

Forest Legacy LWCF Project

Avalon Woodland Ravines

Jefferson County Florida

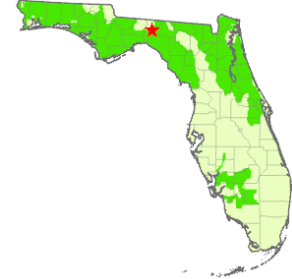


FUNDING HISTORY

FY 2025 Forest Legacy Program Funding	\$4,740,000
FY 2025 Non-Federal Cost Share	\$1,580,000
FY 2025 Project Costs	\$6,320,000
FY 2025 Project Acres	5,495

Forest Legacy Funding To Date	\$0
Total Project Costs	\$8,670,000
Total Project Acres	8,101

★ Project Location
Forest Legacy Areas



Tract Name	Size (ac)	Tract Cost	FLP Funding	Non-Fed Cost Share	Status
Phase 1	5,495	\$6,320,000	\$4,740,000	\$1,580,000	Proposed 2025
Phase 2	2,606	\$2,350,000	\$1,755,000	\$595,000	Proposed 2026

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The Aucilla River watershed contains some of the most significant archaeological and paleontological sites in the United States, unique geologic features, and a corridor of public and private conservation lands. A CONSERVATION EASEMENT (CE) on the 5,495-acre Avalon Woodland Ravines – Phase 1 (AWR-1) property will provide a linkage between conservation easement properties in the upper portions of the watershed to the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge and State public lands along the Gulf. Conservation of AWR-1 strengthens the region's climate resiliency as species migrate away from the coast. AWR-1's substantial size and habitat diversity supports a wide range of Florida State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP)-listed animal species while protecting water resources that flow to the Wacissa Springs Group and Aucilla River. From wading birds to human paddlers seeking a serene experience on the spring-fed Wacissa River, a spectacular range of species will benefit from the water quality and water resource protections afforded by this project. A CE will ensure the unique conservation features of AWR-1 remain in perpetuity, and the sustainably managed working forests will continue to be part of the regional economy.



Wood Storks are a federally threatened species that utilize wetlands on AWR-1. (Photo by Kim Sash)

PROJECT FEATURES

Important

- **THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES HABITAT:** Federally-threatened Wood Storks frequently forage in AWR-1's marshes. AWR-1 falls between two rookeries located less than 20 miles away in either direction, offering critical feeding areas for parents raising young and improving rookery fecundity.

- AWR-1 offers dispersal habitat for a population of federally-threatened Red-Cockaded Woodpeckers (RCW) located 2.3 miles away. As prescribed burning occurs more frequently in the maturing pines, RCW use of the property will increase. The site will support nesting clusters within 20 years.
- State-endangered Coastal Plains Pogonia was recently found on AWR-1. This dainty orchid is blooming in an area that was newly exposed to sunlight from forest thinning. Future prescribed burning will reveal additional imperiled plants that exist within the seedbank by reducing hardwood density.
- 17 SWAP-listed species have been documented on the property which include Northern Bobwhite, Brown-Headed Nuthatch, Red-Headed Woodpecker, Great Egret, Green Heron, Little Blue Heron, Snowy Egret, Swallow-Tailed Kite, Rusty Blackbird, Prothonotary Warbler, and Round-Tailed Muskrat.
- FISH, WILDLIFE, PLANTS AND UNIQUE FOREST COMMUNITIES: AWR-1 contains 3,326 acres of healthy wetlands that buffer important tributaries to the Aucilla River and provide breeding/stopover habitat for 18 declining migratory bird species, as well as the federally-threatened Wood Stork.
- After full restoration to Longleaf Pine and the reintroduction of prescribed fire, numerous state and federally-listed species such as the RCW, Bachman's Sparrow, Florida Pine Snake, Gopher Tortoise, and Southeastern Pocket Gopher will likely recolonize AWR-1 from adjacent populations.
- WATER SUPPLY, AQUATIC HABITAT AND WATERSHED PROTECTION: 1.1 miles of Dixie Branch and 0.7 miles of Beasley Creek flow through AWR-1 before reaching the Aucilla River, which flows into the Gulf, forming an estuary where federally-listed species like Florida Manatee and Gulf Sturgeon reside.
- AWR-1 protects water flowing into the Aucilla River, a state-designated Outstanding Florida Water and designated paddling trail. These designations are reserved for select waterbodies with exceptional recreational and/or ecological significance.
- AWR-1 falls within the Wacissa Springs Group Priority Focal Area, providing critical recharge to the 15 springs it contains. The springs house endemic Big Blue Springs Cave Crayfish, a Regional Species of Greatest Conservation Need.
- Maintaining AWR-1 in a natural state will bring water quality and quantity benefits to the first-magnitude Wacissa Springs Group. The springs support a thriving outdoor recreation economy, valued at over \$450,000, based upon fishing, paddling, scuba-diving, boating, and wildlife-viewing.
- ECONOMIC BENEFITS – TIMBER: 15.7% of jobs in Jefferson County, Florida relate to agriculture and forestry according to a study produced by The Conservation Fund. A CE on AWR-1 will support forest-related jobs and help to maintain sustainable timber markets in the region.
- The forests on AWR-1 are certified through the Forest Stewardship Council, ensuring that harvested timber comes from land managed with economic, social, and environmental sustainability as the foremost goals. Best Management Practices are employed onsite, per the existing resource management plan.
- Much of the upland acreage on AWR-1 is being, or will be, converted to Longleaf Pine over time. Harvested timber from the property will help sustain markets for Longleaf Pine products, create/retain jobs related to its use as a timber commodity, and encourage additional Longleaf Pine restoration.
- Forest restoration activities such as brush management, forest thinning, and prescribed burning will continue to require and support private contractors in perpetuity if application of a CE is achieved. 22 local companies currently provide forestry-related land management services in the region.
- ECONOMIC BENEFITS – NON-TIMBER: The landowner seeks to transition AWR-1 into a quail-hunting property. In Jefferson County, 255 hunting-related jobs generated nearly \$22.5 million in economic impact in 2017 and a labor income of \$8.3 million.
- AWR-1 is leased to 29 hunters each year, generating direct revenue of over \$62,200 per year. White-tailed Deer and Wild Turkey are the most desired game species on the property. Many of the hunters have harvested game from the property for multiple generations.



