

Forest Legacy LWCF Project

Wakulla Caves Forest

Wakulla County Florida

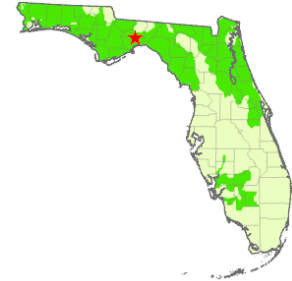


FUNDING HISTORY

FY 2018 Forest Legacy Program Funding	\$2,540,000
FY 2018 Non-Federal Cost Share	\$2,000,000
FY 2018 Project Costs	\$4,540,000
FY 2018 Project Acres	721

Forest Legacy Funding To Date	\$0
Total Project Costs	\$7,316,000
Total Project Acres	1,276

★ Project Location
Forest Legacy Areas



Tract Name	Size (ac)	Tract Cost	FLP Funding	Non-Fed Cost Share	Status
Caves Tract	721	\$4,540,000	\$2,540,000	\$2,000,000	Proposed 2018
Forest Tract	555	\$2,776,000	\$1,388,000	\$1,388,000	Proposed 2019

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The 1,276-acre Wakulla Caves Forest (WCF) protects karst sinks for cave diving and entry into the Wakulla-Leon Sinks Cave System (WLSCS), an underground aquifer cave and tunnel network that, along with systems in Mexico, is one of two premier warm-water destinations globally for experienced divers to explore for miles at depths to 300 feet. The WLSCS is vitally important to the recreation based economy of Wakulla County. This longleaf pine forest also helps connect the 632,890-acre Apalachicola National Forest with the 6,000-acre Wakulla Springs State Park and its National Natural Landmark spring, preserving a wildlife and recreation corridor from the national forest to state park. The WCF is the highest priority in a 1997 state project to protect the longleaf forests, karst features and corridor of the WLSCS. Only seven miles south of Tallahassee, the WCF area is unfortunately favored by developers for new residents working in the capital city. FEE acquisition of the Caves Tract in 2018, family owned since the 1870s but now listed for sale, and the Forest Tract in 2019 will protect the WLSCS and longleaf forests, and enhance prospects for landscape-scale sustainability of the public lands network along Florida's Nature Coast.



Meeting House sink allows dives into a massive cave at depths exceeding 270 feet (Photo by Keith Fountain)

PROJECT FEATURES

Important

- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS – TIMBER:** According to a 2014 University of Florida study, the 1,276-acre WCF contains pine timber that is managed to contribute to the \$1.7 billion annual economic output and more than 2,500 jobs attributable to the forest products industry in the nine-county Tallahassee region.
- Caves Tract is managed by a certified forester pursuant to a Florida Forest Service approved plan, with increasing use of prescribed fire. Pine/hardwood timber is dominant with mature, high quality pines well represented. Bottomland hardwood is limited and maintained in its current condition.

