



# **Alachua County Forever & Agricultural Land Protection Strategy**

**Strategy Development Update**

**BOCC Meeting 09/10/24**

**Andi Christman, Land Conservation Program Manager**



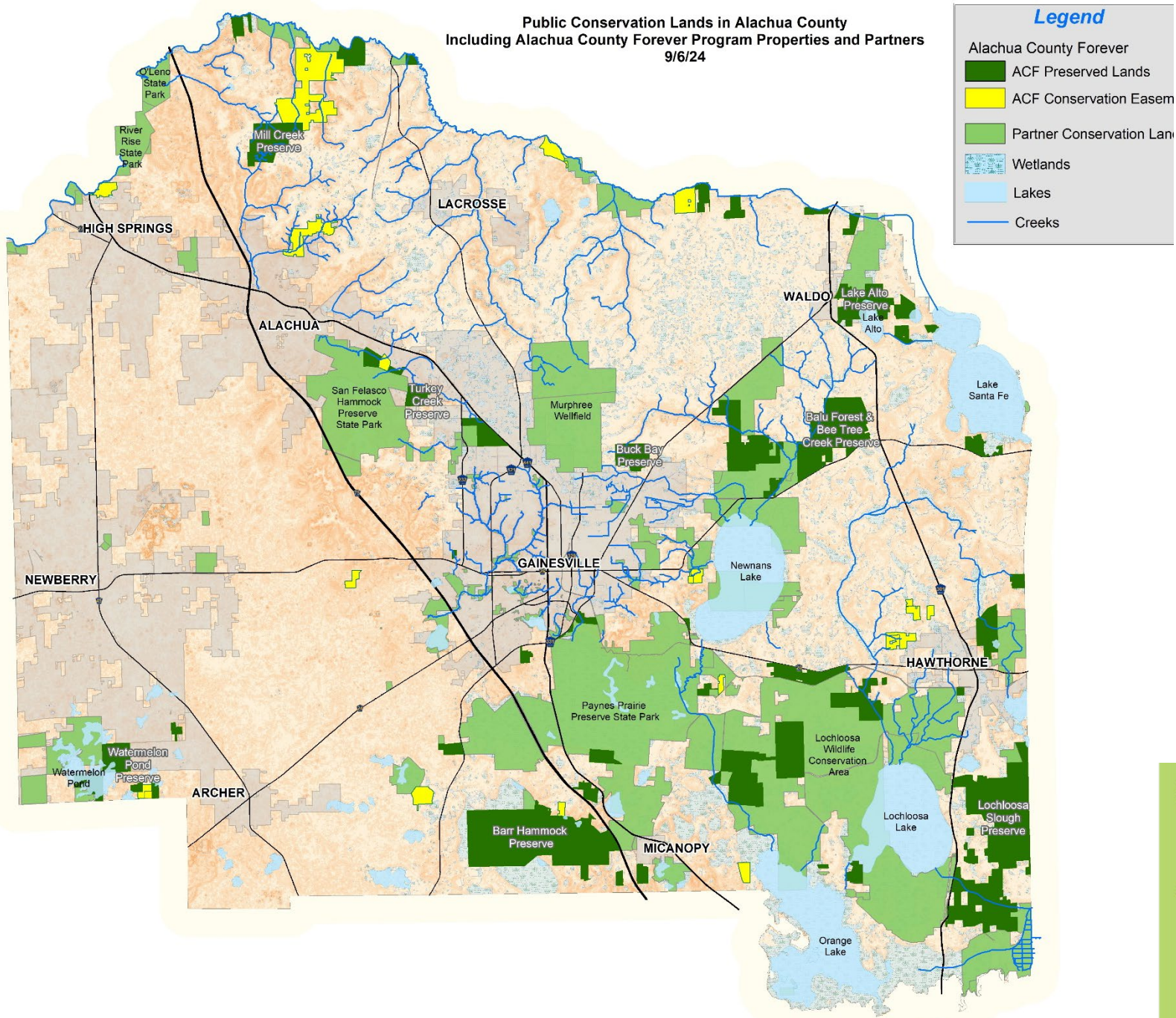


# How does Alachua County Forever Protect Environmentally Significant Lands?

Through purchase of Land, and of Development Rights from willing landowners, and management & restoration of those lands to protect water resources, wildlife habitat, & provide recreational access.



Public Conservation Lands in Alachua County  
Including Alachua County Forever Program Properties and Partners  
9/6/24



**Alachua  
County  
Forever:  
24 years &  
34,500+ acres  
protected**

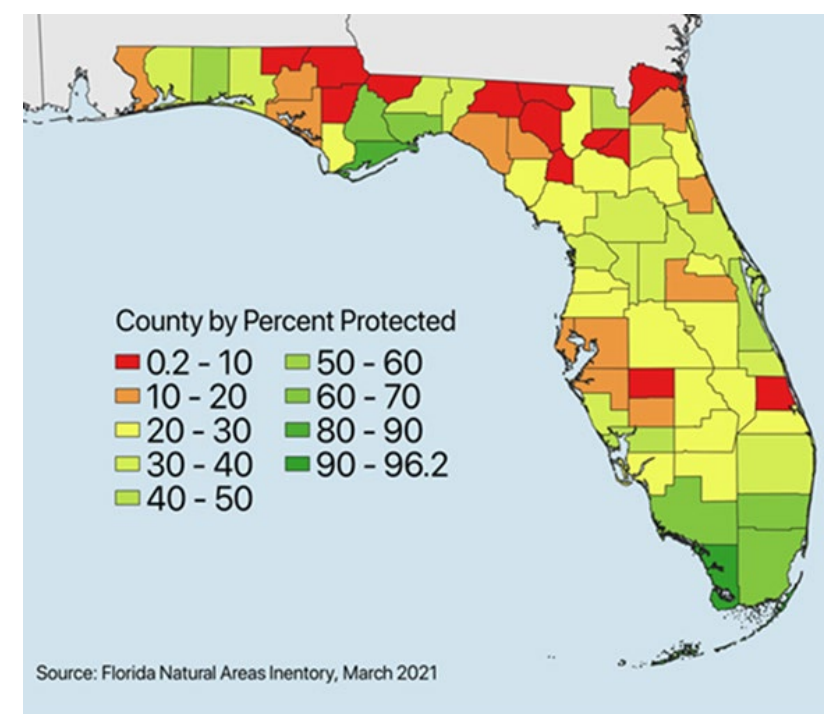


# Essential Levels of Protection

- **The 30 x 30 Target**

- Protecting 30% of land and water by 2030 (43,000 more acres needed)

