

Forest Legacy Project

Wolfe Creek Forest

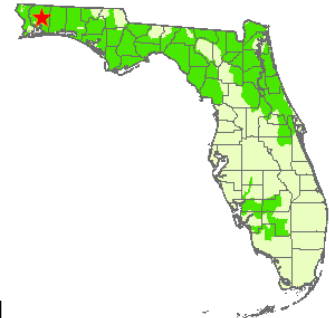
Santa Rosa County, Florida



FUNDING HISTORY

FY 2022 Forest Legacy Program Funding \$10,525,000
FY 2022 Non-Federal Cost Share \$10,675,000
FY 2022 Project Costs \$21,200,000
FY 2022 Project Acres 7,868

Forest Legacy Funding To Date \$2,788,066
Total Project Costs \$31,712,408
Total Project Acres 11,663



★ Project Location
Forest Legacy Areas

Tract Name	Size (ac)	Tract Cost	FLP Funding	Non-Fed Cost Share	Status
Kingfisher Timber	1,272	\$3,356,080	\$1,781,780	\$1,574,300	Completed 2020
Springhill	799	\$2,156,328	\$1,006,286	\$1,150,042	Completed 2018
Springwater Blueway	7,868	\$21,200,000	\$10,525,000	\$10,675,000	In Review 2022
Tupelo Timberlands	1,724	\$5,000,000	\$3,750,000	\$1,250,000	In Review 2021

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The FEE ACQUISITION of the 7,868-acre Springwater Blueway tract will complete a gap within the world's largest contiguous longleaf pine landscape preserving lands and waters vital to listed animal and plant species. Conserving Springwater Blueway precludes incompatible land uses (i.e., people/property under flight paths and noise complaints) to the operations of NAS Whiting Field, the most active airfield in the world. Strengthening military base viability and supporting nature-based tourism businesses (i.e., outfitters) assure economic vitality and jobs. Protecting surficial and water recharge areas benefits communities relying on them for both agriculture and safe drinking water. Springwater Blueway will be managed as part of the Blackwater River State Forest with restoration of the longleaf pine forest, one of the most



Ernest Mill Creek (Photo by Michael Jenkins)

threatened and ecologically diverse ecosystems in the world. Conserving Springwater Blueway furthers America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative and the private-public Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership working to improve the longleaf forest range that includes a state forest, a national forest, two military bases, a state water management district and many collaborative private landowners.

PROJECT FEATURES

Important

- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS-TIMBER:** In 2016, Santa Rosa County-based forest industries contributed over \$346M with 243 direct and 1,713 related jobs to the local economy. The tract will create/retain critical forest-related jobs and expand markets for longleaf lumber, poles and specialty products.
- This tract produces pine pulpwood, which supplies nine area mills with an estimated annual value of over \$200,000.
- The tract's management practices are certified by the Sustainable Forestry Initiative and follow existing forest management plans. The tract contains soils considered superior by the USDA for forestry and agricultural uses, with the largest groups being Dothan, Troup and Fuquay soil types.
- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS FROM NON-TIMBER PRODUCTS:** The tract provides recreational hunting lands for several local hunt clubs with over 100 members and direct revenue totaling \$37,000/yr. Popular game onsite includes deer, turkey and hogs.
- Over seven miles of creeks are within the tract including the spring-fed navigable Big Coldwater Creek - a significant tourism destination. Two commercial nature tourism vendors dependent on the forest lands report over 60,000 customers a year supporting 60 jobs and about \$2M in direct revenue.
- Strategically, the tract's conservation furthers base buffering efforts of the NAS Whiting Field, securing the County's largest employer with over 14,600 jobs in 2018 and a regional economic impact of over \$1.4 billion.
- **THREATENED/ENDANGERED SPECIES/HABITAT:** The tract is a biodiversity hotspot (FL Natural Areas Inventory) and a Strategic Habitat Conservation Area (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission) for the federally threatened Eastern Indigo Snake and federally endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker.
- A Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) has been observed within a delineated area that includes the tract, supporting a likelihood the neighboring BRSF populations are utilizing the tract for foraging. Restoration will expand foraging and nesting opportunities onto the tract.
- 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 the Cypress Minnow are documented on the tract.
- **FISH, WILDLIFE, PLANTS, AND UNIQUE FOREST COMMUNITIES:** The Florida Forest Service's Assessment of Need identifies restoration of longleaf forest as a priority and crucial to threatened and endangered species. Restoration of the tract furthers the USFWS's RCW Recovery Plan.
- Longleaf pine forests are the most threatened and ecologically diverse ecosystems in the world, with 900 species found nowhere else in the world and 30 federally threatened/endangered species. Restoration of the tract will add to the largest contiguous longleaf landscape managed as part of the BRSF.
- **WATER SUPPLY, AQUATIC HABITAT AND WATERSHED PROTECTION:** High quality seepage slopes (G2) and streams with associated wetlands are located throughout the tract. Unusual hydrology and frequent fires combine to support a variety of carnivorous and other sun-loving herbaceous plants.
- A shallow sand and gravel aquifer under the tract supplies drinking water to 90% of the County's population of 156,000 people. The Northwest Florida Water Management District Water Resource Plan notes drinking water resources are inadequate highlighting the need to protect the aquifer.
- The flatwood forest wetlands of Ernest Mill and Big Coldwater Creeks flow into the Blackwater River, an Outstanding Florida Water, and then into the Yellow River Marsh Aquatic Preserve. The Blackwater River and Yellow River are critical habitat for the federally endangered Gulf Sturgeon.



