

Forest Legacy LWCF Project

Welannee Watershed Forest

Okaloosa County Florida



FUNDING HISTORY

FY 2020 Forest Legacy Program Funding	\$2,900,000
FY 2020 Non-Federal Cost Share	\$1,000,000
FY 2020 Project Costs	\$3,900,000
FY 2020 Project Acres	2,817
Forest Legacy Funding To Date	\$0
Total Project Costs	\$10,000,000
Total Project Acres	7,208

Tract Name	Size (ac)	Tract Cost	FLP Funding	Non-Fed Cost Share	Status
North Tract	4,391	\$6,100,000	\$4,300,000	\$1,800,000	Proposed 2021
South Tract	2,817	\$3,900,000	\$2,900,000	\$1,000,000	Proposed 2020

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Lying in North America's largest longleaf pine landscape, the sale of CONSERVATION EASEMENTS on the Welannee Watershed Forest (Welannee) 2,817-acre South Tract in FY 2020 and 4,391-acre North Tract in FY 2021 to the State of Florida will essentially complete the conservation of the Yellow River corridor from the Florida-Alabama line to its outlet into Blackwater Bay on the Gulf of Mexico. The landowner has also presented the 1,178-acre RCPP Tract to a Regional Conservation Partnership Program for longleaf and military readiness. Welannee supports the regional military mission and economy by buffering the Yellow River along important training corridors for Eglin Air Force Base (Eglin AFB). Welannee benefits important freshwater aquatic habitat for the Gulf sturgeon and other aquatic listed species and maintains the water quality of the Yellow River as it flows into important coastal estuaries. Restoration of thousands of acres of longleaf pine and prescribed fire will enhance terrestrial rare species populations and habitats, provide a scenic setting for paddling a state-designated canoe trail, support hunting opportunities for wounded veterans and youth, and preserve a trail used by President Andrew Jackson and troops in 1818.



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 by a full-time, certified forester using equipment based onsite in a 7,500 square foot facility to implement the timber management plan and longleaf pine restoration goals of the landowner.
- Welannee contributes to economic and conservation metrics of America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative for restoring and sustainably managing longleaf pine within the largest longleaf pine landscape in North America, an assemblage of public and private lands containing over 1 million acres.

- Welannee supports the Pensacola region forest products industry that provides over 5,000 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.
- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS-NON-TIMBER:** Welannee supports the \$8.8 billion economic impact to Okaloosa County from Eglin AFB and its network of airfields and facilities by protecting critical lands and waters that support the military mission, the largest employment industry in the county by a factor of two.
- Welannee protects clean freshwater in the Yellow River that flows into the salinity-sensitive habitats of coastal marshes, seagrasses and oyster reefs that support a diversity of mussels, oysters, crabs, shrimp and fish that are important to the commercial and recreational economy of Pensacola Bay.
- **THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES HABITAT:** Welannee and RCPP Tract protect over 24 miles of shoreline along the Yellow River where it is designated as critical habitat for the Gulf sturgeon, federally listed as threatened by the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- While many Welannee uplands were converted to loblolly 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.
- Extensive, intact floodplain forest stretches the entire length of Welannee with numerous oxbows and sloughs. High bluffs exceeding 50 feet overlook much of the Yellow River and the extensive broadleaf communities include at least one confirmed state endangered plant, the Florida flame azalea.
- **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.
- Welannee harbors at least six rare and imperiled freshwater fish, as well as 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).
- Nine state or federally endangered plant species are identified by FNAI as potentially occurring at Welannee, including the Panhandle lily, Hummingbird flower and White-top pitcher plant, together with iconic longleaf animal species like gopher tortoise, eastern indigo snake and Florida pine snake.
- Welannee's bluffs and higher floodplain terraces support diverse and mature broadleaf-dominated forests with swamp chestnut oak, mockernut hickories, beech and other upland and bottomland hardwoods. These areas also support populations of the eastern chipmunk, considered rare (S2) in Florida.
- **WATER SUPPLY, AQUATIC HABITAT AND WATERSHED PROTECTION:** Welannee and RCPP Tract contain 12 percent (14.7 miles) of the 118-mile Yellow River as it flows south from the Florida-Alabama state line to Blackwater Bay and the other coastal estuaries on the Gulf of Mexico.
- In addition to the Yellow River, Welannee and RCPP Tract together protect 8,385 acres and improve management on forest lands that buffer 21 linear miles of creeks in the 1,365 square-mile Yellow River watershed, one of three major rivers flowing into Pensacola Bay.
- 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 wildlife, freshwater fish and the coastal estuaries important to estuarine biodiversity and the local economy.
- Welannee forests protect clean, fresh waters of the Yellow River flowing to the Yellow River Marsh Aquatic Preserve at Blackwater Bay, then East Bay and Pensacola Bay, which balance salinity for estuaries supporting mussels, oysters, crabs, shrimp and fish for commercial and recreational harvest.



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

- **PUBLIC ACCESS:** Welannee provides limited public access via a paddling trail launch site and a 3,600-square foot lodge that hosts Operation Outdoor Freedom hunts for wounded veterans and youth wildlife hunts sponsored by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.
- **SCENIC:** South Tract protects the northern launch site and viewshed along over 6.5 miles of the 54-mile state-designated Yellow River paddling trail from uses incompatible with this spectacular outdoor recreation experience.
- **HISTORICAL/CULTURAL:** I.G. Searcy's 1829 Map of Florida documents the trail used by President Andrew Jackson and 1,200 men as they crossed the South Tract and Yellow River during a 225-mile, 18-day march to confront the Seminole Indians in Pensacola, Florida.