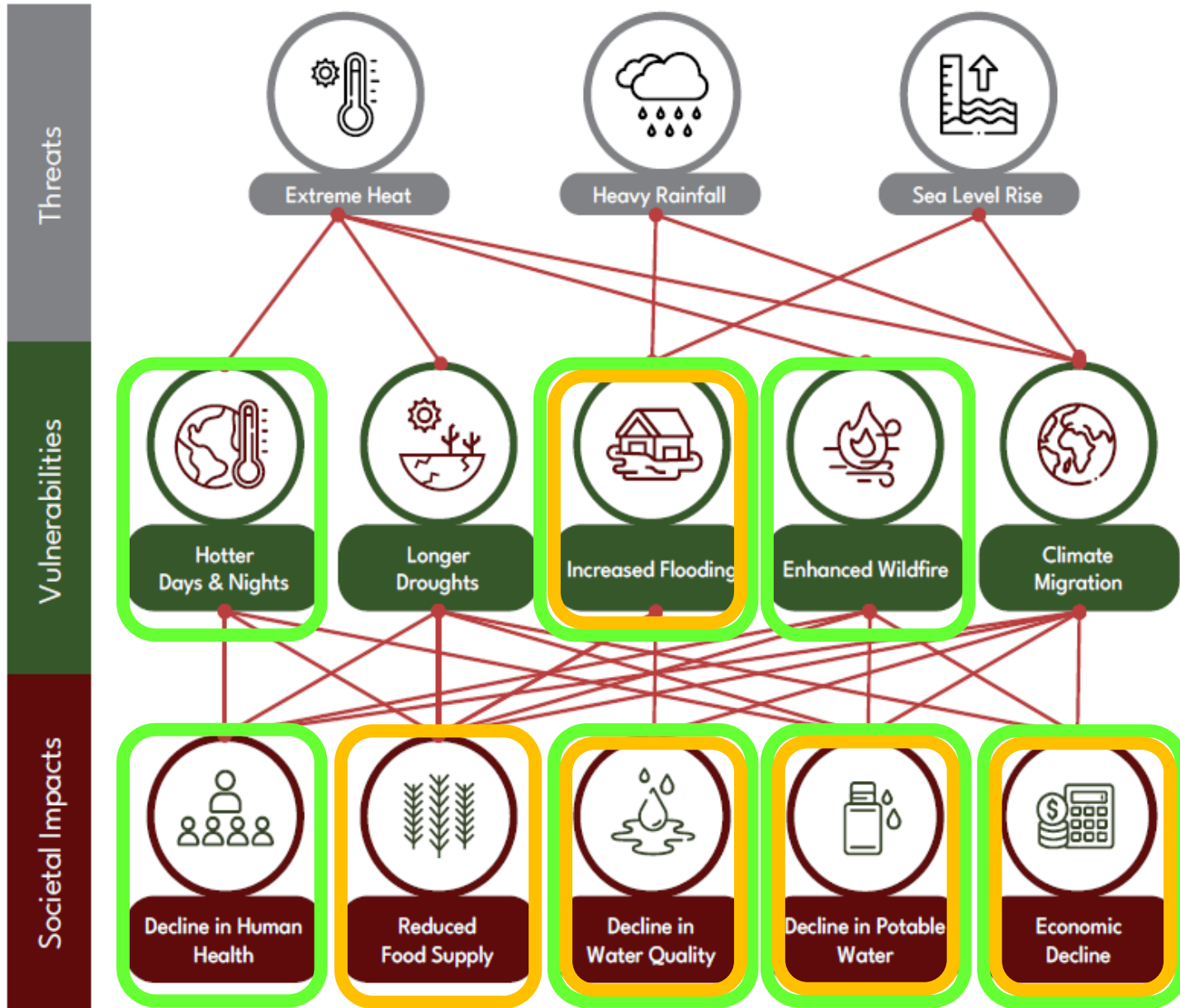
- “*the minimum commitment to protect essential ecosystem services and buffer against the worst impacts of climate change”*



- **All efforts must include:**
  - Corridors
  - Wetlands and Water Resources
  - Imperiled Species and Sites
  - Diverse Habitats
  - **Agricultural Land Protection**



## Global Temperature Increase



# All Land Conservation Reduces Climate Vulnerability

By Providing Ecosystem Services with Measurable Economic Value:

- Protecting water supply & water quality
- Providing flood control
- Supporting climate resilience
- Sequestering carbon
- Harboring wildlife
- Promoting outdoor recreation



