



# ALACHUA COUNTY ALACHUA COUNTY FOREVER STEWARDSHIP STRATEGY



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### Cover photos, clockwise from top left:

- Barr Hammock Preserve North Trailhead
- River Otters      Photo Credit: Mac Stone
- Trinity United Methodist Church Volunteers at Turkey Creek Preserve
- Volunteers erecting Preservation Area Sign at Phifer Flatwoods Preserve
- Sandhill Cranes      Photo Credit: Mac Stone
- Staff Working a Prescribed Burn

## Executive Summary

This Report is intended to inform the Board of County Commission's discussion regarding the sustainability of the Alachua County Environmental Protection Department's Alachua County Forever (ACF) land stewardship program. While staff has communicated this strategy to the Board over the years (September 28, 2005, February 17, 2006, July 17, 2006, and September 7, 2007), several factors prompt the re-issue of this report. There has been turnover on the County Commission and the ACF Program is maturing and repositioning itself with a stewardship-first focus.

In the 2000 general election, over 60% of County voters directed the Commission to "acquire, improve and manage environmentally significant lands." This improvement and management -- land stewardship -- is funded from the County's General Fund and a 10% set-aside from the proceeds of the 2000 ACF Referendum. This ACF stewardship strategy has resulted in these seed funds being used to leverage partnerships to great effect. Through FY13, ACF was able to leverage \$1.56 million worth of non-personnel stewardship effort. This is 5.5 times the County's own non-personnel investment over the same time period and represents funding and effort that the County did not have to spend on its sites. It represents what could have been the degradation in the sites -- the unfunded backlog -- if the County did not fund the full level of effort needed to sustain the conservation values of the property.

The stewardship strategy described herein has evolved over the years in response to three stimuli. First, there is a County-wide obligation to use taxpayer-provided funds efficiently and with maximum effect. That requires leveraging outside sources. Second, the General Fund is dependent on the tax base and is the funding source of last resort for many Board priorities. ACF has always operated with minimal stewardship funding as it has prioritized land acquisition over stewardship and recreational access. That will change for reasons detailed herein, primarily because deferred stewardship now needs to be addressed. Third, ACF has always believed involving partners and the community in its work rewards them for their financial investment and for their trust. As important, involving the public creates community pride and true ownership in these special lands.

When they consider ACF stewardship funding, the Board should review the history of the Program, its operating principles, its growing obligations, and its successes in reducing its dependence on the General Fund. Since 2008, ACF's stewardship strategy has saved the Board \$1.6 million in General Fund expenses. For reasons discussed in this report, the Program will require additional inputs of funding and staffing over the next few years if it is to remain faithful to the Board's "no loss of conservation values" land stewardship principle.

## Current Status

The ACF Program was authorized through a referendum passed by 62.5% of Alachua County voters at the November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2000 general election. They agreed *“Alachua County [should] acquire, improve and manage environmentally significant lands to protect water resources, wildlife habitats and natural areas suitable for resource-based recreation...”*

The ACF Program has been remarkably successful using first those funds authorized in 2000 and then the funds from the successor Wild Spaces and Public Places Referendum (2008). In all, 243,000 acres have been nominated to the County for protection representing over 3,770 parcels and 3,600 landowners. The Board has added 186 projects to the Active Acquisition List representing 55,000 acres. ACF has conserved 18,730 acres worth over \$75 million using a combination of the County’s funds and partnerships. Of the 51 County projects, 25 had some form of financial partnership matching the County’s investment dollar-for-dollar towards the final cost. Of the 51 acquisitions, 26 are managed by partners with the remaining lands managed by ACF. ACF also manages Balu Forest, a 1,576-acre County-owned site that is designated for a future waste processing/handling facility. The County’s support for its various partners contributed to the protection of another 14 projects, totaling 3,677 acres worth \$23 million in land value.

Through FY13, ACF was able to leverage \$1.56 million worth of non-personnel stewardship effort on the 51 sites from non-county sources. This is 5.5 times the County’s own non-personnel investment over the same time period and represents funding and effort that the County did not have to spend on its sites. It represents what could have been the degradation in the sites -- the unfunded backlog -- if the County did not fund the full level of effort needed to sustain the conservation values of the property. Forty-two percent of the acreage is open to the public with another 50% available through County partnerships with private outreach programs.

