

Forest Legacy LWCF Project

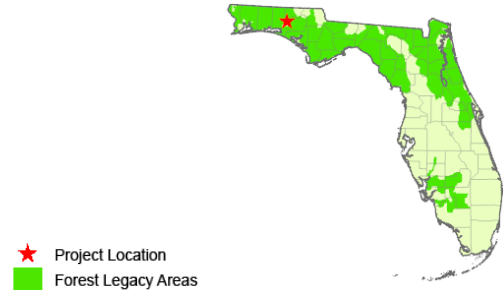
Creeks to Choctawhatchee River Timberlands

Walton County Florida



FUNDING HISTORY

FY 2027 Forest Legacy Program Funding	\$2,840,000
FY 2027 Non-Federal Cost Share	\$4,270,400
FY 2027 Project Costs	\$7,110,400
FY 2027 Project Acres	2,222
Forest Legacy Funding To Date	\$0
Total Project Costs	\$7,110,400
Total Project Acres	2,222



Tract Name	Size (ac)	Tract Cost	FLP Funding	Non-Fed Cost Share	Status
Creeks to Choctawhatchee River Timberlands	2,222	\$7,110,400	\$2,840,000	\$4,270,400	Proposed 2027

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Any typical morning on the Creeks to Choctawhatchee River Timberlands (C2CRT), one might see light gently filtering down through beautiful hardwood forests. Slow-moving creeks wind through vast pine plantations and eventually feed the Choctawhatchee River, home to multiple federally-listed species. FEE acquisition of the 2,222-acre C2CRT is a timely opportunity to preserve unbroken forested lands, protect the Choctawhatchee River, buffer Eglin Air Force Base (AFB), and leverage the State's Florida Forever funding program. Expanding Pine Log State Forest (PLSF), Florida's first State Forest, will strengthen the management plan for timber harvest, prescribed fire, recreation, Operation Outdoor Freedom opportunities for wounded veterans, and ecological restoration. Perpetual state protection will preclude uses incompatible to Eglin AFB, the largest air force base in the world, where defense-related activities in NW Florida account for 23% of the region's economy. Actively listed for sale, this project is poised to stop the fragmentation of 23 unique project parcels. State conservation acquisition of C2CRT would further federal and regional goals of many initiatives including the America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative.



Crooked Creek flowing south through an intact bottomland forest. (Photo by Melissa Hill)

PROJECT FEATURES

Important

- **PUBLIC ACCESS:** Protection of C2CRT and addition to the Florida Forest Service (FFS)-managed PLSF will legally secure a new recreation area and public access while protecting resources and practicing multiple-use management across the landscape. It will expand PLSF by 28%.
- C2CRT will be incorporated into PLSF management, offering recreational opportunities such as camping, wildlife viewing, hiking, bicycling, and hunting. It will also provide recreational and rehabilitation opportunities for wounded veterans through FFS's Operation Outdoor Freedom program.

- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS - NON-TIMBER:** The Eglin AFB Reservation comprises 33% of land in Walton County and the US military is the major employer. The base is valuable to the local economy in that it employs 20,000+ personnel and provides services for over 81,000 military and civilian personnel.
- Walton County Tourism data shows tourists visiting north and central Walton County contribute \$54M in direct spending annually which supports 330 jobs. 20% of visitors report hiking, biking, and nature tours as their primary reason for visiting. C2CRT will increase these recreational opportunities.
- Conservation of C2CRT furthers goals of the Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape to retain forestry lands and buffer Eglin AFB from incompatible land uses. Eglin AFB is the county's largest employer with over 14,500 jobs in 2018 and an annual regional impact of over \$1.4 billion.
- C2CRT will maintain land use that is compatible with military testing and training missions to support Eglin AFB, one of the nation's most comprehensive land/air/sea training areas, further securing America's freedoms both domestic and abroad.
- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS - TIMBER:** In 2016, Walton County-based forest industries contributed over \$97 million to the local economy, supporting 119 directly related and 732 indirectly related jobs. C2CRT will create/retain critical forest-related jobs and expand markets for wood products.
- C2CRT contains soils classified as productive for forestry uses by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), including Longleaf, loblolly, and slash pine stand growth, with the largest soils series being Shubuta fine sandy loam (43.2%) and Norfolk loamy sand (20.9%).
- **T&E SPECIES/HABITAT:** Active Gopher Tortoise burrows, known to also house over 350 commensal species such as the federally listed Eastern Indigo Snake, have been documented on C2CRT to the north. Restoration onsite will expand foraging and burrowing opportunities on C2CRT and beyond.
- Creeks running through C2CRT directly feed into Bruce Creek, which is critical habitat for freshwater mussel species including the federally-threatened Tapered Pigtoe, Southern Sandshell, and Fuzzy Pigtoe, and the federally-endangered Choctaw Bean and Southern Kidneyshell.
- Florida Natural Areas Inventory lists 38 rare and imperiled plant and animal species that would likely be identified in a survey including Florida Spiny-Pod (G2/S2), Ashe's Magnolia (G3/S2), Carolina Lily (G4/S2), Cooley's Meadowrue (G1/S1), and Big-Eared Bat (G3/S1).
- **WATERSHED PROTECTION:** 100% of the property provides aquifer recharge for the region's drinking water. C2CRT meets the NW FL Water Management District's goal to protect watershed resources through acquisition with public access noted in the associated Water Management Plan.
- Several creeks pass through C2CRT, such as White Creek, Crooked Creek, & Peavy Creek, which drain to Bruce Creek; Oak Grove Branch, which crosses the property on its route to Sandy Creek; and an unnamed tributary of Mill Creek. All aforementioned C2CRT waterbodies drain to the Choctawhatchee River.
- **AQUATIC HABITAT:** The Choctawhatchee River is an Outstanding Florida Water, a state-designated waterbody worthy of special protection because of its exceptional ecological and recreational value and provision of critical habitat for the federally-endangered Gulf Sturgeon.
- **UNIQUE HABITAT:** FFS's Assessment of Need names restoration of America's historical Longleaf Pine forest, now only occupying 5% of its original range, as a priority and crucial to the long-term viability of this habitat's 30 federally-listed species and 900 species found nowhere else in the world.
- The property consists of hilly uplands ranging from 85 to 220 feet. Numerous seepage streams and ravines cross the uplands and are home to State-listed carnivorous pitcher plants. The onsite hardwood forests provide watershed protection and contain over 50 species of rare plants.
- Intact, remnant longleaf pine and understory species remain on northern C2CRT. The FFS will restore C2CRT in line with the existing PLSF resource management plan. Longleaf Pine forests are the most ecologically diverse ecosystems in the world.



Biologist with federally-endangered Gulf Sturgeon on the Choctawhatchee River. (Photo by Ryan Hagerty, USFWS)

- **HISTORIC/CULTURAL:** The C2CRT is located within historic Muscogee/Creek (federally- recognized Native American tribe) tribal lands. The property contains a recorded archaeological resource with the Florida Division of Historic Resources (DHR).
- The DHR site (WL3322) is believed to be associated with the Archaic period (8500 B.C.-1000 B.C.). It is likely that many additional sites are located on the project, as it has never been subject to formal archaeological investigation.
- **SCENIC:** The scenic state-designated Choctawhatchee River Paddling Trail is downstream from C2CRT. The existing PLSF hosts the federally-designated Florida National Scenic Trail that winds across PLSF. C2CRT may provide additional education sites for nearby Nokuse's E.O.Wilson's Biophilia Center.

Threatened

- **LACK OF PROTECTION:** All of C2CRT's 23 unique parcels are actively listed for sale. Reassembling this forest would be difficult if any parcels were sold. The Trust for Public Land (TPL) has secured an Option Agreement to serve as the trusted acquisition partner for the Florida Forest Service.
- There is high interest in the purchase of individual parcels within C2CRT. The realtor has been steadily receiving offers for purchase of individual parcels. TPL retains the option to prevent immediate site fragmentation.
- C2CRT's zoning allows subdivision, residential and commercial development, agriculture, recreational hunting and conservation uses. All of C2CRT zoning also allows one unit per ten acres.
- **LAND AND LANDOWNERS CIRCUMSTANCES:** The land is held in a Trust. The patriarch who served as the primary land manager passed away in late 2018. Neither the matriarch, in her nineties, nor her heir, live on site and they have listed all their land holdings for sale including C2CRT.
- **ADJACENT LAND USE:** The population growth in Walton County is one of the highest in the US. From 2010-2022, Walton County's population increased 50.9% compared to the US's population which grew 7.7% during this time. The State of Florida is the fastest growing state in the country. (US Census)
- University of Florida's 2070 Trend study shows that based on current trends, the amount of developed land in Walton County will more than double by 2070, from 11% to 27%. Most of the predicted land conversion is from timberlands to urban development.
- Walton County's population in 2024 was 87,728, a 4,386 person increase over the 2023 population count. Building permits in Walton County have increased over the past two years (2,792 building permits in 2023 and 2,883 in 2024) despite increases in interest rates.
- C2CRT is surrounded by many 40-acre or less, privately owned parcels, making this property a critical anchor for establishment of a forested connection between Eglin AFB and state-held lands along the Choctawhatchee River to the east and the conservation easement lands to the south.
- **ABILITY TO DEVELOP:** Well drained soils, zoning that allows residential development, and considerable frontage on paved roads make development on C2CRT attractive to buyers. Increased demand for housing to support military facilities and continued rural sprawl pressure the region for development.
- Electricity, septic, and well water are readily available, priming the property for development. C2CRT recharges the underlying aquifer that not only provides drinking water to the region but will also support rural development if converted.