- **Santa Fe River Corridor**

- **Florida Wildlife Corridor**

- **Southern Corridor**

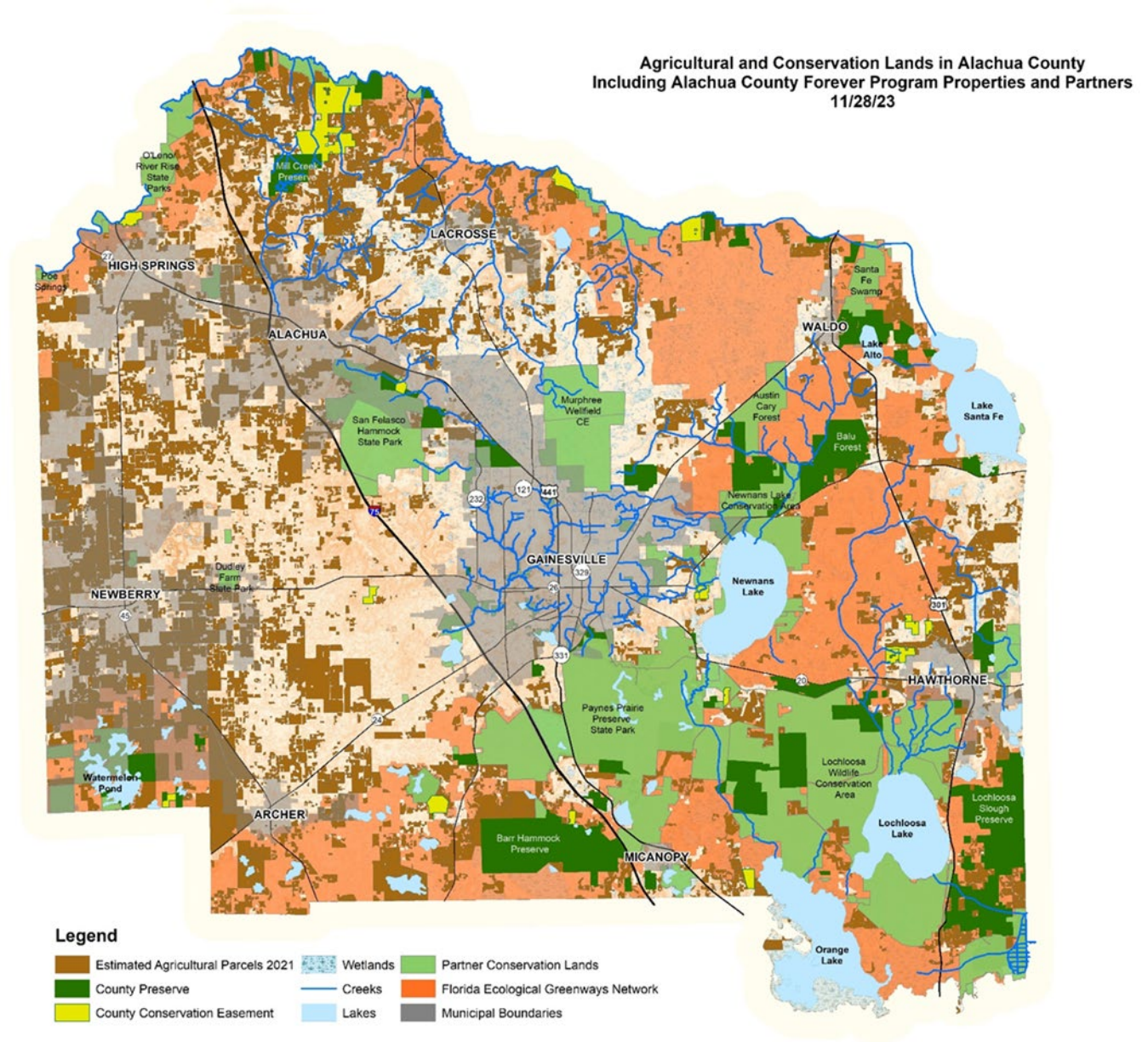
- **Agricultural Land Protection**

- **Strengthening all Corridors**

