

Forest Legacy LWCF Project

Peace River Longleaf Pinelands

DeSoto County Florida

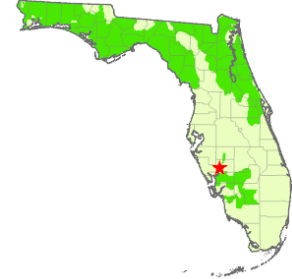


FUNDING HISTORY

FY 2027 Forest Legacy Program Funding \$17,160,000
FY 2027 Non-Federal Cost Share \$15,815,000
FY 2027 Project Costs \$32,975,000
FY 2027 Project Acres 1,324

Forest Legacy Funding To Date \$0
Total Project Costs \$32,975,000
Total Project Acres 1,324

★ Project Location
Forest Legacy Areas



Tract Name	Size (ac)	Tract Cost	FLP Funding	Non-Fed Cost Share	Status
Peace River Longleaf Tract	1,324	\$32,975,000	\$17,160,000	\$15,815,000	Proposed 2027

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Peace River Longleaf Pinelands (PRLP), proposed for protection, is a landscape in Florida's Heartland where Longleaf Pine savannas stretch along two miles of the meandering Peace River; critically endangered Florida Panthers and Bonneted Bats find refuge in its forests and floodplains. This 1,324-acre FEE acquisition in DeSoto County fills a major missing link in protected lands and closes a critical gap in Peace River State Forest (PRSF), connecting 6,000 acres of non-adjacent parcels and enhancing landscape-scale conservation from the Peace River to the Gulf Coast. PRLP lies within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area and the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Conserving PRLP will expand hunting and fishing access for Florida Forest Service's Operation Outdoor Freedom events at Camp Peace on PRSF, providing guided activities to wounded veterans. The project safeguards water quality in the Peace River, a drinking water source for over 1 million people and the largest freshwater contributor to Charlotte Harbor, a \$3.2 billion Sun Coast economic driver. This rare Forest Legacy opportunity in Florida's deep south secures lasting benefits in a watershed dominated by mining, agriculture, and development.



Birds eye view looking west from Peace River across mesic flatwoods and hammock. (Photo by Walt Bethel)

PROJECT FEATURES

Important

- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS Non-timber:** Protection of 1,324 acres along the Peace River helps safeguard the river's supply of drinking water to over 1 million people daily. A US EPA study of 27 U.S. water systems found forested watersheds cut treatment costs by 150%, adding economic value to conservation.
- The Peace River is the largest freshwater source to Charlotte Harbor, an estuary of National Significance in the National Estuary Program. One of 28 in the U.S. and four in Florida, this designation highlights critical ecological and economic value, directed to protect water quality and habitat.
- Charlotte Harbor is Florida's second-largest estuary and a state-designated Outstanding Florida Water, designated as such to increase protection for exceptional ecological and recreational value. Its watershed is vital to the Florida Sun Coast, generating \$3.2 billion annually in income.

- Natural resource-based recreation is DeSoto County's second largest economic driver, generating over \$92M annually. PRLP's 2 miles of undeveloped Peace River bank and 1,000+ acres of hiking trails will boost tourism and support local outfitters, guides, charters and other local business.
- **WATER SUPPLY/WATERSHED PROTECTION:** Protecting PRLP supports Peace River water quality and EPA source water goals. With 94% of PRLP contributing to aquifer recharge, conservation reduces pollution risks from land conversion and safeguards local drinking water sources.
- Land conversion is the top threat to Peace River surface and drinking water quality. Conserving PRLP helps protect daily drinking water for over 1 million people, reduces treatment needs and costs, and safeguards Charlotte Harbor, a vital and vulnerable coastal estuary.
- PRLP terrain reduces downstream flooding, as 46% is in Priority 1 floodplain. Site conservation would prevent additional development and septic tank construction, ensuring PRLP uplands will not contribute nutrients or waste to surface and drinking water during seasonal Peace River flood events.
- Clean water from the Peace River is critical to the 180,000-acre Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserve, home to productive seagrass beds and Florida statute-protected mangrove habitat that supports breeding birds, fisheries and recreation such as world-famous tarpon and goliath grouper sportfishing.
- **FEDERALLY LISTED SPECIES:** Nearly 50% of PRLP was designated Critical Habitat in 2024 for the endangered, endemic Florida Bonneted Bat—one of the world's rarest bats. The largest known population is 12 miles to the south, well within documented species foraging range per USFWS GPS data.
- Protecting PRLP is critical for endangered species movement. The USFWS Panther Recovery Team identified two corridors across PRLP for "likely panther movement." These natural routes offer secure pathways and avoid high mortality areas under existing land cover conditions in the panther core range.
- PRLP's Longleaf Pinelands, hardwood hammocks, wet prairies, and floodplain form a rare habitat configuration once common in Florida. Federally threatened species observed on PRLP include the Crested Caracara, Eastern Indigo Snake, and Wood Stork, all dependent on these unique ecosystems.
- **T&E:** PRLP is a wildlife haven where state-listed species are often seen--Swallow-Tailed Kites nesting in pines, Sandhill Cranes foraging in prairies, Southern Fox Squirrels leaping through canopies, and Black Bears feeding on palm berries. Protecting PRLP lets visitors experience The Real Florida.
- **PUBLIC ACCESS:** State acquisition of PRLP will expand recreation on PRSF via river and county road access. PRLP will connect to adjacent state forest trails, adding hiking and horseback riding through rare pinelands. Fence removal along the river will improve views and connectivity.
- **PUBLIC ACCESS & VETERANS:** Conserving PRLP will expand hunting and fishing for FFS-administered Operation Outdoor Freedom events at Camp Peace. These free events provide guided access, recreation, socialization, and rehabilitative opportunities for U.S. wounded veterans and Purple Heart recipients.
- **IMPORTANT WILDLIFE HABITAT:** PRLP lies fully within the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Signed into law by the Florida Legislature in 2021, the corridor is a physical geographic area for prioritizing conservation of connected intact habitat protecting wildlife from habitat fragmentation and extinction.
- Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) Critical Lands and Waters Identification Project (CLIP) recognizes 100% of PRLP as Priority 1 or 2. CLIP, developed by state, federal and NGO partners, guides long-term acquisition planning based on biodiversity, water and natural resources.