## Principles

The principles governing the stewardship of Alachua County’s nature preserves are no different than those for the Courthouse, an active park, the Administration Building or a fire truck. Each is a capital asset, held in trust for the public benefit. Each has an acquisition and an operational cost and the County has a fiduciary responsibility to maintain these assets even though the financial benefits may not be immediately apparent.



In the case of nature preserves, not only do the natural resources need to be restored and maintained to preserve their ecological function, the public access infrastructure requires maintenance to remain functional. There is an obligation to provide a safe, meaningful experience. Just as critical are the land stewardship and security actions that make Preserve neighbors safe from wildfire and crime. Prescribed burning; applying fire under conditions where it can be controlled and effective, is cheaper and more ecologically productive than combating wildfires. The Florida Forest Service notes, “[f]or each dollar spent in fuel management, \$2.14 in wildfire suppression and damages was saved” (*Wildfire Risk Reduction in Florida*, pg. 10). A well-managed site, with good access, good visibility, and regular monitoring encourages less crime than what would otherwise appear to be a vacant or abandoned lot.

The most powerful mandate an elected government can have, is a direct message from the community it serves. In the 2000 general election, over 60% of County voters directed the Commission to “acquire, improve and manage environmentally significant lands.” This mandate was subsequently validated in 2008, twice, with the passage of the Wild Spaces and Public Places referendum (53% in favor) and the Registry of Protected Public Places (75%). This community has reinforced the importance and the current relevance of that mandate. During the recent years’ Community Conversations town hall meetings, attendees placed environmental protection near the top of their funding priorities.

The Board has followed through on that obligation to improve and manage the acquired properties. The Alachua County Code, Chapter 36 “Land Conservation Program” states “[u]p to ten percent of the proceeds of these bonds may be used for initial land management and providing public access to the properties. The County and property co-owners will provide for ongoing land management of acquired properties.” (Sec. 36.06). The Board has set aside \$2 million from the proceeds for the improvements and funds the management of the property from the General Fund each year.

The Alachua County Comprehensive Plan 2001-2020, Conservation and Open Space Element, Land Conservation Program, Management, Policy 6.6.11 states “*The County shall provide continued funding for ongoing operation and maintenance costs associated with County-owned lands.*” On January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2002, the Alachua County Board of County Commissioners (BoCC) held a workshop to develop guidance for land conservation project



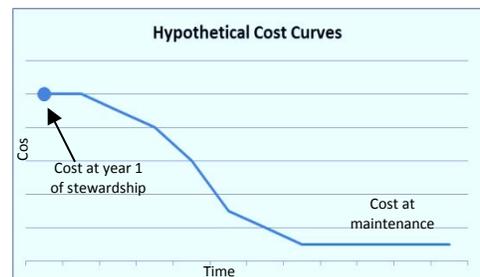
selection, financing and stewardship under the Alachua County Forever program. At this meeting the BoCC adopted the following guiding principles relating to stewardship:

*“The BoCC is aware that there are long term stewardship costs associated with projects selected but no funding source other than the General Fund Reserves has been identified. To minimize stewardship expenses while the Program is in this initial acquisition phase, staff will use a strategy of “no loss of conservation values” stewardship. The initial stewardship program will reflect this strategy. As the program matures and other funding sources materialize, the stewardship program may be enhanced. Any stewardship of ACF sites shall be consistent with the ACF’s primary goal of preserving, restoring and enhancing environmental values.”*

Staff has repeatedly detailed the operational costs of the program in order to assist the Board with understanding land stewardship costs. The first time was in the summer of 2000 prior to the adoption of the Alachua County Forever Referendum that was to go to the voters. Staff presented the likely stewardship costs for a portfolio of sites to the Board. Staff again presents the stewardship costs each time an acquisition project is proposed to the Board for negotiation and twice again before its purchase.

## Stewardship Discussion

ACF purchases property which can be viewed as occupying a spot on a continuum of conservation value; conservation value here defined as including ecological functions and benefits and recreational opportunities. The “No Loss of Conservation Values” principle means that each year, the property must be either moving forward along that continuum towards better conservation value, or at worst, remain in place. It should not degrade. Generally the goal is to restore the ecosystem to that which existed prior to 1492. At this level, the site is in “maintenance” and is actually at the most economical to manage per acre. For example, minor effort is needed to remove exotic plants and the proper prescribed fire regime has been restored making it easier to burn. To illustrate this, if ACF was managing just one degraded site, the cost curve would start out at the highest point and gradually decrease over time to a flat maintenance level (see chart at right).



