

Limestone Ranch

Hardee County

Less-Than-Fee

Purpose for State Acquisition

Acquisition of the Limestone Ranch conservation easement will provide a buffer for Limestone Creek (a tributary of the Peace River with high water quality), provide habitat protection and enhancement of numerous rare species and imperiled natural communities, and afford additional resource protection for the Peace River waters and riverine wetlands within the boundaries of the Peace River State Forest, and the Horse Ranch, Horse Creek Ranch and Peace River Refuge Florida Forever projects, the downstream Charlotte Harbor Estuary, and the Gasparilla Sound-Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserve.

This project meets Florida Forever goals of protecting Florida's biodiversity by preserving 1,500 acres of Strategic Habitat Conservation Area, preserving acreage for such species as the swallow tailed kite and the Cooper's Hawk, the Eastern indigo snake and the Florida sandhill crane. The uplands buffering the Peace River also help protect manatees in the river. This project also meets Florida Forever goals of preserving linked landscapes by connecting with the Horse Creek Ranch, Peace River Refuge and the Peaceful Horse Ranch. The project also advances Florida Forever goals of protecting, restoring and maintaining water and wetlands by protecting 762 acres of floodplain. The entire project meets a number of priorities for aquifer recharge. Finally, about 4,219 acres of the project are suitable for sustainable forest management.

Manager

The property would continue to be managed by the current owner, with periodic management oversight by the state to confirm compliance with agreed-upon easement conditions.

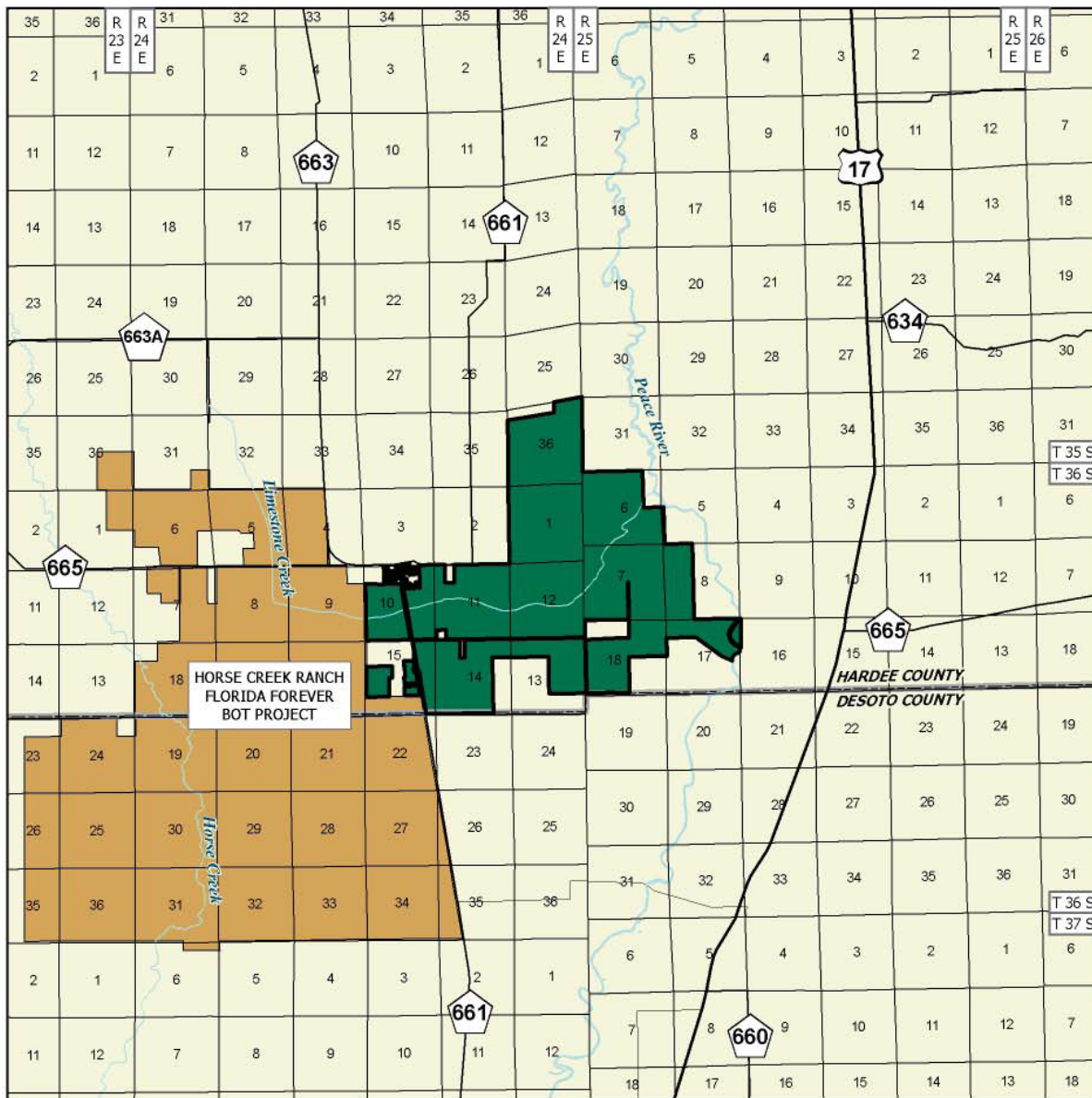
Limestone Ranch FNAI Elements	
Gopher Tortoise	G3/S3
Giant Orchid	G2G3/S2
Bachman's Sparrow	G3/S3
3 rare species are associated with the project	