Florida Forever program staff photographs Longleaf Pine regeneration on PRLP. (Photo by Erica Hernandez)

- The federal and state partner founded, Southeast U.S. and Caribbean Initiative (SECAS), ranks 11% of PRLP as High and 69% as Medium priority, where conservation has greatest regional impact. SECAS aims to improve ecosystem connectivity by securing a network of conserved lands and waterbodies.
- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS TIMBER:** PRLP timber will support DeSoto County's forest economy. A 2016 University of Florida report identified the region's forest industry contributed 4,307 jobs and \$848M in economic output. Longleaf management will boost ongoing growth since 74% of PRLP is suitable for timber.
- **SCENIC:** PRLP expands access and viewshed along the Peace River Paddling Trail and is identified by the state and county for a future multi-use greenway. Trails boost rural economies. Florida Greenways and Trails Foundation reports trails generate \$52.3B annually to the state's economy.
- **HISTORIC:** The Peace River Valley was historically home to the Calusa tribes, as the river was a key pre-colonial trade route to the Gulf Coast. Seminole Indian communities remained in the valley until the Seminole Wars of the 1800s. Neither PRLP nor PRSF have been surveyed for cultural artifacts.

Threatened

- **LACK OF PROTECTION:** PRLP is currently 100% unprotected. Conversion into intensive land use would harm adjacent conservation lands and the Peace River. Without protection, land use changes and lack of management threaten water quality for over 1M residents and the region's tourism economy.
- A 150-acre sand mine borders PRSF's northern boundary in a region zoned for agriculture by DeSoto County. In 2021, adjacent farmland located less than a half mile from PRLP was purchased by the mine. The northern end of PRLP shares the same soil type as the mining site.
- The Florida Legislature underfunded land protection programs recently limiting available monetary resources for FFS priorities. As funding shifts to projects with strong match, FLP is an invaluable cost-share tool. With a 48% match, this project is well positioned to move forward.
- **ABILITY TO DEVELOP:** PRLP is zoned for nearly 100 homes. Its rural appeal draws commuters from costly, crowded coastal areas. Less than 30 minutes from Sarasota and Port Charlotte, this fast-growing region saw over 15% growth vs. 1% U.S. growth from 2010–2020.
- Over 200,000 acres of phosphate mining rights exist in the Peace River Watershed, including the 18,000-acre DeSoto mine located 3.5 miles northwest of PRLP. Both the mine and PRLP are zoned for agriculture. Protecting areas like PRLP is key to buffering surface water quality from mining impacts.
- Charlotte County, downstream of PRLP, is fully developed to the county line. New housing construction is extending into DeSoto County along the Peace River corridor. As coastal living costs rise, inland counties face increasing pressure to rezone for more development, especially along waterways.
- A 2025 University of Florida study finds low-density sprawl costs rural counties \$1,800/acre, while conserved land provides \$900/acre in ecosystem benefits. Protecting natural and agricultural lands preserves rural economies, reduces infrastructure strain, and safeguards vital ecosystems.
- **ADJACENT LAND USE:** Like much of DeSoto County, most uplands in the Peace River Watershed have been converted from native pinelands to ranches, crops, mining, and rural housing. Fortunately, two-thirds of PRLP's boundary adjoins PRSF and the Peace River--an unparalleled conservation opportunity.
- Unprotected lands adjacent to PRLP are mostly subdivided. To the north are cleared homesteads, pastures and a sand mine adjacent to the state forest. To the south across the river, land cleared for citrus, pasture and housing developments are putting pressure on the river floodplain.