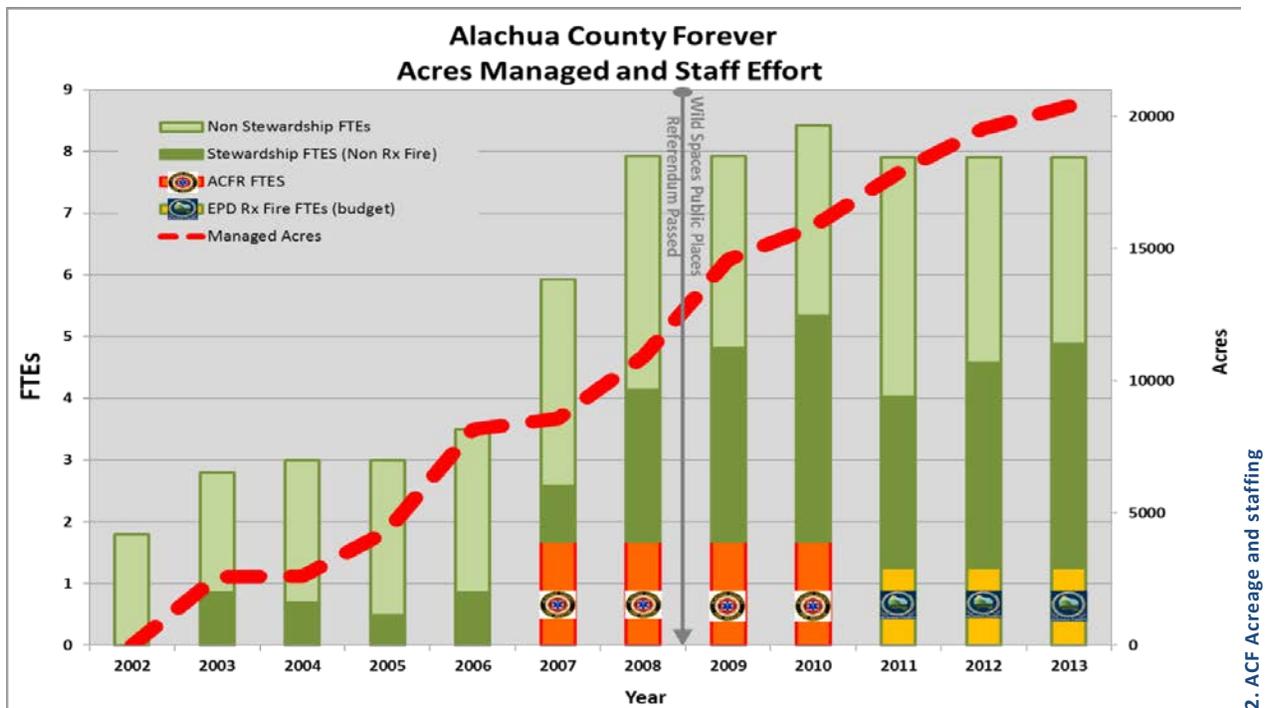
1. Hypothetical cost curve for a single site



ACF prepares a management plan for each acquired site. This document is reviewed by the County’s advisory boards, presented to the public and preserve neighbors, and adopted by the Board. The plan recognizes the ecological and recreational needs, funding constraints and opportunities, and lays out an appropriate ten-year vision for the property including goals, objectives and a general schedule. Adopted plans are available from the ACF website.

A major challenge for long-term stewardship of preserve lands is the financing of stewardship objectives. Without a commitment to stewardship of ACF preserves, the County will not be able to maintain the investment the citizens made in their conservation lands and the citizens will not reap the quality of life benefits that these properties can provide. ACF preserves require a variety of stewardship actions that include provisions for public access, passive recreation, environmental education, land management, site security, and recurring site maintenance. Control of invasive exotic species, fire management, restoration of natural hydrological regimes, endangered species monitoring, and a variety of other land management issues must be considered long-term responsibilities.