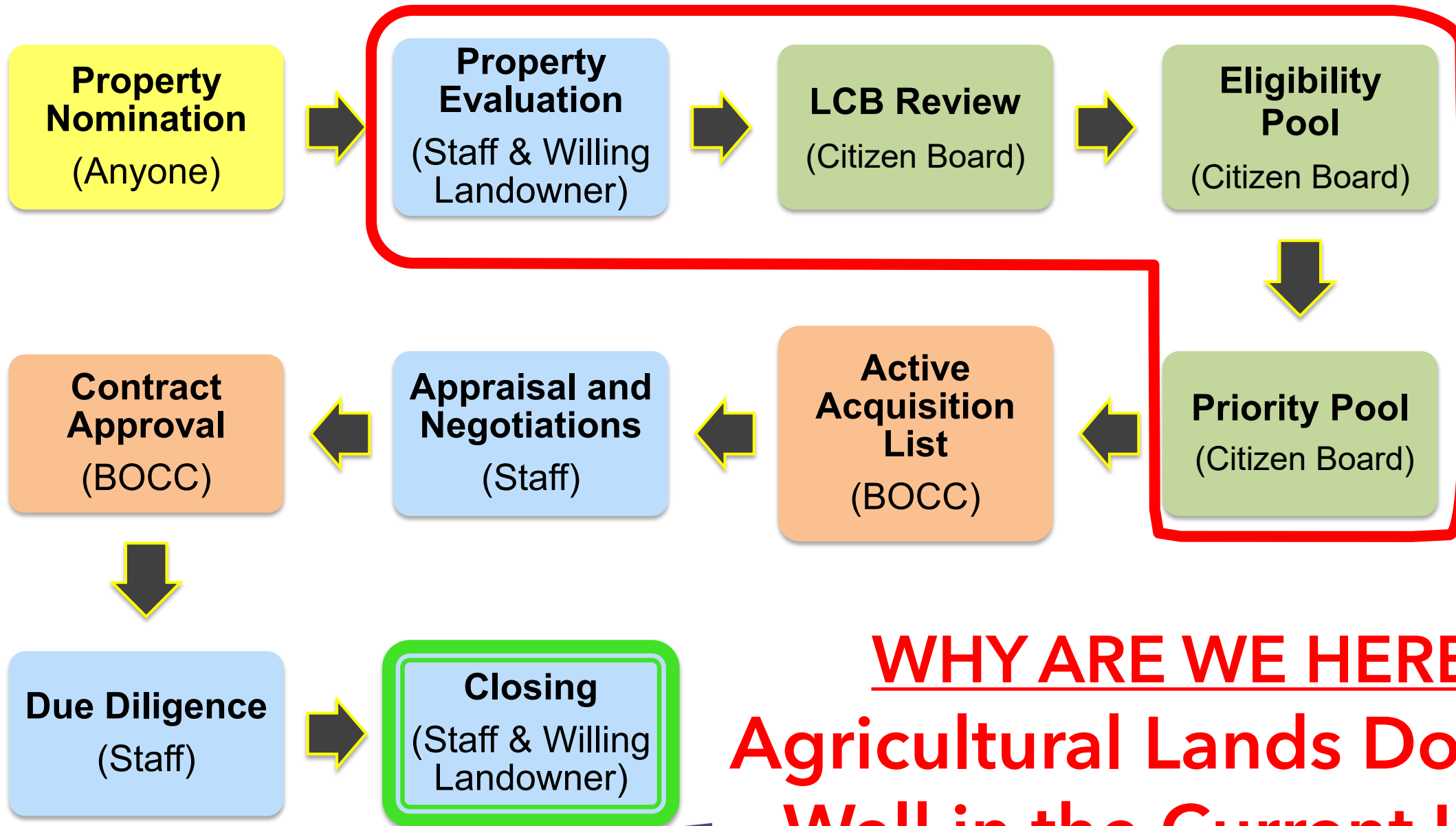
- **Water Quality & Recharge**

- **Local Food Production**

# A Corridor-Based Program



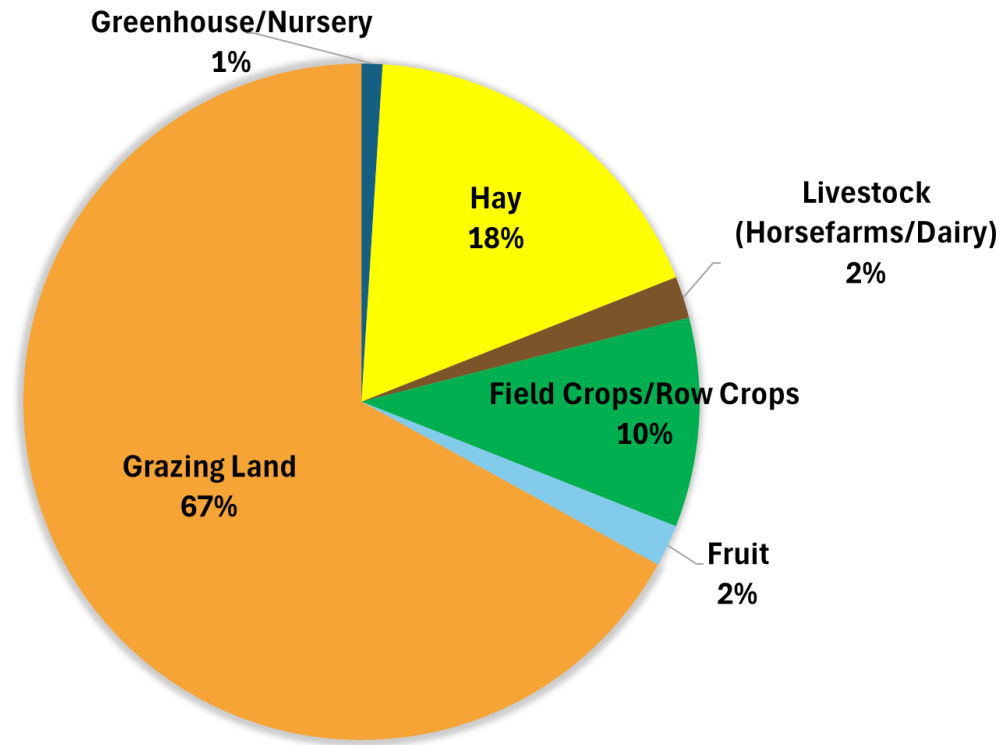
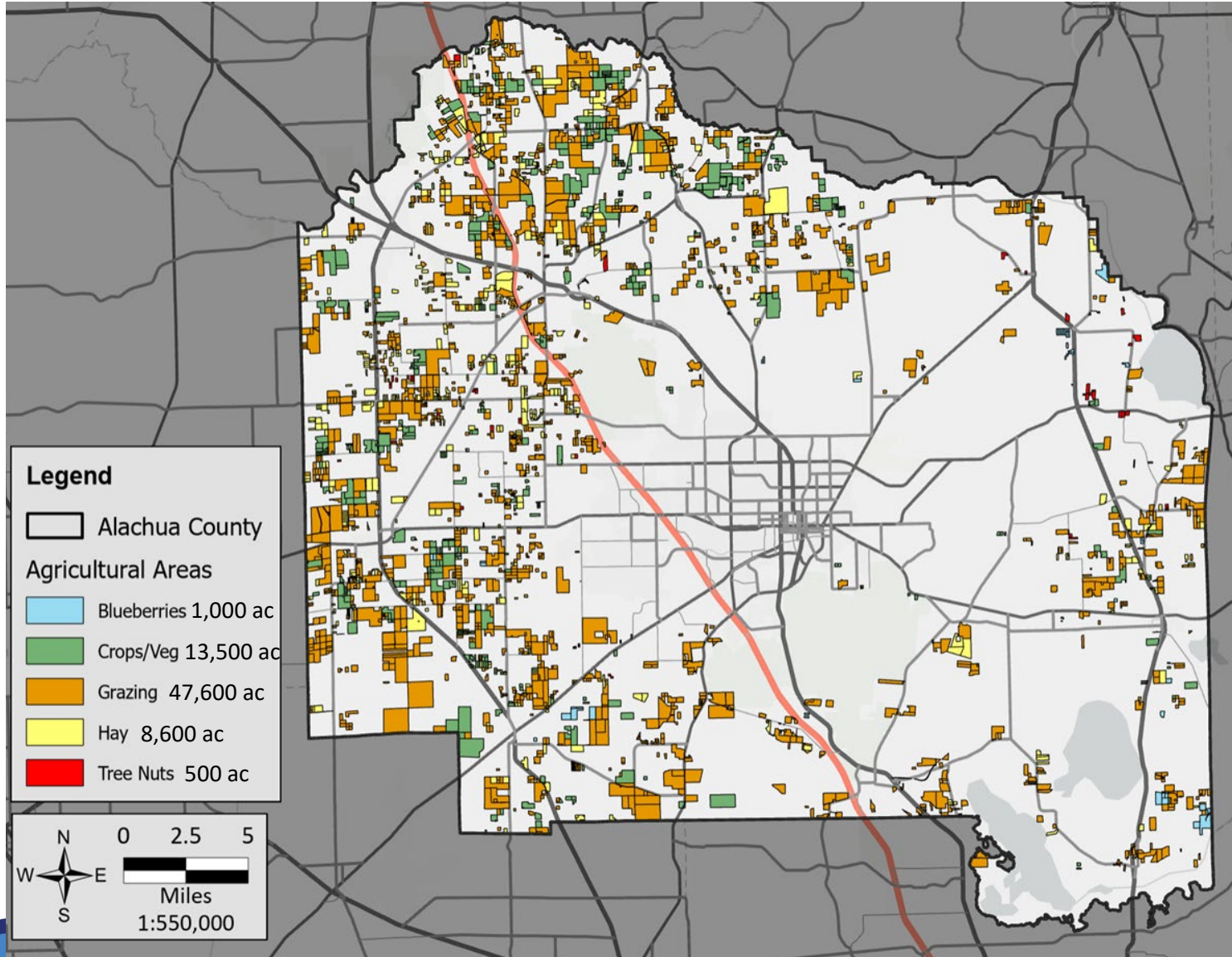