Threatened

- **LACK OF PROTECTION:** Okaloosa County currently allows, without rezoning, development of the 2,817-acre South Tract at a density of one residential unit per 10 acres, with the possibility of one acre lots with at least 50 feet of frontage on a public road.
- Florida and Okaloosa County regulations do not prohibit many agricultural, residential, institutional and general commercial uses of the South Tract that could result in the conversion of Welannee forests to non-forest uses.
- The flight corridor component of the Eglin AFB military mission is threatened by the incompatible residential density and outdoor lighting that would result from commercial and residential development of Welannee.
- **LAND AND LANDOWNER'S CIRCUMSTANCE:** The Welannee landowner also owns and manages Henry Company Homes, northwest Florida's largest residential new home builder with projects near the beaches and military installations throughout the western Florida panhandle.
- From 2010-2015, Okaloosa County had the greatest population growth in the 13-county western Florida panhandle region. This growth is concentrated in the north half of the county containing Welannee since the south half of the county is essentially Eglin AFB or developed coastal properties.
- Welannee was purchased in 2005 for Henry Company Homes' long-term need for speculative residential development land to satisfy the rapid residential and commercial growth experienced in Okaloosa County, particularly north of Eglin AFB.
- **ADJACENT LAND USE:** Welannee is increasingly threatened by residential conversion of lands north of Eglin AFB like Yellow River Plantation, a new 160+ homes residential 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 is 68% uplands with unique, spectacular river views and direct access to several public roads and utilities, making residential and commercial development or agricultural conversion of the property very feasible and attractive.

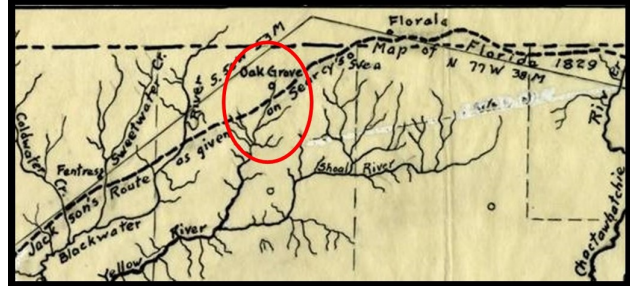


New homes for sale at Yellow River Plantation by Henry Company Homes. (Photo by Keith Fountain)

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, by contributing to qualitative metrics for both restoring longleaf on private lands and increasing the acres and frequency of prescribed fire on previously fire-suppressed lands in the ecosystem.
- 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 five Gulf of Mexico states, by protecting identified priority lands in the Yellow River watershed related to scenic rivers and longleaf pine habitat.

- **CONSERVATION PLAN-NATIONAL:** Welannee and RCPP Tract support the objective to prevent further population reductions identified in the federally-threatened Gulf Sturgeon Recovery/Management Plan developed by the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service by protecting over 14 miles of the Yellow River and its spawning areas designated as critical habitat.
- **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 through the removal of loblolly plantations and a regular prescribed fire program.
- Welannee is located in Military Airport Zone III/Military Influence Planning Area III 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 furthers 2012 Florida Wildlife Action Plan strategies related to protection of important lands and waters by preserving 7,208 acres in the Yellow River basin (a highest ranking priority with a high number of Species of Greatest Conservation Need) and preventing residential development, a high to very high threat based on the threat analysis of upland habitats.
- Welannee furthers 2010 Florida Forest Action Plan national and regional priorities and objectives of the cost-share Rural and Family Lands Protection Program related to conserving working forest landscapes and improving prescribed fire by protecting 7,208 acres of working forest adjacent to public conservation lands that is being restored to longleaf pine production with a two-year fire rotation.
- Maintaining the healthy forests of Welannee furthers the Land Acquisition Workplan and 2017 Pensacola Bay System Surface Water Improvement and Management (SWIM) Plan of the Northwest Florida Water Management District, which identify the property as a priority to protect the relatively high-quality Yellow River from stormwater runoff pollution caused by adjacent incompatible land use activities.
- RCPP Tract, like Welannee, supports a Regional Conservation Partnership Program targeted at securing private working forests to benefit longleaf pine, threatened & endangered species and military readiness.
- **COMPLEMENT PROTECTED LANDS:** Welannee expands the protected shoreline of the Yellow River north over 12 miles beyond the 16,500-acre Yellow River Water Management Area, and shares a boundary with the 211,000-acre Blackwater River State Forest. RCPP Tract protects two miles of river shoreline as well. The north boundary of Welannee is adjacent to the proclamation boundary of Conecuh National Forest.



Andrew Jackson's 1818 route across the Yellow River on map by Mark Boyd (Photo by State Library of Florida)

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	0
Stewardship Plan (or equivalent)*	1
Readiness Total Tally Score	4

Supporting Parties

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

CONTACT INFORMATION

Scott Stewart

*National Forest Legacy
Program Coordinator*

USDA Forest Service

1400 Independence Avenue,
3SC

Washington, DC 20250

202-205-1618

sstewart@fs.fed.us

Michael W Murphy

*Forest Legacy Program
Coordinator*

USDA Forest Service

1720 Peachtree Road, NW
Suite 700

Atlanta, GA 30309

404-347-5214

mwmurphy@fs.fed.us

Catherine Ingram

Forest Legacy Coordinator

Florida Forest Service

3125 Conner Blvd.

Room DOJ 240

Tallahassee, FL 32399-1650

850-681-5827

Catherine.Ingram@freshfromflorida.com

