

**FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION
DIVISION OF HABITAT AND SPECIES CONSERVATION**

Consideration of the acquisition of the Dunham Ranch parcel within the Crooked Lake West Site of the Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem Florida Forever Project as a Mitigation Park under the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Land Acquisition Trust Fund Fish and Wildlife Habitat Acquisition Program in cooperation with Polk County.

COUNTY: Polk

SELLER: Kathaleen C. Dunham individually or as co-owner with Shirley L. Cannon, Joint Tenants.

PURCHASE PRICE: \$12,353,716.00 and all other costs of acquisition
FWC's Cost Share= \$11,603,716.00
Polk County's Share = \$750,000.00

ACREAGE: 1,148.49 acres +/-

STAFF REMARKS: This parcel is one of a group of parcels being reviewed for the establishment of a proposed Gopher Tortoise Mitigation Park. It was selected for acquisition because of its conformance with FWC's criteria for establishing Gopher Tortoise Mitigation Parks. These include gopher tortoise population density, soils complex criteria, rural location, conformity with minimum acceptable management criteria, i.e., legal access, contiguous lands, good boundaries, prescribed burning suitability and its location within the Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem.

Dunham Ranch is located in the southeast quadrant of Polk County. The parcels lie on the north side of State Road 98, the west side of Stokes Rhoden Road, and east of the Ellis Road terminus in the Frostproof area of Polk County. The City of Frostproof, an unincorporated municipality, is 5 miles to the east of the Dunham Ranch. Frostproof is between Lake Reedy and Lake Clinch at the intersection of U.S. Highways 27 and 98. The Ranch is 3.61 miles southwest of Crooked Lake.

The site is listed in the *Polk County Comprehensive Land Use Plan* as A/RR ("Agricultural/Rural Residential"), which corresponds to the current zoning designation. The area surrounding the parcel is primarily rural in character with increasing development in the immediate vicinity and land has been purchased speculatively for future development. Dunham Ranch parcels contains approximately 70% uplands and 30% wetlands. This tract is currently zoned A/RR (Agricultural/Rural Residential) within the Polk County Comprehensive land use plan which corresponds to its current zoning.

It is presently managed primarily as a cattle grazing operation with a small citrus grove operation about 54 acres in size. Improvements on the site include two houses used as residences, an older unused mobile home, and equipment sheds. There are also perimeter cattle fences, interior

fences, gates and several wells all of which are typical for a beef cattle operation. The citrus grove has an irrigation system serviced by a separate well at the grove. There are three separate inholdings within the boundary of the ranch which will be evaluated for future acquisition if the ranch is acquired. No further information is known about previous uses of the property at this time.

The citrus grove is being acquired because the Dunham family is only offering the ranch in its entirety for sale as one property. If the ranch is acquired, current plans are to place the grove under a grove management lease for the existing life cycle of the citrus trees. As required by statute, revenue accruing to FWC from any future grove management lease on this site will be used for management of the tract. When the grove is no longer economically feasible to operate, the trees will be removed and the grove site will be restored.

All of Dunham Ranch lies within the Crooked Lake West Site consisting of approximately 12,000 acres, of the Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem Florida Forever Project. This project is currently designated as a Category "A" Florida Forever project. FWC is the designated lead managing agency for this project site. Crooked Lake West Site was approved by the Acquisition and Restoration Council in September 2006 and subsequently by the Board of Trustees, as a boundary amendment to the Lake Wales Ridge Florida Forever Project. FWC and Polk County jointly developed and submitted the Crooked Lake West Boundary Amendment, which was cosponsored with the Southwest Florida Water Management District. Each of the cooperating agencies have committed to funding a percentage of the acquisition of the project contingent upon the availability of funds.

Toward this end, FWC and Polk County have committed to entering into a Multi-Party Acquisition Agreement (MPAA) with the Department of Environmental Protection, Division of State Lands for this project.

The MPAA will allow FWC and Polk County to cooperate in the acquisition and future management of the Dunham Ranch and accelerate acquisition of this tract. This will allow FWC to leverage its acquisition funds and the parties to work within the landowners' timeframe. Polk County staff had previously been working on this project with the Dunham family as the ranch is also on the Polk County Environmental Lands Acquisition List and the owners had expressed an interest in a conservation sale.