**WHY ARE WE HERE?**  
**Agricultural Lands Don't Fit  
Well in the Current Land  
Ranking & Review Process**



# Our Agricultural Landscape



## 2022 Census of Agriculture (USDA) Alachua County Data

Farms (number)	1,712
Land in farms (acres)	197,906
Average farm size (acres)	116
Median farm size (acres)	21
Total crop land (acres)	72,230
Harvested cropland (acres)	46,075

# A Strategy to Protect Farmland

- Building on the Alachua County Forever Program and Process:
  - 1) Develop a strategy framework and process to provide for better inclusion of agricultural lands in land conservation process.
  - 2) Plan for likely implementation as a sub-strategy under the Alachua County Forever Program.
- **Present framework to the Board of County Commissioners, citizens, and stakeholders for input and review.**
- **Implement according to BOCC direction.**





# How can Alachua County Forever Protect Working Agricultural Lands?



Through purchase of Development Rights from willing landowners and establishment of Conservation Easements focused on allowing continued agricultural practices.



# What's allowable Using WSPP Funds?

- The County Attorney's Office has determined that acquisition of conservation easements is an allowable use of Local Government Infrastructure Surtax funds, as conducted in accordance with FL Statute 704.06.



- **The following requirements are established:**
  - Easements are perpetual
  - Allows for continuation of current or historic agricultural uses.
  - Activities must be in accordance with BMPs



# Current ACF Conservation Easements

- 17 Conservation Easements held currently (5,382 ac)
  - 8 Non-Agricultural Conservation Easements
  - **9 Agricultural Conservation Easements**
    - 4,319 acres (not entirely in ag production)
      - 76 acres to 2,265 acres in size
    - \$11M (County) + \$6.7M (partners)= \$17.8M
      - Avg \$4,300/ac (2007-2024)
      - Two partnerless acquisitions, one 100% donation.



**Staff Recommendation:** Continue to prioritize Cost-Sharing at staff level.

# Potential Easement Funding Partners

Name	What does it fund	Application /Enrollment Period
<b>USDA ACEP ALE</b>	50% CE Value	Typically end of calendar or beginning of calendar year either December or January
<b>RCPP</b>	50% or 25% of CE Value	Periodic open enrollment periods depending on available funding and defined by lead partner
<b>DEP Springs Restoration &amp; Alternate Water Supply</b>	Acquisition costs typically 10% – 50% of CE value	Typically accept applications in December or each year. Funding awards are typically not announced until Fall or Winter the following year.
<b>Florida Forever</b>	Acquisition & due diligence	Varies depending on property status within or outside of a Florida Forever project area
<b>FDACS Rural Family Lands Protection Program</b>	25%-100% of CE Value & Due Diligence	Open enrollment periods. The last open enrollment was June 2023.

