



Agenda Item Summary

File #: 26-00038

Agenda Date: 1/13/2026

Agenda Item Name:

Addition of Land Conservation Projects to the Alachua County Forever Active Acquisition List

Presenter:

Emily Uhlmann, Senior Planner – Environmental Protection Dept., (352) 275-2050

Description:

Staff requests the Board of County Commissioners (BoCC) approve the addition of the following land conservation project to the Alachua County Forever (ACF) Active Acquisition List. The staff recommendation is based on the addition of this property to the Priority Pool by the Land Conservation Board (LCB) as outlined in Resolution 22-66.

1. Watermelon Pond – Whitehurst (Full Price List)

Addition of this project to the Active Acquisition List, authorizes staff to: obtain title work and appraisals, negotiate price and terms with the owners, and execute purchase or option contracts. Any purchase contract or option will be brought back to the Board for consideration.

Recommended Action:

Approve the addition of the following property on the Active Acquisition List

1. Watermelon Pond – Whitehurst (Full Price List)

Prior Board Motions:

None

Fiscal Note:

Watermelon Pond – Whitehurst (Fee Simple) - Cost Estimates:

Total estimated cost for acquisition and 10-year stewardship: \$6,781,005

The current annual property tax revenue of all the project parcels is: \$2,935.83

Purchase and maintenance would be funded from the Wild Spaces Public Places surtax.

Additional details can be found in Exhibits 3 and 4.

Strategic Guide:

Environment

Background:

Watermelon Pond – Whitehurst: In November 2025, the subject property was nominated to the Alachua County Forever Program (ACF) for consideration as a fee simple acquisition. On December 04, 2025, the Land Conservation Board (LCB) placed the 635.36-acre Watermelon Pond – Whitehurst property in the Priority Pool. The Whitehurst project includes two parcels (Alachua County Property Appraiser Tax Parcel Numbers (ACPA TPN) 02660-001-000 and 02659-000-000) owned by Whitehurst Cattle Co. The property has frontage on County Rd 337 in southwest Alachua County, on the south side of Newberry (within the municipal boundary) and northwest of Archer. Historically dominated by sandhill natural community type, the property retains many of the species associated with that natural community. It is adjacent to parcels in the Watermelon Pond Alachua County Forever (ACF) project area along its entire southern boundary, and it connects to a portion of the Watermelon Pond Wildlife Environmental Area (WEA), managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC).

The northwestern 171 acres of the larger parcel are planted with approximately seven-year-old longleaf pine. Mature trees on the remaining 304 acres of the larger parcel were harvested in December 2024, and the remaining offsite hardwoods were chipped and burned in March 2025. This portion of the site has not been replanted, but groundcover species indicative of former sandhill habitat are revegetating the site. Although obviously still recovering from disturbances over the last year, the variety of groundcover species observed indicates that the site could be restored to good ecological condition with time, prescribed fire, and invasive species control.

In the southwestern quadrant of the larger parcel, the remains of an older borrow area that may date back to the late 1930's is a notable geologic feature. This may have once been a more natural shallow wetland feature, but it is now functioning more like a recovering sinkhole/ sinkhole wetland. The sloped sides of the pit are vegetated with mature oaks and other trees as well as a variety of shrubs and ferns, and there is a wetland at the bottom of the pit. The smaller eastern parcel has a more mixed agricultural use footprint and currently consists of row crops, pasture, and successional hardwoods/ xeric hammock. There were no cattle present at the time of the site visit, but the property may have been grazed in the past.

Tracks of a variety of small mammals as well as those of deer and hogs were seen onsite, and there were numerous gopher tortoise burrows of different sizes. Invasive species identified include Japanese climbing fern and Chinese tallow in the borrow pit as well hairy indigo in harvested area and in the wet prairie. There are no recorded archaeological sites on the nominated property, and any infrastructure on site was associated with hunt stands or food plots. If acquired, this property would be managed as part of the Watermelon Pond Preserve or potentially part of the Watermelon Pond WEA.

Additional information can be found in the attached desktop evaluation. (Exhibits 1 and 2)

General:

The staff recommendation is based on the addition of this property to the Priority Pool by the Land Conservation Board as outlined in Resolution 22-66. As with all Alachua County conservation lands, those accepted as fee-simple acquisitions will go through the vetting process for the Registry of Protected Places.

Comp Plan Reference:

Policy 6.0 Land Conservation Program within the Conservation and Open Space Element, states "Establish and maintain a land conservation program for the purchase, preservation, and management of natural areas and open space to complement the regulatory approaches identified in other section of this element."