Under the terms of the MPAA, FWC will assume responsibility for funding management costs of the tract with FWC as the lead managing agency and Polk County designated as a cooperating manager of the property. If for any reason Polk County is unable to cooperate in the acquisition of the Dunham Ranch, FWC will proceed to acquire the ranch independently and pay all costs of acquisition if this acquisition is approved.

Dunham Ranch is situated within the Lake Wales Ridge physiographic region of central Florida in the southern portion of the Central Lake District of the state. The Lake Wales Ridge is the topographic crest of central Florida. It is made up of residual sandhills, relic Beach ridges and paleo sandhills up to 200 feet above sea level. A review of soil data indicates a composition of predominantly upland soils on the ranch such of Duette fine, Archbold, Tavares, Immokalee, Smyrna, and Myakka sands. The tortoise-supporting habitats on the site consist of oak/sand pine

scrub, mesic flatwoods, xeric oak hammock, relict sandhills, and improved pasture interspersed within a mosaic of herbaceous and forested wetlands.

The potential for listed species to be located on or to use the tract is considered high. A gopher tortoise survey conducted by FWC and Polk County Natural Resources Division staff revealed an average tortoise density of 1.0 to 1.7 burrows per acre within FWC's recommended criterion of 0.8 gopher tortoises per acre for the establishment of mitigation parks. Other listed species that occur or are likely to occur on the tract are sandhill crane, eastern indigo snake, Florida pine snake, short-tailed snakes, and gopher frogs, among others. In addition to the gopher tortoise, Sherman's fox squirrel, the Eastern indigo snake and Florida fence lizard were observed during the survey.

Habitat enhancement and restoration would benefit the long-term viability of listed upland species. The tract consists of both intact habitats and areas converted to improved pastures and citrus grove. The eastern half of the tract contains large patches of sand pine/oak scrub, remnant sandhills, and mesic flatwoods that could be managed in their current conditions with mechanical treatments and prescribed fire. The site also contains cutthroat grass seeps within its wetter areas. The improved pastures would require maintenance and/or restoration to provide optimal habitat conditions for listed species as significant infestations of cogon grass and tropical soda apple were observed in improved pastures.

A field review of the site revealed a high manageability potential. Adequate access from public roads, well-defined boundaries, extant natural communities, and the rural nature of the area would support common management activities currently employed by FWC, such as prescribed burning and ground cover restoration. In addition FWC manages other sites in close proximity to this site which increase the ability to effectively manage this site. Consequently, it has very good potential for restoration of the habitat along with a concordant increase in the gopher tortoise population and many of its commensally associated species to historic levels that were likely present on the ranch.

Moreover, the mosaic of existing natural communities on the ranch provides habitat for a diversity of wildlife species. Also, it has good potential for passive resource based recreation, such as hiking and wildlife viewing. For the reasons stated above, the Dunham Ranch is recommended for acquisition as a Gopher Tortoise Mitigation Park at this time. Given its resource characteristics and strategic location, this acquisition would provide benefits meriting acquisition under the FWC's Land Acquisition Trust Fund Wildlife Habitat Program.

The Lake Wales Ridge area is inhabited by flora and fauna found nowhere else in the world such as the Lake Wales Ridge tiger beetle, sand skink, clasping warea, scrub bluestem and scrub holly. Seventy-five rare species occurrences are found in the diverse Lake Wales Ridge ecosystem such as the Florida sand hill crane, Florida scrub jay, and Southeastern American Kestrel, short-tailed snakes and gopher frogs, among others. Acquisition of the ranch will aid in the conservation of many of these listed species and will help to ensure the survival of wildlife like the gopher tortoise, and other associated fish and wildlife resources. Habitat types exemplified by the gopher tortoise are under increasing pressure for residential development.

Thus, the acquisition will conserve an important segment of that habitat and aid in fulfilling the goals of FWC's Gopher Tortoise Management Plan.

In summary, this tract of land is an important and integral component of the Commission's acquisition plans to conserve gopher tortoise habitat along with other fish and wildlife resources in this region of Florida. If acquired, title to the tract will be vested in the Board of Trustees with a long-term lease to the FWC for it to be managed as a Gopher Tortoise Mitigation Park. The property will be managed by the FWC in cooperation with Polk County as a Gopher Tortoise Mitigation Park for natural resource conservation, restoration, and resource-based public outdoor recreation within a gopher tortoise habitat management regime.

RECOMMEND: APPROVAL CONTINGENT UPON ON EXECUTION OF AN OPTION OR AN ASSIGNMENT OF OPTION CONTRACT AND APPROVAL BY THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES