Forest Legacy LWCF Project
Wakulla Caves Forest
Wakulla County Florida

FUNDING HISTORY

FY 2021 Forest Legacy Program Funding	**$1,622,250**
FY 2021 Non-Federal Cost Share	**$794,000**
FY 2021 Project Costs	**$2,416,250**
FY 2021 Project Acres	**314**
Forest Legacy Funding To Date	**$4,162,250**
Total Project Costs	**$6,616,250**
Total Project Acres	**1,031**

Tract Name	Size (ac)	Tract Cost	FLP Funding	Non-Fed Cost Share	Status
Boudreau Tract	96	$807,500	$534,750	$272,750	Completed 2022
Caves Tract	717	$4,200,000	$2,540,000	$1,660,000	Completed 2020
Doyle Tract	101	$762,750	$523,125	$239,625	Completed 2022
Lanvers Ventures	117	$846,000	$564,375	$281,625	Completed 2022

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Large unnamed karst sink ready for exploration by WLSCS diver Steve Cushman (Photo by Keith Fountain)

With the successful FEE acquisition of the Forest Legacy Caves Tract in 2019 and protection of its many well-known karst sinks, other heirs of John Stallon Ferrell have come together to present their 779 acres (Legacy Tract) for FEE acquisition to realize the habitat and aquifer protection goals of the 1,496-acre Wakulla Caves Forest (WCF) project. The WCF is part of the lands assembled by Mr. Ferrell, a Civil War veteran and state legislator, in the 1870s. The Legacy Tract is an opportunity to protect more known karst features like those associated with the Wakulla-Leon Sinks Cave System (WLSCS), a globally-significant cave system. Legacy Tract will also contribute to linking the 632,890-acre Apalachicola National Forest to the 6,000-acre Edward Ball Wakulla Springs State Park and protecting the aquifer for Wakulla Springs, a National Natural Landmark. Less than 5.5 miles south of Tallahassee, Legacy Tract is a target for developers of new residential projects serving the capital city. Acquisition of Caves Tract for the state park and Legacy Tract for Wakulla State Forest will expand recreation, protect the WLSCS and Wakulla Springs watershed, and expand the vast network of public lands along Florida's Nature Coast.

PROJECT FEATURES

Important

- ECONOMIC BENEFITS – TIMBER: Legacy Tract 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, according to a 2014 University of Florida study.

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

- Legacy Tract is managed by a forester pursuant to a forest management plan. Pine/hardwood timber is dominant with mature, high quality pines well represented. Bottomland hardwood is limited and maintained in its current condition.
- With a high percentage of soils suitable for sandhill restoration, Legacy Tract presents an opportunity for the Florida Forest Service to expand its restoration and sustainable management of longleaf pine in a setting that provides timber and non-timber benefits to the Wakulla County economy.
- ECONOMIC BENEFITS - NON-TIMBER: Legacy Tract contributes to protecting the water quality of Wakulla Springs, the WLSCS and many other nearby springs, which attract visitors having an annual direct impact of $22.2 million on Wakulla County according to a 2003 study.
- Unlike Caves Tract, with its well-documented connection to the WLSCS, Legacy Tract's karst features are unexplored. However, recent exploration of the eastern sinks at Caves Tract by diver Steve Cushman is mapping the network eastward under State Road 61 toward the Legacy Tract large unnamed sink.
- THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES HABITAT: Ongoing prescribed fire and good forest management practices have maintained native groundcover in pine plantations that will facilitate restoration of sandhill habitat by the Florida Forest Service consistent with the Wakulla State Forest management plan.
- Crustaceans and other aquatic life, including the globally imperiled Woodville Karst Cave Crayfish, Florida Cave Amphipod and Hobbs' Cave Amphipod, have been documented by the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) in the WLSCS which may connect with karst features on Legacy Tract.
- FISH, WILDLIFE, PLANTS AND UNIQUE FOREST COMMUNITIES: Eastern diamondback rattlesnake, bald eagle, Florida black bear, gopher tortoise and Southeastern fox squirrel have been observed on Legacy Tract.
- Acquisition of Legacy Tract will protect Florida black bear habitat identified by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) that will contribute to efforts to secure a wildlife corridor from the Apalachicola National Forest to the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge.
- 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 for black bear and other wildlife.
- WATER SUPPLY, AQUATIC HABITAT AND WATERSHED PROTECTION: Aquifer recharge provided by Legacy 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.
- Legacy Tract protects at least one unexplored karst sink with a likely hydrological connection to the WLSCS and 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.
- PUBLIC ACCESS: Legacy Tract, with extensive road frontage and upland forest communities, will increase public recreation in the 4,897-acre Wakulla State Forest and, together with other active land protection projects, increase the likelihood of connecting with public lands to the north and west.
- Protection of Legacy Tract enables the expansion of existing trails at Wakulla State Forest and integration of recreational trails and uses pursuant to multiple use concepts at the nearby Wakulla Springs State Park and Apalachicola National Forest.
- SCENIC: Legacy Tract provides a scenic approach along State Road 61 from the Apalachicola National Forest to the adjacent Wakulla State Forest, Wakulla Springs State Park and County Road 267 on the Big Bend Scenic Byway, recognized by the U.S. Department of Transportation as a National Scenic Byway.