- Caves Tract has been enrolled in the Florida Forest Stewardship Program since 2012 with a focus on restoring native longleaf pine to achieve fully stocked, healthy stands capable of providing a sustained yield of multiple forest products.
- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS – NON-TIMBER:** Caves Tract is leased to Cave Connections for commercial use to access the WLSCS (the longest underwater cave system in the U.S.), which provides premier opportunities for warm-water cave diving at depths up to 300 feet found only in two locations worldwide.
- A 2003 economic study found that Wakulla Spring visitors had an annual direct impact of \$22.2 million on Wakulla County. Cave Connections anticipates this market could increase by as much as \$10 million annually with Caves Tract in public ownership and operating as a regional hub for cave diving.
- **THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES HABITAT:** Crustaceans and other aquatic life, including the globally imperiled Woodville Karst Cave Crayfish, Florida Cave Amphipod and Hobbs' Cave Amphipod, are documented by the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) in the WLSCS accessed on Caves Tract.
- As Caves Tract continues to see its mixed forest stands restored to longleaf pine and the frequency of prescribed fire increased, groundcover and habitat for the many species associated with the longleaf ecosystem will be significantly improved.
- **FISH, WILDLIFE, PLANTS AND UNIQUE FOREST COMMUNITIES:** FNAI has documented Eastern diamondback rattlesnake, Florida black bear, gopher tortoise and Southeastern fox squirrel, and identified habitat for the Eastern indigo snake, Southern hognose snake and Red-cockaded woodpecker on Caves Tract.
- The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) Potential Habitat Richness analysis recognizes the high value of Caves Tract to Florida biodiversity by identifying 63-percent as habitat for 5-7 rare or vulnerable vertebrate species.
- FNAI records indicate over three-quarters of Caves Tract contains state-ranked and threatened sandhill and sinkhole lake forest communities that are high priorities for protection statewide.
- **WATER SUPPLY, AQUATIC HABITAT AND WATERSHED PROTECTION:** Aquifer recharge provided by Caves Tract is essential to water quality and quantity at Wakulla Springs – one of the largest freshwater springs in the country – and the Big Bend Seagrasses Aquatic Preserve.
- Caves Tract buffers and protects at least 13 karst sinks with hydrological connections to the Floridan Aquifer from the threats of residential development by maintaining forest habitats and preventing nonforest uses that can easily erode the features or contaminate the aquifer.
- Seventy-three percent of Caves Tract has moderately to excessively drained soils overlaying highly permeable karst areas, thus allowing for significant rates of aquifer recharge to the springshed for Wakulla Springs, the source of water for the nine-mile Wakulla River, an Outstanding Florida Water.
- **PUBLIC ACCESS:** Public purchase of Caves Tract will fulfill the desire of local government and business leaders to expand public access to the WLSCS through Greyhound Sink, located mid-way between Leon Sinks and Wakulla Spring, as well as premier onsite dives at the Meeting House and Ferrell sinks.
- Protection of the WCF enables the expansion and integration of existing trails and diving pursuant to existing multiple use concepts at adjacent lands managed by the Florida Forest Service, Florida Department of Environmental Protection and U.S. Forest Service.
- **SCENIC:** The WCF provides a scenic buffer to County Road 267 on the Big Bend Scenic Byway, recognized by the U.S. Department of Transportation as a National Scenic Byway.
- The WCF is a possible route for almost 1.3 miles of a connector trail in the Capital City to the Sea Trails (CC2ST) network Master Plan. The CC2ST is a regional initiative to create one of Florida's largest trail networks for multiple uses throughout the region of the National Scenic Byway.



© Andreas Hagberg 2015
An illuminated cave deep within the Wakulla-Leon Sinks Cave System (Photo by Andreas Hagberg)

- **HISTORIC/CULTURAL:** Humans have occupied the areas around Wakulla Springs for nearly 12,000 years. While Caves Tract has not been surveyed, there are 70 cultural sites in the Florida Division of Historical Resources Master Site File for the state park.

Threatened

- **LACK OF PROTECTION:** Caves Tract is located seven miles south of Tallahassee (population 190,000) and lacks any legal or regulatory restrictions to prevent its conversion, fragmentation or parcelization for a wide variety of nonforest uses.
- The upland sandy soils of Caves Tract and proximity to public lands and recreation areas make it very attractive to residential developers interested in building new homes less than 20 minutes from downtown Tallahassee and Florida's capitol.
- **LAND AND LANDOWNER'S CIRCUMSTANCE:** After more than 130 years of family ownership, the west side of Caves Tract has been listed for sale with a broker, with the owner now planning to include the tract's road frontage in future marketing through the Multiple Listing Service for real estate in 2017.
- **ADJACENT LAND USE:** Private lands adjacent to WCF on all sides, particularly those along State Road 61, are increasingly being developed as large rural home sites of one to five acres for Tallahassee's rapidly growing population.
- The conversion of forests to rural residential development has destroyed most alternatives for protecting a corridor between the Apalachicola National Forest and Wakulla Springs State Park, leaving the WCF as the last opportunity to preserve this landscape linkage.
- **ABILITY TO DEVELOP:** No significant regulations or physical limitations prevent development of Caves Tract, which contains only seven percent wetlands. County zoning and regulations allow the mitigation of environmental issues and clustering of density to build up to 100 residential units.
- The Wakulla County land use for all but four acres of Caves Tract permits a wide variety of agricultural and residential uses, and its more than one mile of frontage on two paved roads with utilities facilitates and encourages parcelization for residential development.