White-top pitcher plant (Photo by Liz Langston)

- **PUBLIC ACCESS:** A Florida Priority Land Trail priority is sited on a road adjacent to the tract. Acquiring the tract enables relocation thereby providing a safe, dedicated route and a connection to two existing recreation trails: Blackwater Heritage Trail and Blackwater Multi-Use Trail.
- The tract will be incorporated into the Blackwater River State Forest (BRSF) with the opportunity to offer numerous public recreation activities such as fishing, hiking, paddling, hunting, wildlife viewing and horseback riding. In 2018, the BRSF hosted 737,428 visitors.
- Big Coldwater Creek and other navigable creeks with associated riparian hardwood forest wetlands traverse the tract enhancing public access to them.
- **SCENIC:** The tract straddles Big Coldwater Creek, a state-designated paddling trail for its scenic values.
- **HISTORIC/CULTURAL/TRIBAL:** The Florida Master Site File office documents one recorded pre-historic site on the tract. The artifacts found are diffuse non-ceramic scatter of an unspecified period.

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 this same County Commission district.
- This tract's zoning allows subdivision, residential and commercial development, agriculture, recreational hunting and conservation uses. Most of the tract is zoned AG, which allows one dwelling unit per acre and a smaller portion is zoned AG-2, which allows one dwelling unit per 15 acres.
- **LAND AND LANDOWNERS CIRCUMSTANCES:** The landowner for the tract employs a business model to invest in commercial timberlands where the real estate market supports conversion to other land uses and sold off for investment returns.
- The landowner of the tract has previously sold 150 acres for residential and commercial development. The high-demand creek frontage and natural habitat is a desired feature for both uses.
- **ADJACENT LAND USE:** Santa Rosa County has the ninth highest (18.3%) Florida county population growth (FL BEBR) and 68th nationally from 2010-2019 (US Census). According to the county extension office, about 4,000 acres of timberland have been converted to farmland over the past two to three years.
- Since January 2020, the County has approved 9 residential subdivisions for 679 lots in a County with only 184,653 people. In 2019, the County approved 13 residential subdivisions for 799 lots. A new highway planned through this area will exacerbate land conversion.
- Other than the adjacent conservation lands into which the tract will be added, the tract is almost completely hemmed in with smaller cleared lands leaving this tract as the last large currently forested tract between NAS Whiting Field and BRSF.
- **ABILITY TO DEVELOP:** Utilities are in place. The tract recharges the underlying aquifer that can support rural development and cash crop farming if converted.
- The tract offers gentle slopes of 1-5% with well drained soils, several creeks offering water amenities, low density residential zoning, and considerable frontage on state roads make development inexpensive and attractive to buyers.



White-fringed orchid (Photo by Vernon Compton)

Strategic

- **CONSERVATION INITIATIVE, STRATEGY OR PLAN:** The tract's acquisition will implement four conservation plans and two initiatives to restore the diminished longleaf pine ecosystem.
- The tract is identified as a priority area within America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative's Range-wide Conservation Plan with the Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership as the local implementation

team and endorsed by the USDA, and the US Departments of Defense and Interior.

- The tract is identified within the Santa Rosa County Comprehensive Plan as a priority conservation and restoration area.
- The NRCS is focusing its conservation programs toward restoration of longleaf pine forests memorialized in its Longleaf Pine Restoration Plan's Implementation Strategy. This tract is within one of its geographic priority areas as part of an eight million acre restoration goal.
- This tract's conservation supports the Florida Forest Service's 2010 Statewide Forest Action Plan by addressing several issues of importance to the state including: supporting sustainable forest markets, reducing further fragmentation of longleaf pine ecosystems, meeting the challenges of climate change, improving the economic viability of forests, and protecting water quality and quantity.
- The Florida Office of Greenways and Trails identifies Big Coldwater Creek as a state-designated paddling trail and, separately, a priority overland segment along a road adjacent to the tract. The tract's acquisition enables relocating to a preferred safe location, while connecting the Blackwater State Forest Trail Corridor and the Blackwater Heritage State Trail to the Blackwater Multi-Use Trail.
- NAS Whiting Field identifies the tract within its area of concern for potential land use conflicts. Readiness and Environmental Protection Initiative funding is pledged for the acquisition of the tract.
- **COMPLEMENT PROTECTED LANDS:** The tract would use a third Forest Legacy grant award and complete a gap of conservation lands managed by the Florida Forest Service as part of the Blackwater River State Forest.
- The tract ties into an assemblage of conserved lands including Conecuh National Forest (Alabama), Northwest Florida Water Management District conserved lands, and the Eglin AFB and NAS Whiting Field totaling, once fully restored, 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.
- The Florida DEP identifies the larger Wolfe Creek Forest, of which this tract is a part, and two adjacent project areas as Florida Forever priorities for their natural resources and habitats, and as landscape connections between existing conservation lands totaling over 800,000 acres including Eglin Air Force Base, Whiting Field and Conecuh National Forest. Matching funds are pledged.



Longleaf pine regeneration (Photo by Vernon Compton)

Readiness

Pre-Appraisal/Market Analysis	1
Easement or Fee Conditions	1
Non-Federal Cost Share Commitment	1
Signed Purchase Agreement	1
Title Search	1
Mineral Determination	1
Stewardship Plan (or equivalent)*	1
Readiness Total Tally Score	7

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; and Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

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