- Legacy Tract provides an opportunity for a forested connector trail proposed 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 Big Bend Scenic Byway.
- HISTORIC/CULTURAL: Humans have occupied the Wakulla Springs area for nearly 12,000 years. Legacy Tract has not been surveyed, but there are 74 sites in the Florida Division of Historical Resources Master Site file for nearby state lands that include Paleo-Indian, Creek and Seminole tribe resources.

Threatened

- LACK OF PROTECTION: Legacy Tract is located less than 5.5 miles south of Tallahassee (population 196,000) 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 Legacy Tract and proximity to the Florida coast, 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, Legacy Tract ownership is increasingly being parcelized as the property ownership is passed on to future generations.

Representative managed pine plantation (Photo by Catherine Ingram)

- The successful negotiation for the Caves Tract after 25 years of failure has energized the remaining landowner descendants of John Stallon Ferrell to join together in an effort to place their lands in conservation as a legacy to Mr. Ferrell and his passion for the area's natural resources.
- ADJACENT LAND USE: Private lands adjacent to WCF on all sides, particularly those along State Road 61, are increasingly being developed as rural homesites of one to 10 acres for Tallahassee's rapidly growing population.
- With public land being so prevalent in Wakulla County, most of the private land has been parcelized for development, leaving few large development properties like Legacy Tract available to tract home builders.
- The ongoing expansion of U.S. Highway 319 to four lanes only 1.6 miles from Legacy Tract reflects the area's commercialization, growth and increasing conversion to nonforest uses.
- ABILITY TO DEVELOP: No significant regulations or physical limitations prevent development of Legacy Tract, which contains less than ten percent wetlands. County zoning and regulations allow the construction of up to 90 residential units without any rezoning, which would be likely if requested.
- The Wakulla County land use for Legacy Tract permits a wide variety of agricultural and residential uses, and its more than three miles of frontage on two public roads with utilities facilitates and encourages parcelization for residential development.

Strategic

- CONSERVATION INITIATIVE, STRATEGY OR PLAN: The aquifer recharge provided by Legacy Tract 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 high percentage of sandy soils on Legacy Tract provide significant recharge to the springshed feeding Wakulla Springs and other springs in Wakulla Springs State Park, identified in 2018 by the Florida Geological Survey as a State Geological Site significant to the preservation, scientific study and public understanding of geological history and resources in Florida.

Bottomland hardwood swamp at sunrise during drought conditions (Photo by Keith Fountain)

- Legacy Tract supports the 2016-2021 Strategic Priorities and Actions outlined by the America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative that are designed to achieve the goal of increasing longleaf acreage to 8,000,000 acres, particularly those outcomes related to converting mixed stands to longleaf-dominant stands, establishing new longleaf forests and increasing the use of prescribed fire.
- Legacy Tract 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 goal of ensuring the spring is resilient to the impacts of existing and continuing human use.
- Legacy Tract supports the Wakulla State Forest management plan by protecting lands within its optimum management boundary. Managing Legacy Tract as part of the state forest furthers plan objectives related to sustainable forest management, protecting hydrological functions and providing resource-based outdoor recreational activities.
- Legacy Tract supports the draft 2019 Florida Black Bear Management Plan for the East Panhandle bear unit by protecting habitat and forested lands identified by the FWC as abundantly occupied. Legacy Tract and WCF are critical to the movement of bears between the Apalachicola National Forest and St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge via state conservation lands and the Wakulla River corridor.
- Legacy Tract is being added to the Wakulla Springs Protection Zone Florida Forever project, established in 1997 to protect the karst features and forested connections among public lands lying between the Apalachicola National Forest and Wakulla Springs State Park. This project is eligible for funding in the 2019 Florida Forever work plan approved by the Governor and Florida Cabinet.
- Legacy Tract aligns with the Governor's Florida Springs Initiative related to Wakulla Springs 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.
- By protecting high aquifer recharge lands in the Wakulla Springs springshed, Legacy Tract 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.
- COMPLEMENT PROTECTED LANDS: Legacy Tract protects a critical gap between Wakulla State Forest and Wakulla Springs State Park which, together with negotiations in the Wakulla Springs Protection Zone Florida Forever project, presents perhaps the last opportunity to complete a much larger regional wildlife corridor from the Apalachicola National Forest south to the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge.

Readiness

Pre-Appraisal/Market Analysis	0
Easement or Fee Conditions	1
Non-Federal Cost Share Commitment	1
Signed Purchase Agreement	1
Title Search	1
Mineral Determination	1
Stewardship Plan (or equivalent)*	1
Readiness Total Tally Score	**6**

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. (Steve Cushman).

