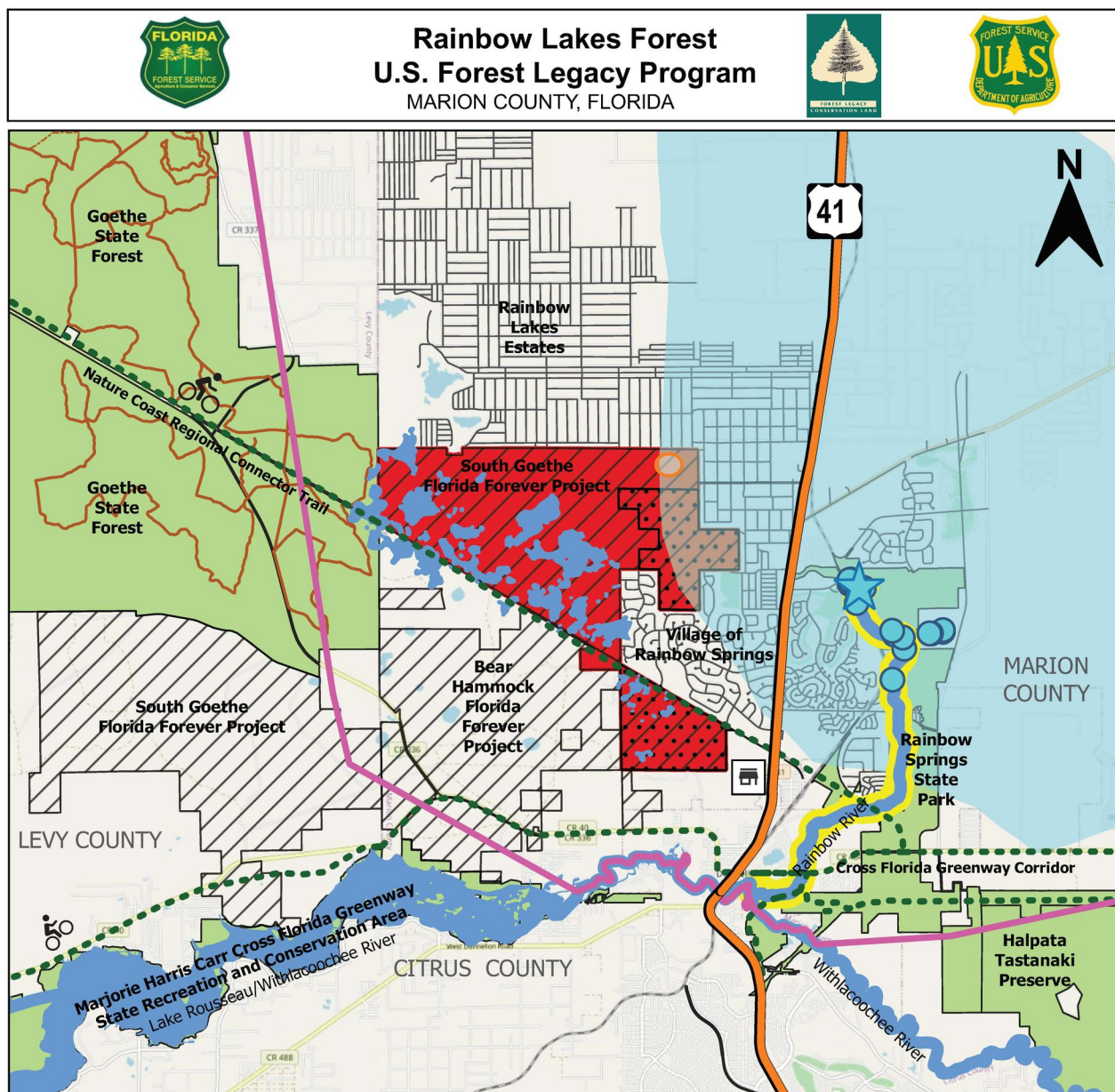
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Legend

FLP 2022 Proposed Project

Rainbow Spring (Head spring)

Springs & Vents (Rainbow Springs Group)

Rainbow Springs Aquatic Preserve

Rainbow Springs Primary Protection Zone (Marion Co.)

Rainbow Springs BMAP Area

Longspurred mint

Florida Forever Project

Planned Unit Development (PUD)

Conservation Lands

State Land

Goethe State Forest Recreational Trails

Regional Recreational Trail Network

Walmart Supercenter

0 1 2 3 4 5 mi

Scale: 1:135,333

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