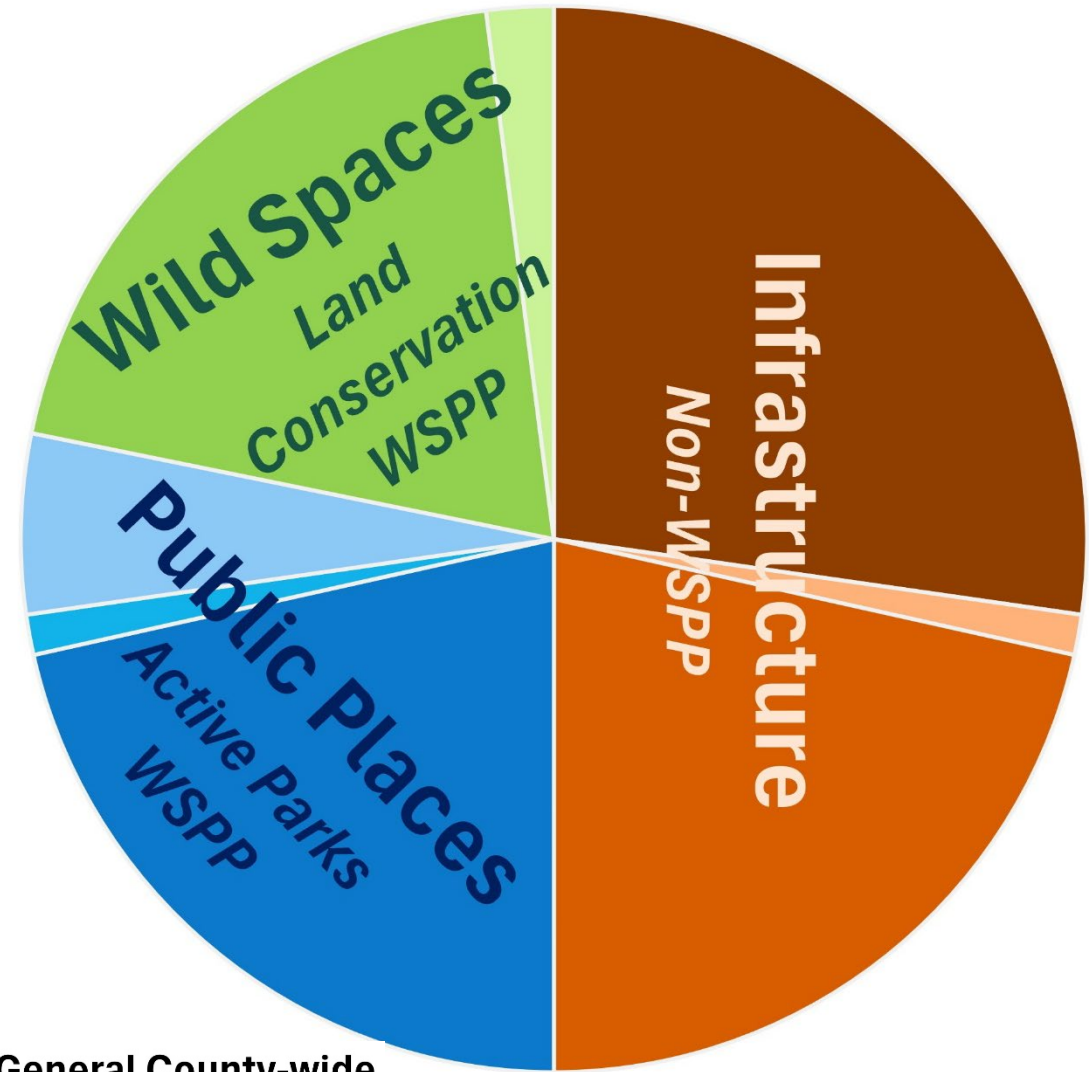


# Land Conservation Surtax Funding

*Conserving lands and green infrastructure critical to community health and climate resiliency.*

## 10 Year Plan & Funding-Board Authorized 2/7/23:

- Continued protection of lands in critical corridors for water resource protection, wildlife habitat protection and public recreation:
  - 4 properties under contract: \$2.3M
  - 6 properties in negotiation: \$6.6M
  - 3 large projects in development: up to \$67M
- Agricultural Land Protection Strategy - \$11M
- Initial preserve restoration and management, Office & Field Support Facility, Public Recreation Improvements ~ \$20M



### General County-wide Surtax Allocations

- |                               |                           |                      |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| ■ County Non-WSPPP            | ■ Municipalities - Parks  | ■ County Wild Spaces |
| ■ Partner Projects: Non-WSPPP | ■ Partner Projects: WSPPP | ■ County Ag Land     |
| ■ Municipalities - Non-WSPPP  | ■ County Parks            |                      |



# Stakeholder Outreach





# Strategy Mission Statement

**Increase farmland  
conservation within the  
Alachua County through the  
purchase of agricultural land  
conservation easements.**



# Property Ranking Matrix

- ✓ **How will this be used?** – To evaluate how well a property aligns with the strategy priorities. The matrix score is one of many factors considered.
- 7 Screening Questions + 23 Ranking Questions
- Matrix question values are included in Resolution.
- Scoring process uses all available data sources and is managed by staff using a consistent and repeatable process and criteria.
- The score is not the final determination of property suitability.



# Property Ranking Matrix

✓ **7 Screening Questions** – To be answered through landowner conversations, property site visit, and desktop review. These will help determine general suitability under the strategy (**no scoring**).

1. Qualifies for Surtax \$\$ Use?
2. Known Hazardous Sites on the Property?
3. Size of Easement (acres)?
4. Landowner Timeline for Easement?
5. Farm Ownership Structure?
6. Agricultural Zoning?
7. Landowner Agrees to Fair Market Appraisal?

# Draft - Property Ranking Matrix

## ✓ 6 Environmental Ranking Question (30 points max.)

1. Aquifer recharge value?
2. Property in Santa Fe River, Watermelon Pond, or TMDL Watershed?
3. % of property in Wetland or Floodplain?
4. Proximity to Conservation Lands?
5. Potential Habitat for Wildlife?
6. Productive Soils (determined through CPI)?



# Draft - Property Ranking Matrix

## ✓ 8 Farm Operation Questions (40 points max)

1. Primary current agriculture operation?
2. Farm sells products consumed in local area?
3. Does landowner purchase farm materials locally?
4. % of farm offered for easement (acres)?
5. Landowner involvement in property/farm operation?
6. Enrolled in BMPs or similar? Agrees to enroll?
7. Engaged in regenerative farming practices?
8. Willing to write or has mgt plan (wildlife, water, soil conservation)?

# Draft - Property Ranking Matrix

## ✓ 4 Partner Easement Acquisition Questions (20 points max)

1. Property already qualify/ranked for partner cost share (FDACS or NRCS, other)
2. Property is greater than 50% agricultural land (excluding timber)?
3. Property is less than 2/3 forested?
4. Property is in Springs Priority Focus Area?



# Draft - Property Ranking Matrix

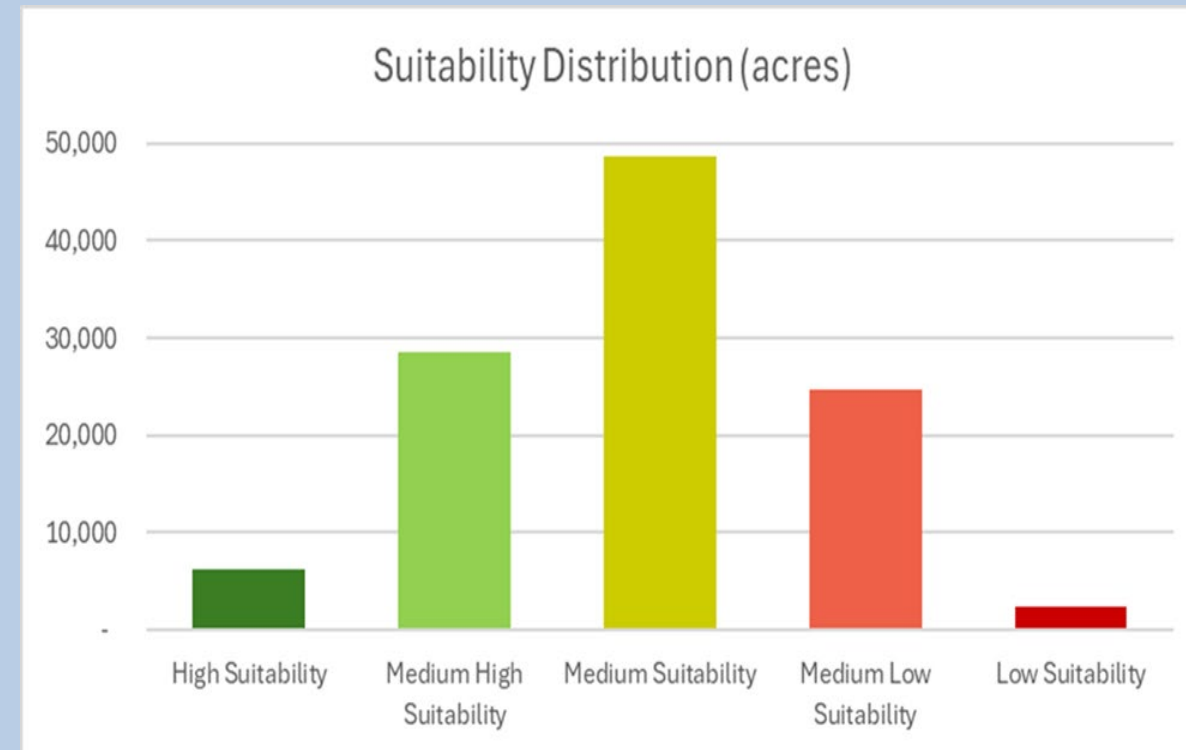
## ✓ 5 Social Value Questions (25 points max.)