The state-listed Coastal Plain Pogonia is one of many unique species on AWR-1. (Photo by Kim Sash)

- **PUBLIC ACCESS:** The landowner will engage with Operation Outdoor Freedom, administered through the Florida Forest Service, the Wounded Warrior Project, and other related non-profit organizations to invite USA veterans and local youths onsite for public recreation.
- **SCENIC:** AWR-1 offers 3.2 miles of scenic viewscapes from public roads, allowing the public to see fire-maintained uplands, large wetlands, and bottomland forests found on the tract. Vistas of the wetlands, especially, offer wildlife viewers the chance to spot a variety of bird and mammal species.
- **HISTORIC/CULTURAL:** AWR-1 contains 8 sites recorded in the State's Master Site File, including artifacts dating back over 8,000 years and a village site on Apalachee Tribe ancestral lands. Another site contains a historic railroad line that transported POWs and wounded soldiers during World War II.
- **CARBON SEQUESTRATION/CLIMATE RESILIENCE, ADAPTATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE:** AWR-1 sits in a conserved climate corridor that nearly connects the Gulf to Georgia. This provides a future route for plants and animals moving inland from the coast and buffers storm impacts, all while sequestering CO₂.

Threatened

- **LACK OF PROTECTION:** Zoning on the property is AG20, which allows for agriculture, forestry, subdivision, and residential development at 1 unit/20 acres. There are no legal restrictions preventing future development and, if unprotected, development will likely occur on AWR-1's uplands.
- The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) identifies 344 acres as having prime soils for crop production, which could prompt conversion of the pine uplands to row-crop agriculture. In addition to the land-use change, associated nutrient inputs would negatively impact Wacissa Springs Group.
- **LAND AND LANDOWNER'S CIRCUMSTANCE:** AWR-1 was acquired in 2021 by a Timber Investment Management Organization. Due to its obligations to investors, the landowner is willing to sell a CE on AWR-1, contingent upon Legacy grant receipt.
- The landowner has successfully completed Forest Legacy Program (FLP) transactions in the past related to the Wolfe Creek Forest project, and owns an adjacent, 2,606-acre tract (Avalon Woodland Ravines – Phase II) that is intended to be a future Forest Legacy project.
- **ADJACENT LAND USE:** Many longtime owners of rural land in the immediate area have recently listed their properties for sale, as property values in Jefferson County increased by 23% between 2021 and 2022. Land-use alterations are likely to result from these changes in ownership.
- While large land holdings border AWR-1, several landowners nearby have converted their lands to improved pasture for cattle production. Run-off from these operations has resulted in additional nutrient inputs into the Wacissa Springs Group Basin and surrounding waterbodies.
- Maintaining large land holdings, such as AWR-1, and reducing residential development improve the likelihood of the continued use of prescribed fire on forestlands. Frequent prescribed fire promotes habitats for priority wildlife, reduces wildfire risk, and improves groundwater recharge.
- **ABILITY TO DEVELOP:** Given AWR-1's proximity to US Interstate 10, US Highway 19/27, and Tallahassee, FL (less than 30 miles away), AWR-1 will be highly desirable for residential development. A 920-acre residential subdivision only 3 miles from AWR-1 has received preliminary plat approval.
- Florida Senate Bill 896 passed in 2021, limiting local governments from restricting solar developments in rural areas zoned for agriculture and forestry. This law will likely lead to the conversion of rural lands into utility-scale solar facilities that provide little to no habitat for wildlife.
- An energy right-of-way borders AWR-1, increasing the likelihood of a future commercial solar installation. A major utility company is engaging nearby landowners to install industrial-scale solar facilities on their lands. At least one neighbor plans to install such a facility within the next year.



