

Forest Legacy LWCF Project

Welannee Plantation

Okaloosa County Florida



FUNDING HISTORY

FY 2019 Forest Legacy Program Funding	\$3,200,000
FY 2019 Non-Federal Cost Share	\$1,400,000
FY 2019 Project Costs	\$4,600,000
FY 2019 Project Acres	3,290
Forest Legacy Funding To Date	\$0
Total Project Costs	\$4,600,000
Total Project Acres	3,290

Tract Name	Size (ac)	Tract Cost	FLP Funding	Non-Fed Cost Share	Status
Phase 1 - South Tract	3,290	\$4,600,000	\$3,200,000	\$1,400,000	Proposed 2019

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Lying in the heart of the largest longleaf pine landscape in North America, the sale of a CONSERVATION EASEMENT on the 3,290-acre Phase 1 (South Tract) in FY 2019 and the subsequent sale of a CONSERVATION EASEMENT on the 3,900-acre Phase 2 (North Tract) of Welannee Plantation (Welannee) to the State of Florida presents the last opportunity to essentially complete the conservation of the Yellow River corridor from the Florida-Alabama line to its outlet into East Bay on the Gulf of Mexico. Welannee supports the Department of Defense mission by straddling 11 miles of the Yellow River along important training corridors related to Eglin Air Force Base (Eglin AFB). This same river corridor is also designated critical habitat for the federally-threatened Gulf sturgeon. Almost 500 acres of longleaf pine exists today and, as mature loblolly stands are harvested, the owner is restoring longleaf pine where soil conditions are appropriate. Protection of Welannee will conserve the rare species and habitats of the Yellow River and its associated forested corridor, promote the restoration of thousands of acres of longleaf pine, and promote the continuation of hunting opportunities for veterans and youth.



The Yellow River flowing through Welannee Plantation on a Fall afternoon. (Photo by Keith Fountain)

PROJECT FEATURES

Important

- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS-TIMBER:** Welannee is enrolled in the Florida Forest Stewardship Program and managed pursuant to a certified forester's management plan that is currently being updated to better reflect the longleaf pine community restoration goals of the landowner.
- Welannee currently supports the Pensacola region forest products industry that provides over 5,100 jobs and produces annual revenues exceeding \$1 billion by satisfying market demand with its sales of loblolly and longleaf pine pulp, chip and saw, and saw log timber to three area mills.
- Welannee does not contract oversight of timber management, but rather employs a full-time licensed employee to manage timber operations and the property, and maintain the landowner's equipment stored on-site at a 7,500 square foot facility.

- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS-NON-TIMBER:** Welannee's native habitat and frequent prescribed fire, particularly in the longleaf pine stands, supports a robust population of whitetail deer and turkey that provides excellent hunting opportunities along a large stretch of the Yellow River.
- **THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES HABITAT:** Welannee protects spawning habitat for the Gulf sturgeon, federally listed as a threatened species, and the entire 11 miles of the Yellow River has been designated critical habitat by the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- Welannee harbors at least two species documented by the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI), the state Species of Special Concern Alligator snapping turtle and Escambia map turtle (G2/S2).
- Extensive, intact floodplain forest stretches the entire length of Welannee with numerous oxbows and sloughs. Relatively high bluffs overlook much of the Yellow River and the extensive broadleaf communities include at least one confirmed state endangered plant, the Florida flame azalea.
- Welannee's island-like floodplain terraces - often isolated by deep floodplain channels and cypress/tupelo swamp - are of sufficient relief to support populations of eastern chipmunk, which is considered rare (S2) in Florida.
- Nine state or federally endangered species are identified by FNAI as potentially occurring at Welannee, including the Panhandle lily, Hummingbird flower and White-top pitcher plant.
- **FISH, WILDLIFE, PLANTS, AND UNIQUE FOREST COMMUNITIES:** Like some other major river basins in panhandle Florida, Welannee is biologically noteworthy for remnant natural communities that reflect both Appalachian and Coastal Plain ecoregion species and natural communities.
- While many Welannee uplands were converted to pine plantations by past owners, extensive remnants of longleaf pine community elements are evident, and frequent fire rotations recently introduced by the landowner are restoring diverse native grassland communities.
- Remarkable areas on Welannee include bluffs and higher terraces in the floodplains and along creeks that support diverse and mature broadleaf-dominated forests. These areas are dominated by swamp chestnut oak, mockernut hickories, beech and other upland and bottomland hardwoods.
- **WATER SUPPLY, AQUATIC HABITAT AND WATERSHED PROTECTION:** Welannee protects more than 11.3 miles of the Yellow River (for more than 10.6 miles it protects both sides of the river) as it flows south from the Florida-Alabama state line to East Bay on the Gulf of Mexico.
- The Yellow River is a highest priority for preservation in the Florida Wildlife Action Plan because of its relatively pristine and stable conditions and high value for fish and wildlife.
- **PUBLIC ACCESS:** Welannee's owner is committed to managing the property to facilitate continuing hunting opportunities for disadvantaged members of the public that might not otherwise have access to lands with a quality hunting experience.
- Welannee has a 3,600-square foot bunkhouse/lodge and hosts Operation Outdoor Freedom hunts for Florida's wounded veterans, a program sponsored by the Florida Commissioner of Agriculture, and youth wildlife hunts through a program sponsored by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.
- **SCENIC:** South Tract protects the northerly 4.6 miles of the 54-mile Florida designated Yellow River paddling trail from uses incompatible with this spectacular outdoor recreation experience as paddlers float south from a landing located on Welannee.