Airboat tours are popular on the Peace River and add to the local economy. (Photo by Walt Bethel)

- **LAND AND LANDOWNER CIRCUMSTANCES:** PRLP is actively listed for sale. The owners, now in their 80s and living off-site, manage the land only through a low-density cattle lease. While property heirs favor a high-profit sale, the current generation supports permanent conservation of the forest land.

Strategic

- **CONSERVATION INITIATIVE:** PRLP lies within the historic range of the once vast Longleaf Pine ecosystem, now diminished by 97%. America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative and the Natural Resources Conservation Service aim to restore 8 million acres of Longleaf Pine forests in the Southeast. Protecting PRLP contributes to these national goals and the wildlife that depends on this ecosystem.
- The Florida Acquisition and Restoration Council has approved PRLP for placement on the 2026 Florida Forever Priority List. Since 2001, Florida Forever, the nation's premier state land conservation program, has conserved 2.6M acres. In FY24-25 it invested \$407M to protect 800,000+ acres, preserving water, wildlife and advancing recreation. FLP funding will be robustly leveraged with state dollars.
- According to the PRLP Florida Forever Measures Evaluation (FFME), a standardized analysis for the state's conservation needs, 94-100% of the property acreage contributes to essential state conservation goals including Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas, Ecological Greenways, Surface Water Protection, Aquifer Recharge, and Florida Natural Areas Inventory Habitat Conservation Priorities.
- The FFME also found PRLP's mosaic significantly contributes to priority state ecosystem services calculated as percent landcover; 57% Natural Floodplain Function, 59% Functional Wetlands, 37% Sustainable Forestry and 35% Under-Represented Pineland-dominated Natural Communities. The combination of rare pinelands and wetlands support imperiled species that rely on both.
- **LANDSCAPE SCALE GOALS AND PUBLIC BENEFITS:** PRLP lies entirely within the Florida Wildlife Corridor, a network of over 18 million acres and home to 131 imperiled animal species and 69 imperiled plant species. Nearly 10 million acres are protected conservation lands and 8 million remain unprotected. Conserving lands like PRLP that complete the corridor is a top priority for partners statewide.
- FWC reports conserving PRLP would protect productive habitat for multiple sportfish. Large numbers of snook migrate upriver during periods of high water to feed. As waters recede, prey concentrate in the Peace River channel, providing abundant food for snook, Florida bass, Florida gar and tarpon. Preserving this productive habitat benefits multiple economically important fish species in Florida.
- The Nature Conservancy's Resilient Land Mapping Tool identifies PRLP as part of a connected, diverse and resilient network that supports species range shifts and gene flow. PRLP is additionally recognized as, "Resilient with Biodiversity," and as being a "High Flow Connected Network." Adjacent protected lands are also identified as having high resilience and biodiversity.
- PRLP connects to a matrix of protected conservation lands owned by state, local and private entities that extend 17 miles south to Charlotte Harbor and 30 miles west to Sarasota County. This collaborative approach to land protection and management across state agencies and private landowners strengthens regional resilience to hurricanes, flooding, wildfire and stormwater impacts.



Urban interface encroaching from adjacent coastal counties towards PRLP, in red. (Photo by State of Florida, Earthstar Geographics,)

- **COMPLEMENT PROTECTED LANDS:** PRLP shares over two miles of northeast boundary with the Peace River Refuge, a Florida Forever program project area and a state acquisition priority that has not yet been secured. Protecting PRLP will strengthen this conservation block and increase the likelihood of adjacent land acquisitions. The USFWS-identified panther corridors both cross both properties.
- Florida Forever priority project area Myakka Ranchlands lies 1.7 miles west of PRLP, linking public and private conservation lands to Myakka River State Park (Florida's third largest upland state park at 37,000 acres) and to T. Mabry Carlton Jr. Memorial Reserve in Sarasota County. The same USFWS panther corridor connecting PRLP and Peace River Refuge also crosses the Myakka Ranchlands project.

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

Florida Senate President Ben Albritton, Florida House District 76; National Parks Conservation Association; Florida Department of Environmental Protection; Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; Longleaf Alliance; Florida Wildlife Conservation Foundation; Florida Conservation Group; Charlotte Harbor National Estuarine Preserve; Southwest Conservancy; and Live Wildly Foundation.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Claire Harper

National Forest Legacy
Program Coordinator

USDA Forest Service

1244 Speer Blvd

Denver, CO 80204

303-895-6157

claire.harper@usda.gov

Annie Hermansen-Baez

Acting Forest Legacy Program
Manager

USDA Forest Service

1720 Peachtree Road, NW

Suite 700

Atlanta, GA 30309

352-376-3271

annie.hermansen@usda.gov

Catherine Ingram

Forest Legacy Coordinator

Florida Forest Service

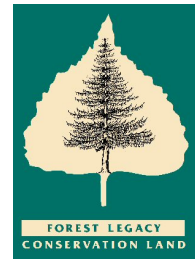
3125 Conner Blvd.