- Landowner qualifies as “historically underserved” or “limited resource”?
- Heir’s Property?
- Farm succession or transfer plan in place?
- Development Review (by EPD-NR staff).
- Immediate development threat adjacent to property?

# Agricultural Land Suitability Model

**PURPOSE** = to evaluate agricultural lands suitability for protection using geospatial analysis. Combines **8 datasets**, each scored from 1-5 for strategy suitability in a GIS model. Max Score = 40.

1. **Agricultural Land Use Type**
2. **Aquifer Recharge Contribution**
3. **Gopher Tortoise Habitat Suitability**
4. **Proximity to Conservation Lands**
5. **Threat of Development**
6. **Springs Priority Focus Area**
7. **Soil Crop Productivity**
8. **Watershed Protection**





# Agricultural Land Suitability Model Output

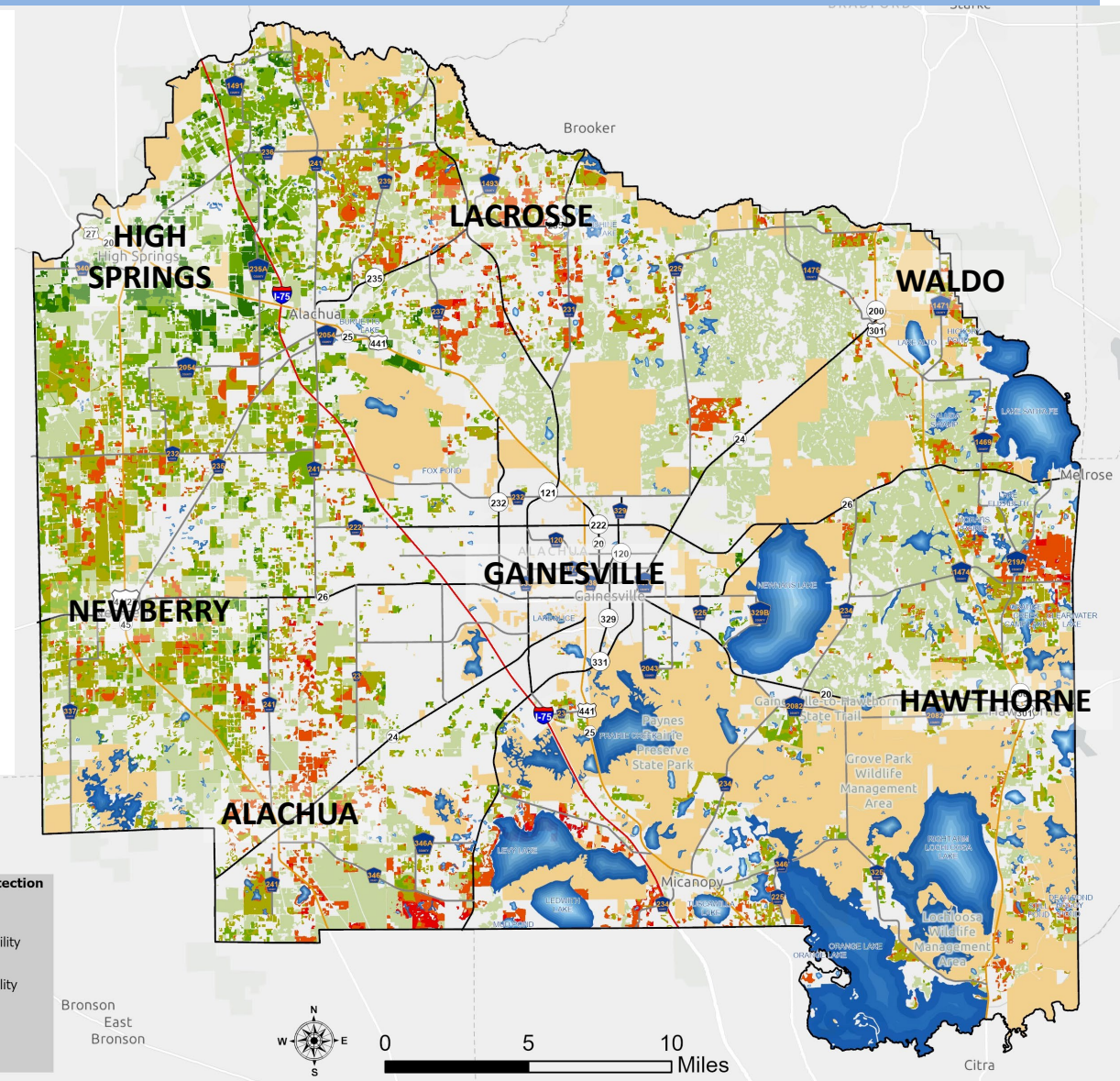
**USE** = Part of the Staff and Advisory Committee Evaluation Process