Frequent prescribed fire-managed loblolly stands fortify the local economy. (Photo by Preston Ballard)

Strategic

- **CONSERVATION INITIATIVE – NATIONAL:** AWR-1 falls entirely within an active NRCS-Regional Conservation Partnership Program project area that provides cost-share funds to landowners that implement prescribed burning, invasive plant treatment, hydrologic improvements, and Longleaf Pine planting. Additionally, 70.8 acres of AWR-1 falls within the Gress Swamp NRCS Sourcewater Protection Area.
- AWR-1 is included within the boundary of the Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape. Designated by a consortium of federal partners, Sentinel Landscapes support military readiness, conserve natural resources, and bolster forestry and agricultural economies simultaneously. The designated area includes nine military bases that collectively inject over \$21 billion into the Northwest Florida economy.
- **CONSERVATION PLAN – NATIONAL:** AWR-1 will support the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Wood Stork Recovery Plan by conserving known foraging habitat and likely roosting habitat for the species. The adjoining land, that is to be submitted as AWR-Phase II for FLP FY 2026, will additionally support this plan, as it includes documented foraging habitat as well.
- By enhancing inputs into the Aucilla River, AWR-1 supports the health of the estuarine ecosystem where the Aucilla River meets the Gulf. This helps to achieve identified goals in the USFWS recovery plans for Gulf Sturgeon, Eastern Black Rail, Florida Manatee, and Loggerhead Sea Turtle. Each species has been recently documented from the Aucilla River estuary.
- **CONSERVATION PLAN – STATE:** This project advances the goals of the 2019 Florida SWAP by permanently protecting and restoring habitat for at least 17 SWAP-listed species. The project will also conserve a number of species being actively tracked by the Florida Natural Areas Inventory due to their imperiled status in Florida.
- The project supports the Florida Forest Service's 2020 Forest Action Plan by protecting water quality and quantity, improving the economic vitality of forests, reducing forest fragmentation, implementing prescribed fire on private lands, and supporting sustainable forest markets.
- **CONSERVATION STRATEGY – STATE:** The whole property is included in the Aucilla Corridor Florida Forever Program project, borders two other Florida Forever projects, and is within 5 miles of several other parcels within existing Florida Forever projects. Florida Forever is the nation's premier state conservation land buying program, legislatively funded at \$400M in 2021 and \$100M in 2022.
- Florida Senate Bill 976 was passed in 2019, authorizing \$300 million to be spent on land conservation for the completion of the Florida Wildlife Corridor. AWR-1 is a high-priority property within the Florida Wildlife Corridor and the Florida Ecological Greenways Network, a state initiative with a goal of linking existing conservation lands to facilitate wildlife movement.
- **COMPLEMENT PROTECTED LANDS:** AWR-1 is adjacent to 3,307 acres of land conserved via conservation easements and fits into a connected corridor of public conservation lands that include the 50,549-acre Aucilla Wildlife Management Area and the 68,000-acre St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. AWR-1 is next to 5,268 acres of land conserved through the Florida Forever Program.
- **OTHER LANDSCAPE SCALE GOALS AND PUBLIC BENEFITS:** Jefferson County, Florida is considered to be a Rural Community of Economic Opportunity with a poverty rate of 17.2%. Most residents rely upon well-water and the project will help to safeguard its quality. The other social, economic, and environmental advantages of this project will bring significant benefits to the local underserved community.



*AWR-1 perpetual conservation will protect the Aucilla River.
(Photo by Peter Kleinhenz)*

Readiness

Easement or Fee Conditions	1
Non-Federal Cost Share Commitment	1
Signed Purchase Agreement	0
Title Search	1
Mineral Determination	1
Readiness Total Tally Score	4

Supporting Parties

Southeast Conservation Adaptation Strategy; Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape; Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services: Florida Forest Service; Florida Department of Environmental Protection: Division of State Lands; Suwannee River Water Management District; Tall Timbers Research Station and Land Conservancy; Apalachee Audubon Society; and Aucilla Research Institute.

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