Room DOJ 236

Tallahassee, FL 32399-1650

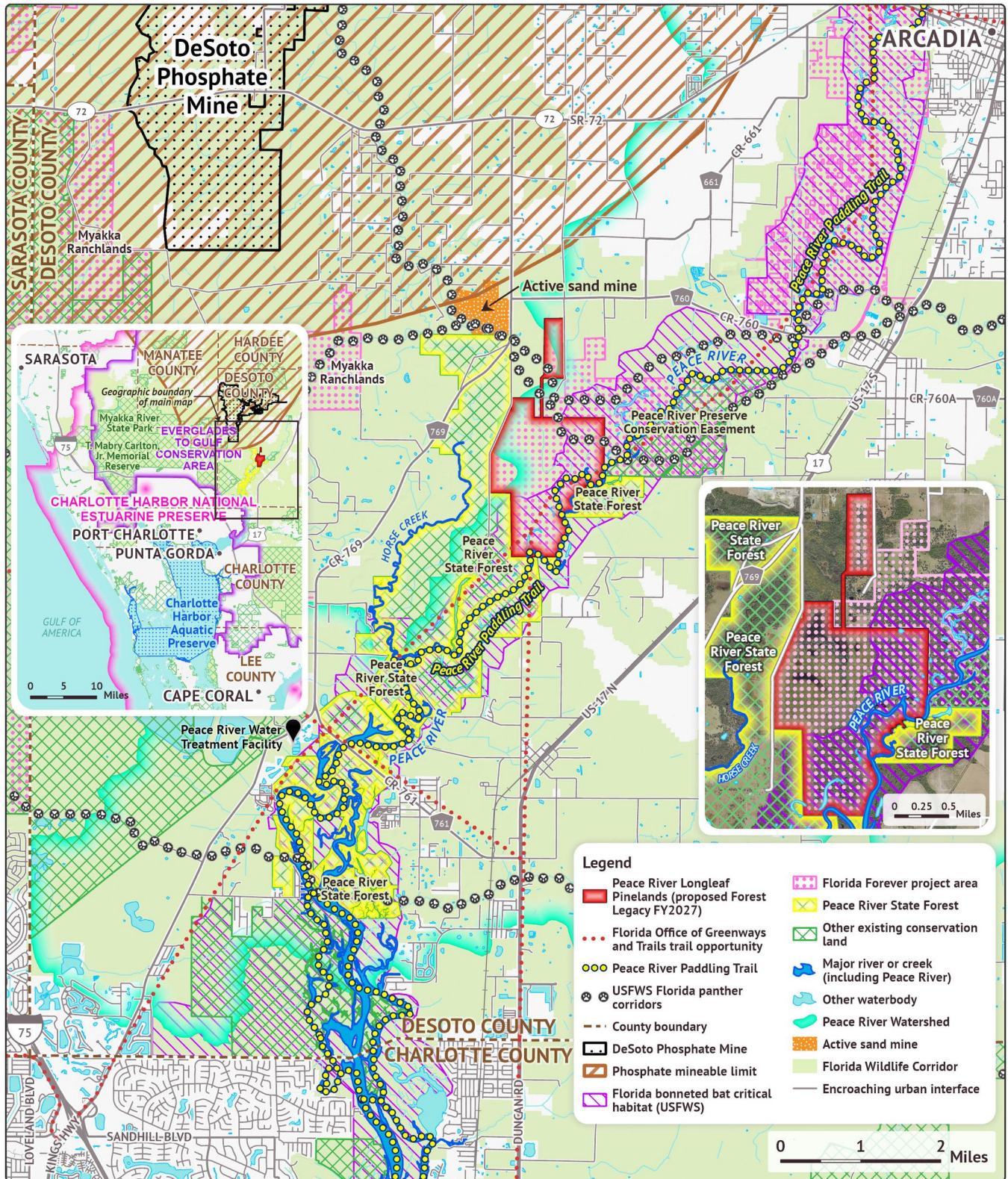
850-681-5827

Catherine.Ingram@fdacs.gov



Peace River Longleaf Pinelands

FY2027 FOREST LEGACY PROGRAM PROPOSAL



September 10, 2025. Copyright © Trust for Public Land. Trust for Public Land and Trust for Public Land logo are federally registered marks of Trust for Public Land. Information on this map is provided for purposes of discussion and visualization only. www.tpl.org