Ongoing harvest of loblolly pine planted by Rayonier, Inc. (Photo by Keith Fountain)

Threatened

- **LACK OF PROTECTION:** Okaloosa County will allow the development of the 3,290-acre South Tract at a density of 1 residential unit per 10 acres, with the possibility of 1-acre lots that have at least 50 feet of frontage on a public road.

- Okaloosa County permits many agricultural, residential, institutional and general commercial uses of the South Tract that could result in the conversion of forest lands. There are no local or state restrictions on the conversion of any of Welannee to non-forest uses.
- **LAND AND LANDOWNER'S CIRCUMSTANCE:** The Welannee landowners also own and manage Henry Company Homes, northwest Florida's largest residential new home builder with projects near beaches and military installations throughout the western panhandle.
- Welannee, purchased in 2005 for speculative residential development as part of the purchase of more than 8,000 acres of industrial timberland from Rayonier, is now available for protection because of the owner's very recent interest in preserving hunting opportunities and longleaf pine conservation.
- **ADJACENT LAND USE:** Welannee is increasingly threatened by lands being converted to residential development along the State Road 85 growth corridor north of Eglin AFB, including Yellow River Plantation, a new community by Henry Company Homes less than three miles from South Tract.
- The development potential for South Tract is high given it is located less than 11 miles from Interstate 10 and less than 16 miles from Duke Field, one of many installations at Eglin AFB.
- **ABILITY TO DEVELOP:** Welannee contains 68% uplands with unique, spectacular river views and direct access to Highway 2, making residential development or agricultural conversion and use of the property very feasible and attractive.
- Welannee additionally has direct access to electrical utilities, making residential development or agricultural conversion and use of the property even more feasible.



New homes for sale at Yellow River Plantation by Henry Company Homes. (Photo by Keith Fountain)

Strategic

- **CONSERVATION INITIATIVE:** Welannee advances the 2015 strategic priorities of America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative (ALRI), a collaboration of over 20 state and federal agencies and stakeholders, to establish up to 95,000 acres of longleaf annually on private lands and increase prescribed fire on all lands in the ecosystem up to 1.8 million acres annually.
- Welannee supports A Land Conservation Vision for the Gulf of Mexico Region developed by the Partnership for Gulf Coast Land Conservation, a coalition of more than 24 conservation organizations within the 5 Gulf of Mexico states, by protecting identified priority lands related to scenic rivers and longleaf pine habitat.
- **CONSERVATION PLAN-NATIONAL:** Welannee supports the Gulf Sturgeon Recovery/Management Plan developed by the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the federally-threatened species by protecting 11 miles of the Yellow River and its spawning areas designated as critical habitat in support of the short-term objective to prevent further reductions in populations.
- **CONSERVATION PLAN-REGIONAL:** Welannee supports the Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership mission to conserve and restore the dwindling longleaf pine ecosystem by expanding the protected lands corridor north along the Yellow River and restoring thousands of acres to longleaf pine habitat with the removal of loblolly plantations and a regular prescribed fire program.



Creek floodplain terraces harbor biodiversity found at few Florida locations. (Photo by Keith Fountain)

- Welannee is located in Military Airport Zone III/Military Influence Planning Area III zones, and supports the Eglin Joint Land Use Study and Tri-County Small Area Studies by abating threats associated with height of objects, outdoor lighting, and radio frequency interference by preventing incompatible uses in identified corridors associated with low-level helicopter training and cruise missiles.
- CONSERVATION PLAN-STATE: Welannee supports the goals of the cost-share partner program, the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program administered by the Florida Forest Service, which seeks to protect working agricultural lands threatened by conversion to other land uses with easements that also preserve conservation values compatible with the agriculture operations.
- Welannee furthers 2010 Florida Forest Action Plan national and regional priorities related to conserving working forest landscapes and improving prescribed fire by protecting 7,200 acres of working forest adjacent to public conservation lands that is being restored to longleaf pine production with a two-year fire rotation.
- Welannee furthers 2012 Florida Wildlife Action Plan (Plan) strategies related to the protection of important lands and waters by preserving 7,200 acres in the Yellow River basin (a highest ranking priority, indicating a high number of Species of Greatest Conservation Need) and preventing residential development, a high to very high threat based on the Plan's threat analysis of upland habitats.
- Maintaining the healthy forests of Welannee with a conservation easement funded by the Forest Legacy Program is compatible with the 2017 Land Acquisition Workplan of the Northwest Florida Water Management District, which identifies the property as a priority fee simple acquisition to protect the Yellow River from pollution carried by stormwater runoff from adjacent land use activities.
- COMPLEMENT PROTECTED LANDS: Welannee expands the protected shoreline of the Yellow River over 11 miles beyond the north boundary of the 16,500-acre Yellow River Water Management Area, and shares a common boundary of one-quarter mile with the 211,000-acre Blackwater River State Forest. The north boundary of Welannee is adjacent to the current proclamation boundary of Conecuh National Forest.

Readiness

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

Supporting Parties

Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Florida Forest Service; Northwest Florida Water Management District; Conservation Trust for Florida; and National Wild Turkey Federation.

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