❖ **HIGHER RANK/MOST SUITABLE LANDS:**

High model ranking + Higher Cost-share

❖ **LOWER RANK/LESS SUITABLE LANDS:**

Lower model ranking + Lower Cost-share



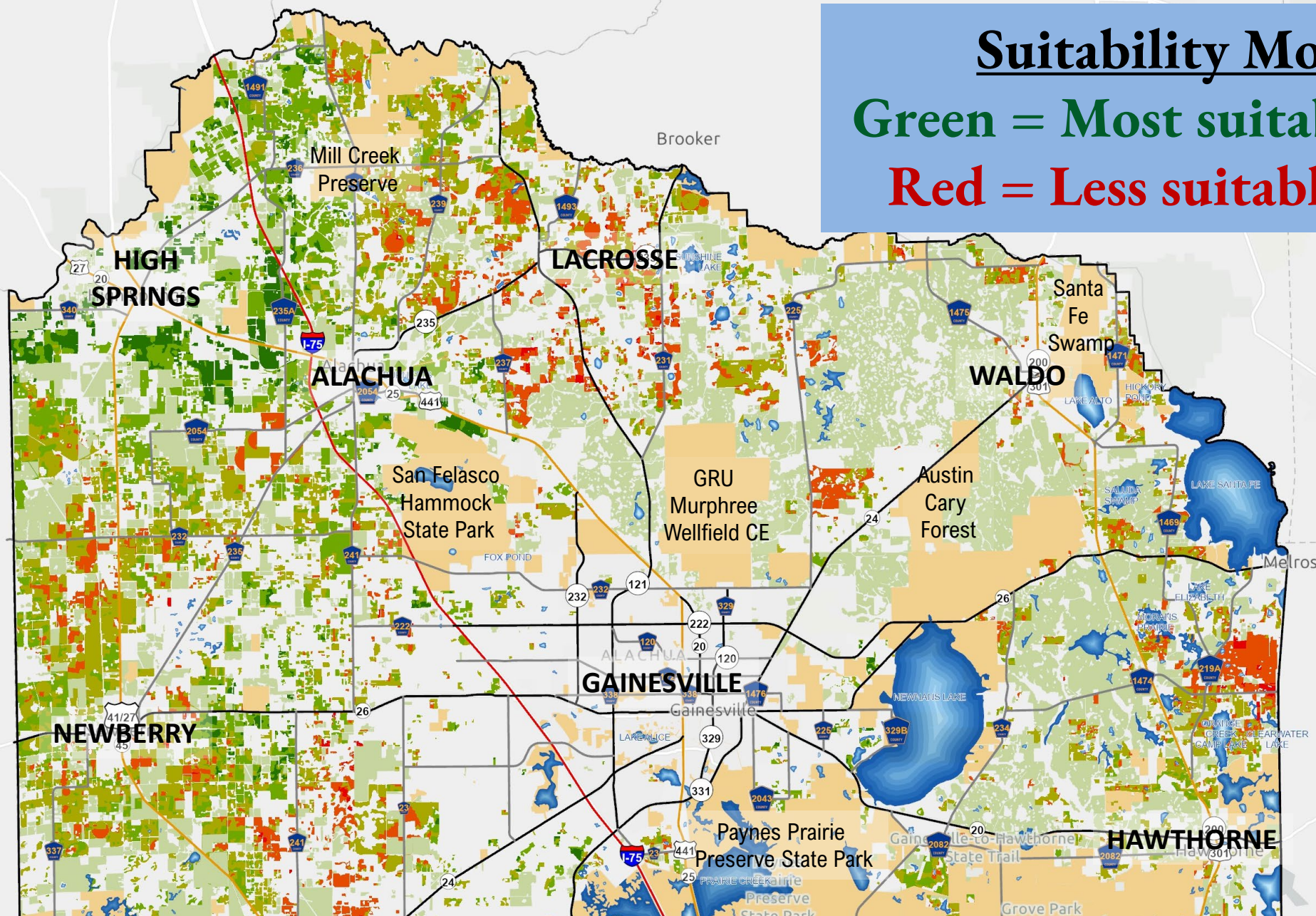


# Identifying County-level geographic priorities

## Suitability Model Outputs

**Green = Most suitable for protection**

**Red = Less suitable for protection**



### Agricultural Land Protection Suitability Model

- High Suitability
- Medium High Suitability
- Medium Suitability
- Medium Low Suitability
- Low Suitability

- Tree Plantations
- Conservation Lands



# Citizen Voice - Advisory Board or Subcommittee

**Staff Recommendation:** Constitute a Board of 9 members with a minimum of 5 representing agricultural interests or industry and 4 Citizens at large. Include representatives from the following as applicant pool allows:

- Agricultural producers
- Farm owners
- Local Food Organizations
- IFAS Representative/s
- Rural Concerns Advisory Committee
- LCB member
- Diverse stakeholders representing county wide municipalities.
- Citizens-at-large
- Student member (4-H)?

# Recommended Staff/Operational Structure

- ❖ Housed in Land Conservation and Management Program (EPD).
- ❖ Implementation Funded by 2023-2032 WSPP Surtax Funds
  - 1 FTE Senior Planner focused on Agricultural Land Protection in FY25
  - 1 FTE Senior Planner to expand implementation in FY26
  - Contracted Outreach staff to build farm landowner relationships
  - 1 vehicle for strategy staff - mid year FY25
  - Expanded Negotiator Services contract
  - Additional legal workload support needs



# Agricultural Lands Currently on ACF Active Acquisition List

## 2 Approaches:

1. Stay on ACF environmentally sensitive lands list, with priority determined by ACF goals and ranking.
2. **Staff Recommendation:** Budget for these staff-identified projects from allocation to Agricultural Land Strategy.
  - 3 have been identified and previously presented as targets for this.

# Staff Strategy Recommendations

1. Adopt BOCC Resolution codifying mission & ranking matrix & citizen board structure and operational process.
2. Allocate \$10M of Wild Spaces and Public Places funding to acquisition of agricultural land conservation easements through the Agricultural Land Protection Strategy (and authorize staff to fund 3 existing projects with this funding).
3. For Partner-Funded Easements, direct staff to establish and require Minimum Easement Deed Requirements that retain county rights (enforcement, inspection, etc).
4. Direct staff to prioritize projects with cost-sharing from partners or landowner donation.
5. Consider identified Staffing/Operational needs in upcoming budget cycles.
6. Direct staff to return in FY26 with recommendations for amendment after initial implementation, including re-evaluation of small farm (40 acre or less) inclusion and climate action plan concurrency.





**QUESTIONS  
OR  
COMMENTS?**