

Update No. 1 (March 14, 2008) – This report has been updated to identify an alternative acquisition approach where the FWC would be the sole acquisition agency, if the Suwannee River Water Management District cannot participate in the acquisition process.

Consideration of the acquisition of the Archer parcel in cooperation and partnership with the Suwannee River Water Management District as a Mitigation Park under the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission’s Land Acquisition Trust Fund Fish and Wildlife and Habitat Acquisition Program.

COUNTY: Lafayette

SELLER: Trust for Public Lands

PURCHASE PRICE: \$5,791,500.00

FWC’s Cost Share= \$2,895,750.00 and all other costs of acquisition

SRWMD’s Share = \$2,895,750.00

PURCHASE PRICE: \$5,791,500.00 (contingent upon final approval of appraisals) and all other costs of acquisition.

ACREAGE: 2,145 acres +/-

STAFF REMARKS: This parcel is one of a group of parcels being reviewed for the establishment of a proposed Gopher Tortoise Mitigation Park. This tract is currently zoned agricultural and is presently being managed for silviculture. It was selected for review due to its match with the gopher tortoise soils complex criteria, its location (rural agricultural land) and conformity with minimum acceptable management criteria, i.e., legal access, contiguous lands, good boundaries, prescribed burning suitability.

This property is currently being offered for sale by the Trust for Public Lands (TPL). The TPL holds an option contract on the property with the Archer Group, LLC. If approved by the Commission, the Suwannee River Management District (District), and the Trustees, TPL will close with the Archer Group. Then, either simultaneously or subsequently TPL will close on the property with the State and the District.

The Archer Parcel is located in the southeastern portion of Lafayette County and within the Hatchbend area west of State Road 349 and east of Mallory Swamp. The parcel has 1,400 feet of frontage along the west side of State Highway 349, approximately one-half mile south of County Road 342, seven and one-half miles southwest of Branford in Suwannee County, seven miles south of U.S. Highway 27, and twelve miles north of U.S. Highway 19 at Old Town in Dixie County.

There are no significant building improvements on the site other than some fencing. The parcel contains approximately 1448 acres of uplands and 697 acres of wetlands. The sites zoning classification is A-3, one dwelling unit per five acres on 2105 acres and A-1, one dwelling unit

per 40 acres on the remaining 40 acres. The area surrounding the parcel is primarily rural in character containing land used for public conservation lands, silviculture, hunting, farming, rural residential development and various agricultural oriented properties.

The Archer parcel is within the Lafayette Forest Florida Forever Project boundary. While this project is currently on the Florida Forever list, it is not ranked on the priority list of Florida Forever projects currently eligible for funding. The western portion of the parcel abuts Mallory Swamp Restoration Area (MSRA) that is titled to and managed by the District. FWC cooperatively manages the MSRA with the District as the Mallory Swamp Wildlife Management Area.

FWC entered into an Acquisition Agreement (AA) with the District, and the Department of Environmental Protection, Division of State Lands (DEP/DSL) as agent for the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund of the State of Florida (Trustees) for this parcel. Under the terms of the AA, FWC and the District shall share equally in the purchase price of the parcel with each contributing 50% (Fifty Percent) of the purchase price. The Trustees will have no share (Zero Percent) of the purchase price for the parcel. Title to this parcel shall be held jointly by the Trustees and the District with a 50% undivided interest vesting in the Trustees and a 50% undivided interest vested in the District. FWC will be designated as the lead managing agency and the District designated as the cooperative managing agency for the property through a lease of the property from the Trustees and the District.

If for any reason The Suwannee River Water Management District is unable to cooperate in any percentage of the purchase price for the Lafayette Timberlands LLC parcel, FWC will proceed to acquire the ranch independently and pay all costs of acquisition if this acquisition is approved. If this approach is used, title would be held solely by the Trustees, and FWC would be the designated managing agency.

The Archer tract consists of both relatively intact native habitats and areas of intensive timber production. The area surveyed by FWC was bedded for pine production and contained a high percentage of weedy species. However, as observed during the initial site inspection, native ground cover distribution and composition are fair to good on most of the site. No significant exotic species infestations were observed. Tract qualities such as size, habitat condition, estimated gopher tortoise density, and proximity to other FWC land management operations all make this site an acceptable candidate for inclusion in the FWC Mitigation Park Program.

The Gopher Tortoise Survey analysis of the tract revealed a viable gopher tortoise population on the parcel, the density of burrows per acre on this tract is more than FWC's generally recommended density of 0.80 tortoises per acre for the establishment of Mitigation Parks. The Gopher Tortoise survey results indicated an estimated average tortoise density of 1.0 tortoise per acre. The potential to maintain and potentially increase the per acre ratio of gopher tortoises is considered high given the mix of xeric soils and remaining sandhill habitat on the parcel.

The potential for listed species to be located on or to use the parcels is considered high. Among the listed species that occur or are likely to occur on the tract, in addition to the gopher tortoise, are eastern indigo snake, Florida pine snake, short-tailed snakes, and gopher frogs, among others.

Habitat enhancement and restoration would benefit the long-term viability of listed upland species.

Additionally, the Archer Parcel has a number of resource attributes that make it an excellent candidate as a conservation acquisition proposal. The parcel has already been evaluated and ranked high enough to be selected for state acquisition as a Florida Forever project. One area of the parcel already borders public conservation land and the other portions of its boundary offer good buffers for prescribed burning. For these reasons, the tract appears to possess the primary characteristics necessary for effective future management, such as its location in a predominately rural area within close proximity to other public conservation lands.

Consequently, it has very good potential for restoration of the habitat and many of its commensally associated species to historic levels that were likely present on the parcel. Moreover, the mosaic of existing natural communities on the parcel provides habitat for a diversity of wildlife species. Also, it has good potential natural resource based recreation, such as hunting, hiking, bicycling, and wildlife viewing. For the reasons stated above, the Archer Parcel is recommended for acquisition as a Gopher Tortoise Mitigation Park. Given its resource characteristics and strategic location, this acquisition would provide benefits meriting acquisition under the FWC's Land Acquisition Trust Fund Fish and Wildlife Habitat Acquisition Program.

Acquisition of this tract will help to ensure the survival of wildlife like the gopher tortoise, and other associated 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. It will aid in buffering adjoining conservation lands from the fragmentation of wildlife habitat. In addition, because it is being acquired in partnership with the District, it will allow FWC and the District to leverage their acquisition funds by reducing the overall cost of the tract to both agencies.

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 jointly vested in the Trustees and the District 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 the District as a Gopher Tortoise Mitigation Park for natural resource conservation, restoration, and resource-based public outdoor recreation within a multiple-use management regime, primarily focused on restoration and management of gopher tortoise habitat, along with compatible resource-based recreational secondary uses.

RECOMMEND: APPROVAL CONTINGENT UPON EXECUTION OF AN OPTION CONTRACT AND APPROVAL BY THE SUWANEE RIVER WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT AND THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES.