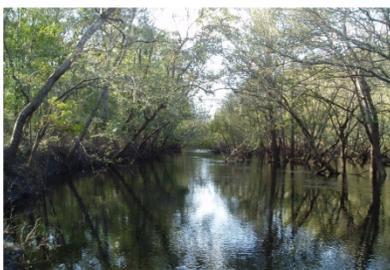
The 2000 ACF Referendum allowed up to 10% of the Bond proceeds to be set aside for capital improvements. The Board has set aside \$2 million for this purpose and not for further acquisitions. This set-aside may only be used for initial land management and for providing public access to the properties. It cannot be used to fund ongoing expenses. ACF Program is allotted General Funds for program support and operations. It therefore faces competition for funding with other worthy County programs for scarce resources ACF can demonstrate an annual increase in its responsibilities and therefore demonstrate a commensurate need for increased budget. As additional properties are acquired, the costs for the program should increase and the program budget should be enhanced. The chart below documents this point.



Resource-management (RM, defined as recurring, non-personnel, non-capital, non-fixed cost) stewardship funding was increased from \$30,537 in FY2006 to \$62,632 in FY2008 and has remained level since with one exception. The addition of the prescribed fire function to ACF in FY2011, while enhancing the ACF budget was actually a reduction in the overall County land stewardship budget. Prior to FY2011, Alachua County Fire Rescue handled prescribed fire along wildfire response and wildland-urban interface development review. The prescribed fire function had a larger budget and 1.65 FTEs. When the function was moved to ACF in FY2011, the budget was reduced to \$200,000 and 1.25 FTEs. The FY2013 RM stewardship budget for land conservation, including prescribed fire was \$159,437. The Board has enhanced the program's staffing over the years as well to maintain a reasonable acre/FTE level-of-effort. Notable was the transfer of Balu Forest stewardship to ACF which was accompanied by appropriations from the Solid Waste Fund.

As was described in previous memos, studies have been published indicating that ACF stewardship is still under-staffed and under-funded. The University of Washington surveyed 127 local governments' RM stewardship efforts around the United States and found that the median effort was 285 acres per FTE and the median RM stewardship expenditure was \$72 per acre. A Sarasota County and a separate Alachua County survey of Florida government efforts corroborate these data. In FY2013, ACF spent \$14.87 per acre on RM stewardship for the portfolio it has primary stewardship responsibility. ACF has 4.88 FTEs working on stewardship for the entire portfolio including those lands on which we coordinate stewardship with partners (4,158 acres per FTE).

Budgeting decision should not be made solely based on such benchmarks. Staff should present their needs as a part of the budget process and request an appropriate level of funding. Given the acquisition focus of the program over the previous years, and consistent with the Board's 2002 direction, staff requested correspondingly low levels of stewardship funding. ACF has been able to maintain the conservation value of the portfolio despite these funding levels due to an aggressive stewardship strategy relying on leveraging partnerships and focusing initially on the low-hanging, cost-effective tasks. One casualty of this initial approach is the deferral of actions needed to move projects forward on the trajectory of increased conservation value. Starting with this year, as the program transitions to stewardship, this deferred stewardship will need to be addressed. Staff will be proposing enhancements in the coming fiscal years to meet these needs.



## Stewardship Strategy

ACF strategy detailed below includes volunteers, community service workers, inmate labor, license agreements, formal and informal partnerships, interim agricultural activities, grants, donations, and facilitating restoration projects resulting from mitigation for developments or from violations. There will always be a need for core County funding for critical land stewardship tools and expertise that can then leverage community partnerships to make this strategy successful.

### Triage Approach to Site Stewardship.

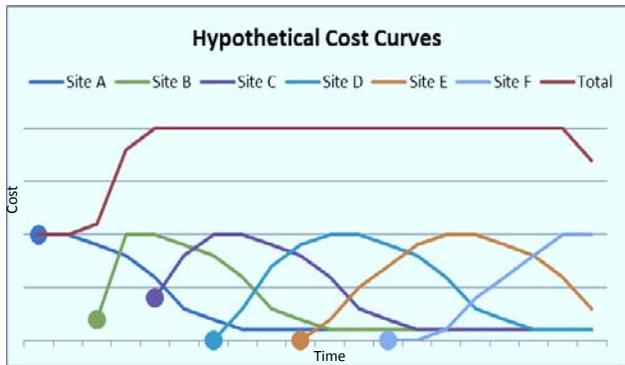
Every year, ACF prepares an annual workplan which contains the stewardship tasks to be completed to keep the portfolio on the proper stewardship trajectory. Management costs are generally influenced by the size and location of a preserve, level of disturbance, recreational uses and resource needs. To develop the workplan priorities, the strategy has been to examine the necessity of performing a particular task across various time horizons, and determine its ecological and economic impact. If deferring the task decreases the conservation value of the site and/or increases in the future cost of the task, the task becomes a priority. If there is no significant decrease in ecological value or increase in the cost of the task by waiting, the task becomes a lower priority.