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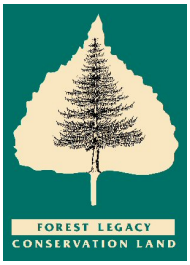
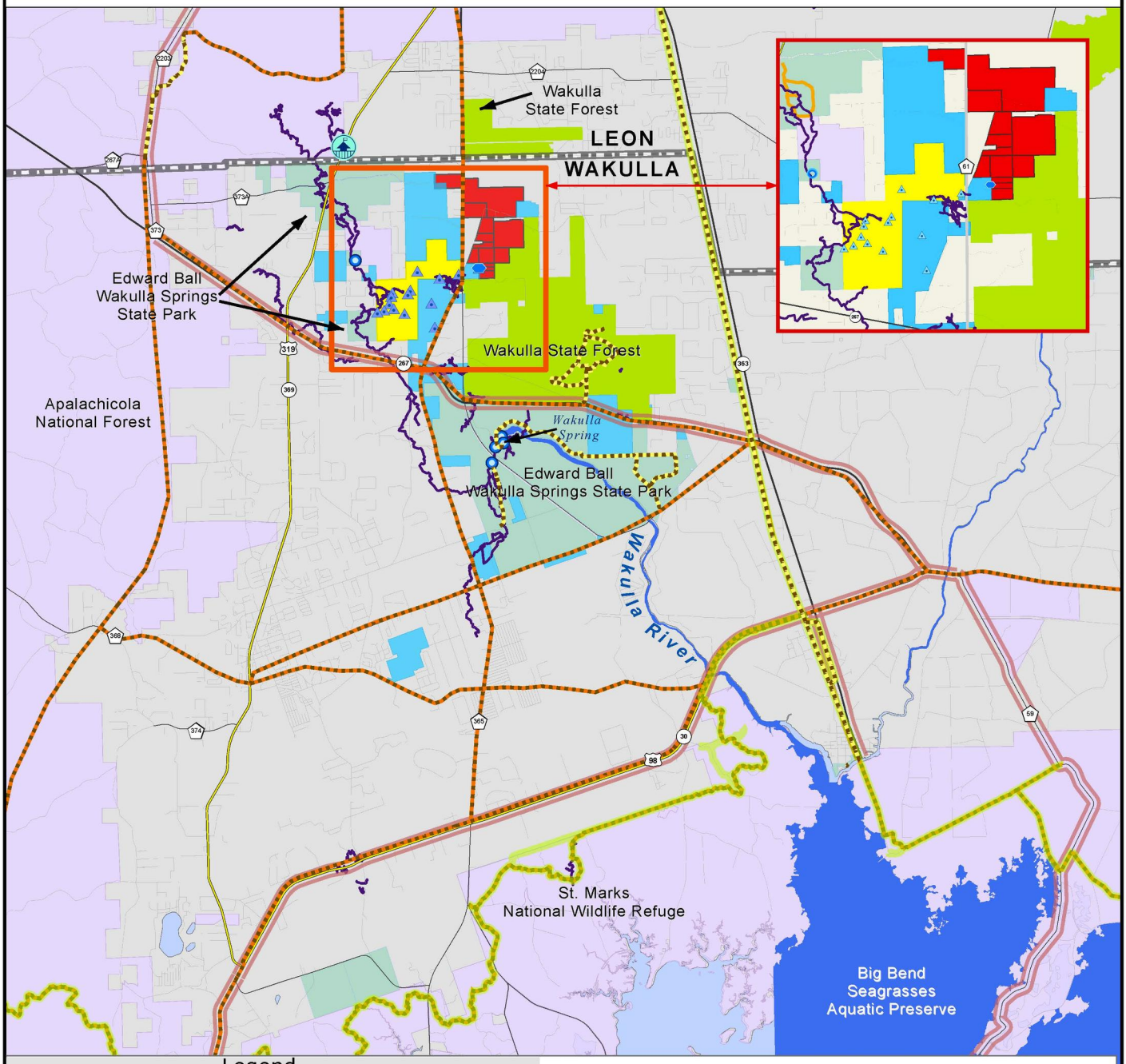


FOREST LEGACY
Wakulla Caves Forest – Phase 2
Wakulla County, Florida



Legend

- Sinks
- First Magnitude Spring
- Large Unnamed Sink
- Leon Sinks Geological Area
- Black Bear Corridor
- Cave Tunnel System
- National Scenic Byway
- Multi-Use Trail
- Proposed Trails
- Florida National Scenic Trail
- Legacy Tract
- Caves Tract – COMPLETED
- Wakulla Springs Protection Zone Florida Forever Project

Managed Areas

- Federal
- Local or Private
- State
- State Forest
- Big Bend Sea Grasses Aquatic Preserve

0 0.5 1 2 3 4 5 Miles

Florida Forest Service

Map Date: 11/7/2019

Managed Area boundaries courtesy of the Florida Natural Areas Inventory

DISCLAIMER:

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