Arrowheads located on C2CRT, recently discovered by DHR PhD staff. (Photo by Melissa Hill)

Strategic

- **CONSERVATION INITIATIVE, STRATEGY OR PLAN:** Acquisition of this project will allow for implementation of four conservation plans and one initiative to restore the historic range of America's longleaf pine ecosystem. C2CRT will be managed under an existing State Forester-approved ten-year land management plan for PLSF.
- **NATIONAL PLANS:** C2CRT is identified as a priority area within the America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative Range-Wide Conservation Plan which is endorsed by the Department of Defense. This plan is committed to by the US Department of Agriculture, Defense, and Interior, with the Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership as the local implementation team.
- Eglin AFB, the world's busiest wing command, identifies C2CRT within its area of concern for potential land use conflicts within a Class 3 Mission Footprint. C2CRT meets the Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape objectives to provide for military mission assurance, increasing resiliency and sustainability of habitat and water resources, and retaining working forest lands as compatible land uses.
- **STATE PLANS:** Conservation acquisition of C2CRT supports the FFS's 2020 Statewide Forest Action Plan by reducing further fragmentation of forestland ownership and improving the economic viability of forests, which have a total annual economic impact of \$16 billion including 133,000 jobs in the State of Florida. It also provides a direct lift to expanding acres managed with prescribed fire.
- **REGIONAL PLAN:** The Florida Department of Environmental Protection designates the Choctawhatchee River as a State Paddling Trail. C2CRT will protect Choctawhatchee River tributary water quality. State acquisition of C2CRT will also offer more flexibility on PLSF as managing agencies work to provide a recreational experience on the Florida National Scenic Trail while managing impacts to the forest.
- **LOCAL PLANS:** C2CRT furthers the Walton County Comprehensive Plan. The Conservation section of this plan specifically states the goal of partnering with private non-profit organizations, and regional, state, and federal agencies on acquisitions to protect the Choctawhatchee River. The policy also highlights the preservation of Hardwood Forested Uplands which C2CRT would further protect.
- **COMPLEMENT PROTECTED LANDS:** Many of the Species of Greatest Conservation Need listed in the State Wildlife Action Plan are confirmed on nearby lands and protecting their habitat on the C2CRT will complement efforts taken by existing conservation lands to further safeguard species. This will create a swath of continual protected forest and Department of Defense compatible uses.
- C2CRT is an anchor point within Priority 2 of the Florida Ecological Greenways Network, the State prioritized Florida Wildlife Corridor promulgated in 2021 by the Florida Legislature. The corridor represents a series of landscape-scale ecologically significant hubs, and a network of connections among the hubs to form a statewide ecological greenways system.
- C2CRT will provide a keystone site of conservation lands for the long-term vision of connecting the current unprotected portions of the Florida Wildlife Corridor to nearby surrounding conservation lands including, Northwest Florida Water Management District conserved lands, Eglin Air Force Base, and Nokuse Conservation Easements.
- **OTHER LANDSCAPE SCALE GOALS AND PUBLIC BENEFITS:** The state protection of C2CRT would anchor the PLSF to a new extent in Walton County, opening up opportunities to expand the PLSF north into Holmes County. This is significant as there are currently no state forests in Holmes County, and the community would greatly benefit from additional recreational resources.