The availability of funding and staffing are also factors in determining priorities. ACF is opportunistic; if funding becomes available for a project through a grant, mitigation project or partnership, that project becomes a priority in the workplan.

ACF has been able to stay on top of the stewardship demands by prioritizing tasks with relatively high-value and low-effort. As more time is spent managing the portfolio, there will be less of these kinds of opportunities. ACF is approaching that point and will have to tackle the next category of properties -- those that require greater inputs of time and money to get to a maintenance level. Per-acre costs and budgets will need to be increased until those sites are in maintenance condition. Then the Program can move to the final category of tasks; those that were so degraded that ignoring them initially did not result in further loss in conservation value. These will require additional inputs even as the previous sites continue to be maintained. Eventually, the entire portfolio will approach maintenance and the per-acre costs will decrease (see chart 4 below).



Note that per-acre costs and total costs (overall budget) are not the same thing. The total cost (red line in chart) – and therefore the budget – stays the same (or may increase) even as portions of the workplan become cheaper to implement. That is because more expensive-to-manage acreage is being added to the workplan; acreage which had previously been ignored or had deferred stewardship. Note that when the total budget is limited (flat red line), as additional sites are added, the work cannot begin at the proper intensity because there is insufficient budget. Work has to be prioritized and more economical tasks selected to fit under the fixed budget cap. As the program nears maintenance on older sites, work can be increased on newer sites. Note also that the initial work curves for each site are flatter than the preceding site. As more sites are added, less work can be done initially on the new sites and stewardship is deferred for longer periods till there is enough budget.



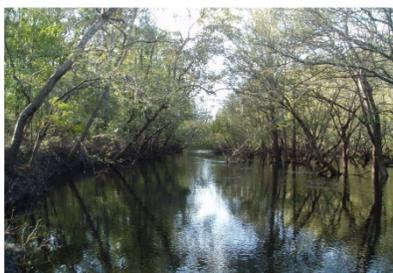
3. Hypothetical cost curves for multiple sites

If budgets and staffing remain constant, these more challenging properties will not be managed. They become more expensive to get moving in the right direction. Exotic plants will become established, dominate and eventually replace the native community. Fire fuels will increase to the point where routine burning will not be possible without expensive mechanical and hand fuel-reduction. Wildlife habitats will become degraded and not support the proper suite of biodiversity. Restoring these and reintroducing animals will become very expensive.

**De Minimus Approach to Site Development.**

Early on while ACF was focused on land acquisition, General Fund dollars were instrumental in funding basic stop-gap management activities that were essential for the inventory and protection of resources. As demands grow to open property to the public, the program spends a mix of the General Fund and bond proceeds on recreational infrastructure. The 2000 Referendum allowed up to 10% of the Bond proceeds to be set aside for capital improvements. The Board has set aside \$2 million for this purpose rather than spend it on acquisitions. The strategy is to at a *de minimus* level to avoid

provide recreational improvements impacts to natural resources and



minimize recurring expenses. This is also consistent with the Board’s 2002 guiding principles. For example, ACF does not typically provide picnic areas and trash cans, both of which require recurring maintenance. ACF will provide parking areas and trails with some interpretive information. As additional funding becomes available through grants or other sources, the visitor amenities may be enhanced and expanded. These decisions are brought to the Board as part of the management plan, grant or contract approval since the additional infrastructure will require increased operating budgets.

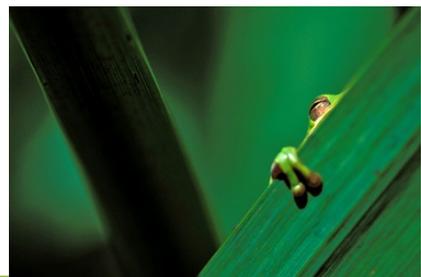
### **Multiple-year Stewardship Plan.**

Staff is developing a 5-year stewardship plan that begins with the coming year’s workplan and looks out 4 more years. Site restoration, improvements and management is often a multi-year effort. For example, restoring a pine plantation starts with multiple thinnings, prescribed fire, plantings, more fire and occasionally some hydrologic restoration. Once the process is initiated, the next steps must follow at the appropriate interval for it to be successful or else the process will have to be re-initiated and the prior work will have been wasted.