Family owned since the 1870s, the Caves Tract is now being marketed for sale. (Photo by Keith Fountain)

Strategic

- **CONSERVATION INITIATIVE, STRATEGY OR PLAN:** The aquifer recharge provided by WCF is critical to the flows and water quality of Wakulla Springs, designated a National Natural Landmark in 1966 to recognize and encourage conservation of its outstanding biological and geological resources. The National Park Service identifies it as one of the largest and deepest springs in Florida.
- The WCF supports 2016-2018 strategic priorities outlined by the America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative designed to achieve the plan's 8,000,000-acre goal, particularly those outcomes related to converting mixed stands to longleaf-dominant stands, protecting existing longleaf habitat and increasing the use of prescribed fire.
- The WCF supports the 2015 Upper Wakulla River and Wakulla Springs Basin Management Action Plan (BMAP) – Florida's latest tool for restoring impaired waters by reducing pollutant loadings – by preventing impacts to highly permeable soils and open recharge sources for the spring and contributing to the plan goal of ensuring the spring is resilient to the impacts of existing and continuing human use.
- The WCF supports the Wakulla Springs State Park management plan by protecting lands within its optimum management boundary. Managing WCF as part of the park furthers plan objectives related to improving the continuity of existing park lands, providing additional natural and cultural resource protection, and allowing for future expansion of recreational activities like cave diving.

- The WCF supports the Florida Black Bear Management Plan goal of 570 bears in the East Panhandle unit by protecting habitat and forested public lands connections identified by the FWC as abundantly occupied. The WCF is critical to the movement of bears between the Apalachicola National Forest and St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge via Wakulla Springs State Park and the Wakulla River corridor.
- The FNAI ranks Caves Tract very highly in a number of statewide resource analyses, including: Strategic Habitat Conservation Areas (82-percent is Priority 2), Ecological Greenways (100-percent is Priority 1), Aquifer Recharge (71-percent is Priority 1) and Sustainable Forestry (67-percent is Priority 1). Fifty-three percent of Caves Tract is sandhill, an under-represented natural community.
- Caves Tract is an Essential Parcel in the Wakulla Springs Protection Zone project, established in 1997 to protect the karst features and forested connections connecting public lands lying between the Apalachicola National Forest and Wakulla Springs State Park. This Florida Forever project is eligible for funding in the 2016 Florida Forever work plan approved by the Governor and Legislature.
- The WCF aligns with the Governor's Florida Springs Initiative as it relates to Wakulla Spring, as it improves conditions by maintaining and better managing forest resources to increase recharge to the Floridan Aquifer and reduce the threat of increased nonpoint source pollution of the spring, river and aquatic preserve that would occur with residential development.
- **COMPLEMENT PROTECTED LANDS:** The WCF protects karst features that are components of the WLSCS, which extends from the Apalachicola National Forest to Wakulla Springs State Park. It is also within the highest-priority Critical Linkages of the Florida Wildlife Corridor segment that connects the national forest south to St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge.
- By protecting high aquifer recharge lands in the Wakulla Springs springshed, WCF contributes to multiple state and water management district plans related to Wakulla Springs, the Wakulla River (an Outstanding Florida Water) and the Big Bend Seagrasses Aquatic Preserve, by preserving the quality and quantity of fresh water recharging the aquifer and ultimately flowing from the spring.



*Former mixed forest stands are being converted to native longleaf
(Photo by Keith Fountain)*

Readiness

Pre-Appraisal/Market Analysis	1
Easement or Fee Conditions	1
Non-Federal Cost Share Commitment	0
Signed Purchase Agreement	0
Title Search	1
Mineral Determination	1
Stewardship Plan (or equivalent)*	1
Readiness Total Tally Score	5

Supporting Parties

Conservation Trust for Florida; Florida Forest Service; Florida Wildlife Federation; Wakulla Environmental Institute; Florida Defenders of Wildlife; Florida Audubon; Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; Florida Department of Environmental Protection; Florida Springs Institute; and Cave Connections, Inc..

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