*Mature timber stand growth on C2CRT.
(Photo by Melissa Hill)*

Readiness

Easement or Fee Conditions	1
Non-Federal Cost Share Commitment	1
Signed Purchase Agreement	1
Title Search	1
Mineral Determination	1
Readiness Total Tally Score	5

Supporting Parties

Eglin Air Force Base; Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape; Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership; The Trust for Public Land; Longleaf Alliance; Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation; Florida Department of Environmental Protection; Walton County; and Choctawhatchee Bay Estuary Program.

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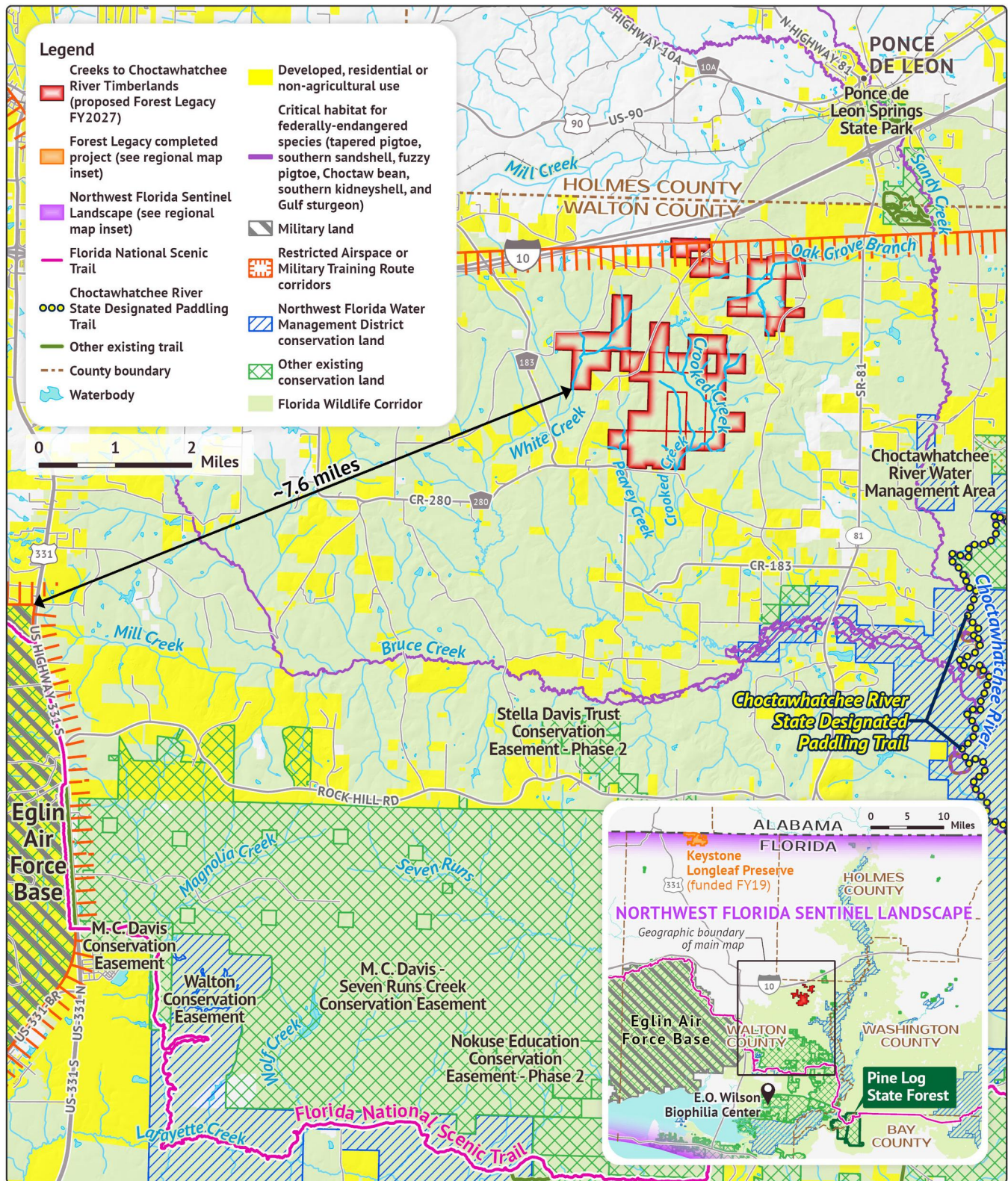
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FY2027 FOREST LEGACY PROGRAM PROPOSAL



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