This kind of long-range planning was previously done very broadly in the management plan; with a multi-year vision necessary to achieve the plan’s goals. That long-term vision will now be documented in enough detail for the entire portfolio, so that the investments of time and money needed to accomplish goals will be predictable. The out-years’ operating costs, and any needed enhancements, can then be requested in a timely fashion as part of annual budget process.

### **Grants.**

The General Fund and the Bond proceeds provide seed money for leveraging grant funds. The ACF strategy will be to continue seeking stewardship grants from the Florida Recreation Development Assistance Program, the Office of Greenways and Trails, and Tourist Development Tax grants for public use facilities, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Division of Forestry for restoration and reforestation grants, Division of Historical Resources archaeological stabilization grants, and from private foundations. Since 2008, ACF has received over \$238,000 in these kinds of stewardship grants. None of these would have been possible without core funding from the General Fund for staff and needed match. Each grant represents funding the County does not have to provide from local sources to meet its goals.



## Volunteers.

Staff has always used volunteers to assist with management activities such as vegetation and wildlife monitoring, trash removal, invasive plant control, native plantings, sign and fence installation, trail maintenance, interpretive material development and grant writing. If the current minimum wage rate was applied to the volunteer hours, the County has saved over \$60,500 since 2008. Clearly the actual savings are far greater since contracting that work out would cost more than minimum wage.

The strategy is to build a strong Volunteer Conservation Corps with a diverse skill set that is able to perform needed work. While using volunteers can offset General Fund costs, it must be balanced with an increase in the County's liability exposure. Therefore staff continues to work with Risk Management on determining activities appropriate for volunteers.

ACF has established a Volunteer Monitor program to enhance the security of the preserves and the visitor experience. Monitors will walk trails, assist visitors and report to program staff any incidents that are a threat to public safety or sensitive resources. This program provides a substantial savings to the General Fund because this service is very expensive to contract and time consuming for staff. The presence of Monitors on the sites will help deter inappropriate activities and provide a safer more enjoyable visitor experience. The use of Monitors will allow staff to direct their efforts towards resource management and conservation biology. Both the Volunteer Conservation Corps and the Volunteer Monitors can be rolled into a Citizen Service Organization, commonly known as "Friends of" group, if the community starts one.

## Partnerships.

ACF's stewardship partnerships provide many valuable services to the County including invasive species control, natural and hydrological restoration, wildlife habitat monitoring, wildfire management, facilitating public access, education and recreation, site security and recurring site maintenance. These partnerships have saved the County about \$1,200,000 since 2008. An example of these partnerships are the use of license agreements with caretaker/hunters to provide a wide array of services on the sites like hog trapping, mowing and maintaining trails. Each license agreement saves the County in excess of \$10,000 in staff time annually per site. Such hunting license agreements are detailed in the Hunting Business Plan adopted by the Board in 2013. The strategy will be to continue to pursue partnerships with the University of Florida, State and federal agencies, and private organizations to focus on specific site needs.



ACF has many innovative partnerships to provide access to the sites, including those that are not yet opened. The public may contact any one of the partners: Conservation Trust for Florida, Florida Trails Association, Florida Native Plant Society, Alachua Conservation Trust and Gainesville EcoTours. Information on how to contact them and schedule a tour is on the website at: <http://www.alachuacountyforever.us>. ACF also has partnerships with the National Wild Turkey Federation and the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Youth Hunting Programs to provide access to non-tradition hunting groups on County lands. Each of these partnerships creates access at no cost to the County.

### **Interim Agricultural Activities**

The strategy will be to continue to look for opportunities to offset management costs using private sector partnerships through interim agricultural activities such as leasing existing pasture areas to private parties. These will be used until a restoration plan can be developed, funded and implemented. This strategy is fully described in the Cattle Grazing Business Plan adopted by the Board in 2012. The desire to maximize revenue generation must be tempered by the realization that these sites are acquired to preserve water resources, protect wildlife habitats and to provide natural areas suitable for resource based recreation. Agricultural uses must serve conservation goals. Private benefit on public lands may also be subject to IRS regulations, grant restrictions and Bond Covenants.

### **Timber Sales.**

Of the 12,261 acres under primary ACF management, approximately 3,000 acres contain planted pine. The ACF stewardship strategy is to harvest/thin planted pines and other offsite species over time, while simultaneously restoring the biodiversity of these areas through prescribed burning, ground cover restoration and replanting site appropriate species. Proceeds from the timber sales augment capital improvement stewardship funding. A full treatment of this strategy can be found in the Timber Harvesting Business Plan, adopted by the Board in 2011.

