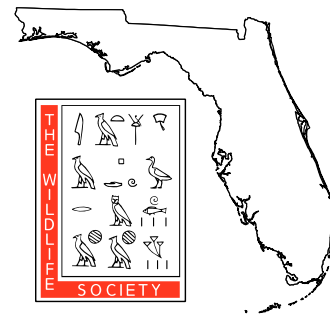


Florida Chapter
THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY
www.fltws.org



November 21, 2024

transmitted electronically

Rick Dolan, Director
Florida Forest Service
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RE: Proposal to surplus 324 acres within the Withlacoochee State Forest

Dear Director Dolan and Mr. Vinson,

The Florida Chapter of The Wildlife Society (FLTWS) is a non-profit conservation organization of wildlife professionals, educators, and students dedicated to sustainable management of wildlife resources and habitats in Florida. The FLTWS is recognized as a proactive group that promotes wildlife research and management and develops positions on natural resource issues based on sound biological data and scientific principles. We occasionally comment on issues with regional or state-wide relevance to conservation of wildlife habitat. The proposal to surplus a 324-acre parcel in the Withlacoochee State Forest met those criteria.

State statute defines the process for surplus land as including a review by the lead management agency and approval by the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC). Since the Florida Forest Service is the lead management agency for the Withlacoochee parcel, we would hope that your staff is asked to provide an objective review of whether this parcel or any other parcel within the state forest system is “no longer needed for conservation purposes”. Similarly, we would expect that the ARC would provide an independent perspective of the conservation value of any tract of state lands proposed for surplus. Since this wasn't the case with the recent proposal for surplus the 324-acre parcel in Hernando County, FLTWS conducted a remote assessment of the natural resource values of the tract, and we have summarized our conclusions below.

Soils under virtually all the property are Candler fine sands which are well-drained soils that typically underlie longleaf pine/wiregrass communities. Current and historical aerial photography confirm this community type, and though there have been some alterations to the natural community over the years, it appears as though restoration of the characteristics of the historic longleaf pine/wiregrass community would be relatively easy. The location of the parcel just east of the Suncoast Parkway and north of US 98

could complicate the use of fire to manage the property, but we know you deal with that issue on much of the rest of the Withlacoochee State Forest.

We used the Florida Forever Conservation Data Viewer maintained by the Florida Natural Areas Inventory to assess conservation value based on several natural resource metrics. We found that the 324-acre parcel is a part of the Florida Wildlife Corridor and is ranked as a Priority 2 Strategic Habitat Conservation Area (Priority 1 is the Highest). In addition, almost all the parcel is Sandhill Habitat, which is mapped as an Under-represented Natural Community and all the tract has the highest ranking for aquifer recharge.

Although the area is adjacent to expansive urban development, the parcel is part of a regional linkage of conservation lands within Citrus, Hernando, Pasco and Sumter counties that includes:

- Withlacoochee State Forest
- Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge along the coast
- Chassahowitzka Wildlife Management Area and the Weekiwachee Preserve to the west
- Crystal River Preserve State Park to the northwest
- Potts Preserve to the northeast
- Flying Eagle Preserve to the east, and
- Green Swamp to the southeast.

Chipping away at this linkage by surplus high value conservation land would compromise the value of the linkage.

The FLTWS believes that the 324-acre parcel that was proposed for surplus has significant conservation value in and of itself as well as a part of a regional ecological linkage. Surplus the parcel or exchanging it for a parcel of lower conservation value should not be considered. It certainly does not seem reasonable to conclude that these 324 acres are “no longer needed for conservation purposes”. For any proposals to surplus, we hope your team of foresters, wildlife biologists, and land managers will have the ability to objectively assess the property and reach a similar conclusion.

Thank you.

Sincerely,



Maria Zondervan, President
Florida Chapter of The Wildlife Society
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