

# Ranch Reserve

Brevard, Indian River and Osceola Counties

Less-Than-Fee

## Purpose for State Acquisition

Large cattle ranches in Osceola County occupy a vast area of open lands—pastures, pine flatwoods, palmetto prairies, and marshes—west of the St. Johns River. These flatlands are important for wildlife like sandhill cranes, caracara, red-cockaded woodpeckers, and an experimental group of extremely rare whooping cranes. The Ranch Reserve project will acquire certain rights from ranch owners to ensure that a large part of these lands will remain as they are today, to preserve a connection of open land with public lands to the north and east, and to maintain or increase the diversity of wildlife on this wide plain.

## Manager (Monitor)

The St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) will monitor compliance with the terms of the less-than-fee-simple purchase.

## General Description

The four cattle ranches in the project lie on the Osceola Plain west of and above the St. Johns River marshes. Mesic flatwoods interrupted by depression marshes cover about 40 percent of the project area. Swamps and hammocks make up much of the remaining natural communities. Improved pastures cover about 30 percent of the area. At least 24 Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI)-listed animals are known or reported from the project, including red-cockaded woodpeckers and one of the largest populations of sandhill cranes in Florida.

The Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) has released whooping cranes on the SJRWMD's Escape Ranch in an attempt to reestablish the species in Florida. The project includes the headwaters of several streams that flow into the St. Johns River marsh. No archaeological sites are known. The wildlife habitat in the project is threatened by harvest of old-growth pines and conversion to more intensive agriculture or to non-agricultural use.

## Public Use

This project qualifies as a wildlife management area; the amount and type of public use will be negotiated with the landowners.

## Acquisition Planning

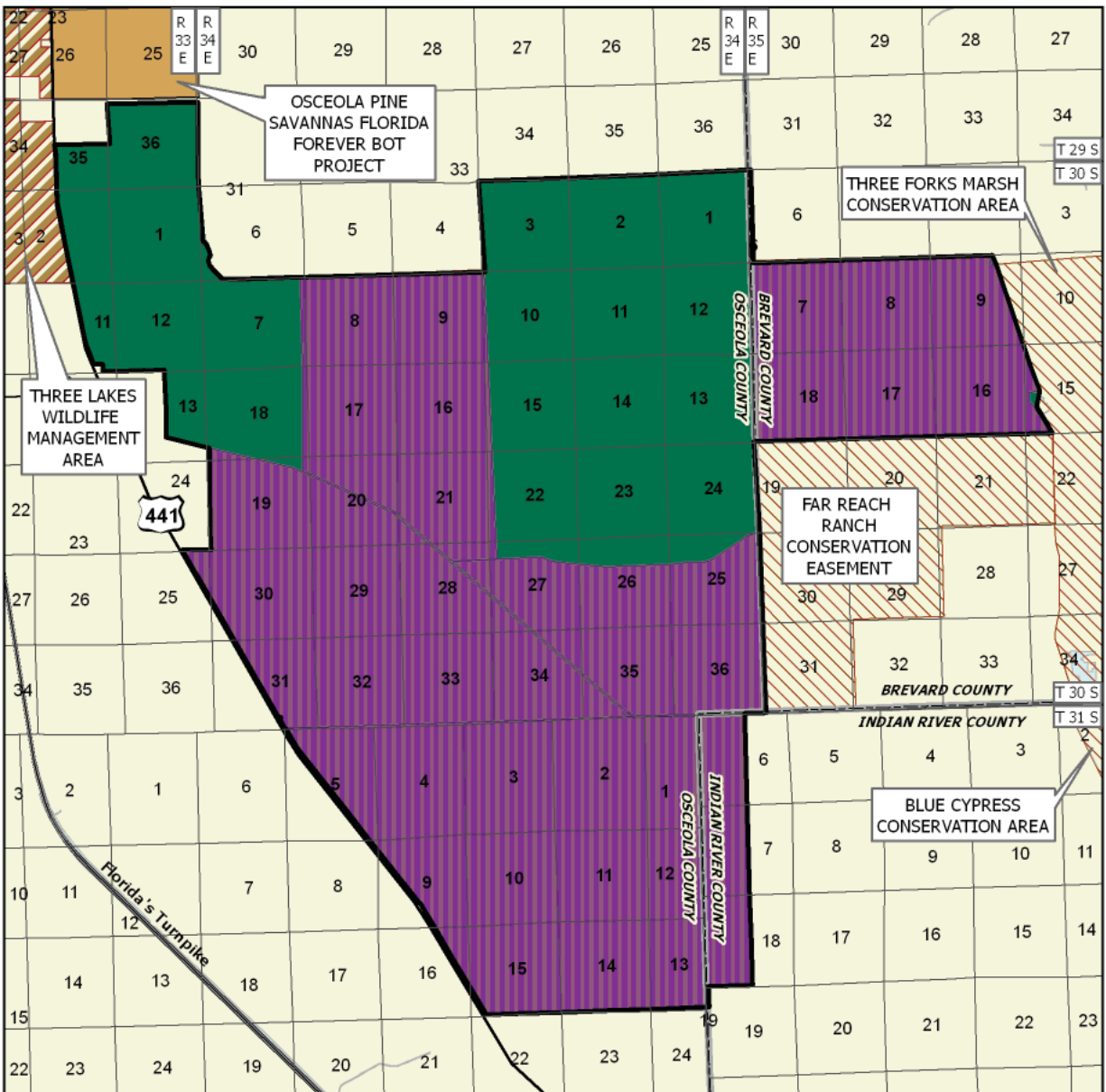
On October 30, 1996, Land Acquisition and Management Advisory Council (LAMAC) adopted criteria for establishing a Less-Than-Fee acquisition category: 1) resource value of the project/tract can be adequately protected through a less-than-fee instrument; 2) seller is willing to accept a less-than-fee-simple instrument and LAMAC has determined that the project's or site's acquisition objectives can be met by acquiring a less-than-fee interest; and 3) manager is willing to oversee a less-than-fee-simple instrument.

On December 5, 1996, LAMAC transferred the remaining ownerships within the Ranch Reserve project boundary—Campbell (acquired), Mills (acquired), Kelly/Bronson and Kaup—to the Less-Than-Fee group.

| Ranch Reserve<br>FNAI Elements                  |             |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Red-cockaded Woodpecker                         | G3/S2       |
| Whooping Crane                                  | G1/SNR      |
| Florida Sandhill Crane                          | G5T2T3/S2S3 |
| Eastern Indigo Snake                            | G3/S3       |
| Gopher Tortoise                                 | G3/S3       |
| Crested Caracara                                | G5/S2       |
| Bachman's Sparrow                               | G3/S3       |
| Sherman's Fox Squirrel                          | G5T3/S3     |
| Florida Burrowing Owl                           | G4T3/S3     |
| Bald Eagle                                      | G5/S3       |
| 10 rare species are associated with the project |             |

|                                   |               |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|
| Placed on List                    | 1997          |
| Project Area (GIS Acres)          | 36,410        |
| Acres Acquired (GIS)              | 23,895*       |
| at a Cost of                      | \$10,773,500* |
| Acres Remaining (GIS)             | 12,515        |
| Estimated (Tax Assessed) Value of | \$11,566,678  |

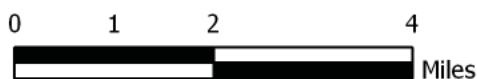
\*includes funds spent and acreage acquired by the BOT and the SJRWMD



## RANCH RESERVE

***BREVARD, INDIAN RIVER AND OSCEOLA COUNTIES***

-  Florida Forever BOT Project Boundary
-  Acquired for Conservation (Less-Than-Fee)
-  Essential Parcel(s) Remaining
-  Other Florida Forever BOT Projects
-  State Owned Lands
-  Other Conservation Lands



SEPTEMBER 2009

The SJRWMD has acquired a conservation easement over the large central tract—Escape Ranch. In 2000 the Board of Trustees acquired a conservation easement over the Mills Ranch.

On December 9, 2011, ARC placed this project in the Less-than-Fee category in the Florida Forever list.

### **Coordination**

SJRWMD is an acquisition partner with the state and has acquired substantial acreage within the project area. TNC is an acquisition partner also.

### **Management Policy Statement**

The primary objective of management of the Ranch Reserve project is to preserve and restore the mosaic of pine flatwoods and wetlands in southeastern Osceola County (and contiguous portions of Brevard and Indian River counties), along with the populations of wildlife that use these lands. Achieving this objective will provide a refuge for threatened animals like the red-cockaded woodpecker, sandhill crane, and many others. The project should be managed to foster, preserve and protect in perpetuity the natural, ecological, wildlife and plant life features and values of the property and to prevent any use of the property that will significantly impair its conservation values. The conservation easement allows the landowner to continue to use the property for commercial cattle operation, hunting, fishing and other activities that are not inconsistent with the terms of the conservation values of the property. The project includes 35,300 acres of contiguous property, including nearly 23,800 acres of the highest-quality land in the southeastern Osceola and adjacent areas of Brevard and Indian River counties. Consequently, it has the size and location to achieve its primary objective.

### **Management Prospectus**

**Qualifications for state designation** The size of the Ranch Reserve project and its importance to wildlife,

particularly to birds such as sandhill cranes and red-cockaded woodpeckers, qualify it as a wildlife management area.

**Manager** The SJRWMD will monitor to ensure compliance with the conservation easement.

**Conditions affecting intensity of management** The project generally includes lands requiring monitoring only and minimum-intensity management.

**Timetable for implementing management and provisions for security and protection of infrastructure** Within the first year after acquisition, the District will take aerial photographs to record the condition of each ranch and begin to inventory natural resources on site. Landowners will develop management and monitoring plans to address site security, monitor and control public access, and implement fire management. Long-range plans will stress ecosystem management and the protection and management of rare species. Forest communities will be managed using techniques recommended by the Florida Forest Service. Appropriate protections will be provided to environmentally sensitive areas. Minimal infrastructure development will be required.

**Revenue-generating potential** The underlying fee ownership will remain with the present landowners, so no public revenue is anticipated from this area.

**Cooperators in management activities** The District will cooperate with other state and local government agencies in monitoring land in the project.

### **Management Cost Summary**

Water Management District funding is available to develop detailed management plans and to monitor compliance with those plans.

*Edited March 31, 2015*