### **Prescribed Burning Program.**

A primer on prescribed fire is provided in the panel below. It has been suggested that the Florida Forest Service (FFS) could handle ACF's prescribed burn function saving the County money. The FFS testified before the Board (8/31/2010) that it would not take over ACF's routine burning activities due their responsibility to burn State lands and to respond to wildfires.



They would also not provide the necessary burn prep and the post-burn mop-up and monitoring. So that option is out. ACF has budget and a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) with FFS for them to provide stand-by assistance when the County initiates a prescribed burn and to provide additional resources and staffing for more technically difficult burns. That MoA also covers FFS deploying in an emergency if one of ACF's burns gets away. The prescribed burn strategy includes a Memorandum of Understanding with other organizations. This multiplies the County's effort so that multiple, County-led burns can happen on County land when conditions are within prescription but when otherwise shortages in staffing or equipment would prevent the burn from happening.

#### A Prescribed Fire Primer

Prescribed fire was raised a number of times in budget discussions each year starting in FY2011 when the responsibility was transferred to ACF. Many of Florida's landscapes are pyric, meaning they have adapted to a natural cycle of periodic fire in its ecosystems. They also require fire to remain in their natural state. For many years, natural areas managers excluded fire from the system. Early images of Bambi's mother dying in a forest fire and the U.S. Forest Service's campaign featuring Smokey Bear's "Remember... Only YOU Can Prevent Forest Fires" resulted in millions of acres of fuel being built up in the nation's forests from fire elimination. Catastrophic wildfires in the 1970s and 1980s including Yellowstone National Park and much of the western U.S., followed by fires in the late 1980s and 1990s in Florida and the southeast, forced a rethinking of the role of fire in natural systems. The U.S. Forest Service adopted formal procedures for prescribed fire in 1995 and Smokey began saying "Only You Can Prevent Wildfires" in 2001.

Prescribed fire is the deliberate lighting of fires under carefully selected conditions for clearly described goals such as reducing hazardous fuel loads and improving ecological conditions. Given the developed and fragmented nature of the County, fires can only be applied under stringent (prescribed) conditions. The proper combination of weather factors including rain, humidity, wind patterns, temperature; sufficient equipment, and personnel are needed to apply fire safely, accomplish goals and manage smoke properly.

Pre-burn preparation is critical to determining the outcome. Burn prep may include creating and maintaining fire lines to contain fires, mechanical reduction of heavy fuels, and protecting infrastructure that could be harmed by fires. After the burn, crews work diligently to mop-up: put out hot spots that could ignite areas that are not intended for burning, put out residual smoking and smoldering fuels to properly manage smoke, and to assess the results.

Many of ACF purchases have no known prescribed fire history. These sites have large stores of unburned fuel that if lit by vandalism, lightning or accident, could lead to a wildfire damaging ecological and timber resources or neighboring farms and residential tracts. The application of fire for initial burns is difficult requiring great deal of burn prep and smaller burn acreages. Our burns are therefore among the more expensive per acre because of this lack of burn history. State and federal agencies manage large expanses of property with longer burn histories. As the fire history of an area increases, the more predictable is the fire behavior and more acreage can be burned for the same level of effort. So their per-acre costs are orders of magnitude lower than the County's. Our burns will become cheaper per acre, but will never approximate the costs seen by the State because of the smaller, more isolated, and more developed context of our sites compared to the State Parks.

Benchmark data provided by the County Office of Management and Budget as part of the FY2014 budget development process did show that despite its relatively high cost of burning, ACF is actually lower than the industry norm for similar type burns. This is due to our development of in-house expertise and our mutual-aid partnerships with public and private burn partners.



### **Community Service Workers and Inmate Labor.**

The strategy is to utilize community service workers (CSW) and inmate labor to accomplish tasks such as installation and maintenance of signs, trails and fences, removal of invasive plants, planting vegetation, and trash removal. If each hour of CSW time was valued at minimum wage, this strategy has saved the County over \$32,000 since 2008. Again, note that this estimate is low since the actual cost would be much higher if this work were contracted out. The use of CSW and inmate labor does involve a commitment of staff time to set up the activity and supervise the actual work... not the inmates.