General Description

Limestone Ranch is about 6,400 acres. The majority of the project is just west of the Peace River, with the southeast corner straddling a half mile section of the river. The property is bisected by Limestone Creek which flows eastward into the Peace River. The proposed project is adjacent to the northeastern corner of the Horse Creek Ranch Florida Forever Board of Trustees (BOT) project approved in 2010. Morgan Park (De Soto County) and the Peace River Refuge Florida Forever BOT project are approximately seven miles south of Limestone Ranch. The surrounding area is largely cattle pasture and citrus groves with remnant flatwoods adjacent to the mostly natural forested wetland corridor along the Peace River. County Road 663 runs through the western portion of the property. Access to the property is east from the community of Limestone off CR 663.

Limestone Ranch is a mosaic of flatwoods, forested wetlands and pastures. Major natural communities include mesic and scrubby flatwoods, bottomland forest, and widely scattered depression marshes. The natural communities cover approximately 3,774 acres of the tract and appear to be in good to very good condition. The canopy cover varies widely, with many areas nearly treeless to a more normal multi-aged stand of the dominant longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*). Many mature pine trees were lost during Hurricane Charlie (2005), however, sparse pine regeneration was observed even in nearly treeless areas. Recent prescribed fire was evident during the site visit as many pines had scorched trunks.

Placed on List	2012
Project Area (GIS Acres)	6,382
Acres Acquired (GIS)	0
at a Cost of	\$0
Acres Remaining (GIS)	6,382
Estimated (Tax Assessed) Value of	\$18,830,416



LIMESTONE RANCH

HARDEE COUNTY

-  Florida Forever BOT Project Boundary
-  Essential Parcel(s) Remaining
-  Other Florida Forever BOT Projects



JULY 2012

The land is home to two under-represented natural community types -- 1,919 acres of pine flatwoods, and 42 acres of scrubby flatwoods. Approximately 1,500 acres (23%) of the site are identified as a strategic habitat conservation area.

The disturbed or worked portion of the land comprises improved pastures and agricultural fields. For the ranch's cow-calf operation, cattle-grazing is the primary use of the improved pasture. There is a 92-acre citrus grove out-parcel in the southeast section of the property, at the end of Jim Williams Road. Invasive exotic plants are relatively infrequent on the property. The western boundary is adjacent to the Horse Creek Ranch Florida Forever project.

Public Use

Because the owner intends to sell the land as a conservation easement and continue managing it for ranching and sod farming, there would be no general public access. The easement would not be open for recreational uses. However, the owner has hosted FWC-coordinated youth hunts annually on the property and expressed interest in continuing to offer that periodic recreational opportunity.

Acquisition Planning

The Limestone Ranch project in Hardee County was submitted as a conservation easement by the landowner, Mr. David M. Durando. On June 15, 2012, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) added this project to the Florida Forever priority List as a Less-than-Fee project.

This is one ownership, and the owner is anticipating selling it in one transaction. Though adjacent to Horse Creek Ranch, the Acquisition and Restoration Council wanted this project to stand alone.

Coordination

There are no known acquisition partners at this time. The Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) reviewed the project and responded that the SWFWMD would not be an appropriate partner for acquisition of this property.

Management Policy Statement

Acquiring Limestone Ranch will help protect Limestone Creek and the Peace River, as well as Charlotte Harbor which receives most of its fresh water from the Peace River. The project will be managed by the private landowner, with restrictions. The conservation easement will likely focus on purchasing the development rights, and on prohibiting conversion of existing natural area to more intensive uses.

Management Prospectus

The Office of Environmental Services, or its successor, is designated to ensure oversight of the conservation easement on this project.



Gopher Tortoise, from the Florida Photographic Archives, Florida Department of State

Updated February 9, 2016