### **Mitigation Opportunities.**

Staff has a list of unfunded restoration projects that can be provided to regulatory agencies for use as potential mitigation or violation resolution projects. These are typically expensive hydrological regime or pine plantation restoration projects involving earthmoving. Since 2008, ACF has leveraged over \$58,000 in mitigation dollars towards site stewardship.

Gopher tortoise mitigation involving relocation of any animals threatened by development is becoming a viable source of revenue for landowners. ACF has been approached in the past but has not accepted any animals to date. ACF's gopher tortoise acceptance policy follows that for any mitigation project. ACF can receive tortoises if three conditions are met: (1) the development project is acceptable to the Board; (2) the recipient ACF site must have a deficit of tortoises and have the habitat values necessary to sustain the numbers; and (3) the mitigation permittee must fund the cost of the relocation, establishment, monitoring and maintenance of the tortoises for a reasonable time period.

### **Fees and Donations.**

The issue of charging fees for access to County preserves was raised during the FY14 budget development meetings. These fees remain controversial in the eyes of the public. Many have stated that they do not think they should have to pay to access property that they have already paid to acquire and manage. The Board's advisory Land Conservation Board moved to oppose fee-for-access schemes on ACF properties when they were briefed by staff on the topic.

There are well-established fee-for-access models used by the State and National Parks systems. Typically the on-site amenities offered at these agencies' sites exceed those offered by ACF. Discussions with other Florida county staff support the trend that access fees are generally not charged unless a site has expensive amenities to maintain, or services are



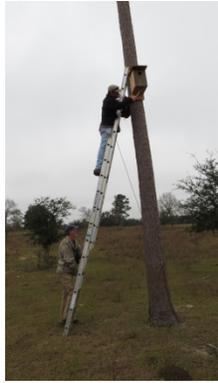
provided such as guided tours or staffed nature centers. Several organizations contacted indicated that the cost of collecting fees is not covered by the fee collections unless there was a ranger present, the fee-collection was actively enforced, and the site was very popular. Locally, the Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park has unmanned pay stations (“iron rangers”) at both the Bolen Bluff and La Chua trailheads. According to State Park staff, the La Chua entrance generates enough revenue only in the winter months when the weather is pleasant and the sandhill cranes are here.

ACF staff has considered placing iron rangers at trailhead facilities to collect fees. Fee receipts should not only cover the cost to collect the fees, but offset the cost of the maintenance of the preserve. Staff visited each site that would have an iron ranger installed to gauge the effort required. It took one staff person six hours driving 132 miles to visit each site in turn, eight stations in all. Based on three visits a week, this effort would cost about \$250 per day or about \$40,000 annually in vehicle and staff time. The cost of a single station with the associated hardware (installed by staff) runs from \$350 for a simple iron ranger to up over \$10,000 for powered stations that accept credit cards. Assuming the more economical stations were installed and they lasted 20 years, at \$2.00 per visitor (what the State Parks charge), there would need to be 20,500 visitors annually just to break even. ACF preserves get perhaps 25% – 50% of that total. At such visitation rates, a fee-for-access scheme would not cover the investment and time required to install and operate it. Staff will be using trail counters to determine more accurately visitation rates at the open preserves. There are additional issues of staff safety carrying cash in remote places, and handling and properly accounting for the proceeds.

Instead of user fees, ACF would like to encourage donations to the program. A no-cost option is to use smart technology and users’ phones in place of fee-collection stations. ACF has created QR codes (at right) that will link a web-enabled device (smart phone or tablet computer) to the County’s PayPal interface which directs payments to an account set up by Finance & Accounting. The QR code can be printed as part of the trailhead kiosk information or transferred at minimal cost to a stand-alone sign. ACF will readily accept donations of services, supplies or equipment from willing parties, provided liability issues can be worked out.



4. QR CODE FOR DONATIONS



### **Impact Fees and Ad-valorem Revenue.**

There are other funding options that could be considered by the Board. While eligible, ACF has not accessed the Parks Impact Fees collected from new development by the County. These have been reserved for infrastructure upgrades at the County's active park system. The Board may consider the imposition of a conservation lands impact fee that would provide funds for acquisition and management of conservation lands.

The Board may also consider the appropriation of that portion of the voter-approved 0.25 mill ad-valorem revenue not used for bond debt service for either funding 1) management activities until 2020 at which time the bond covenant expires, or 2) establishing an endowment fund for management that would last beyond 2020. That portion of the millage so used would count against the County's statutory millage cap.

Staff remains encouraged by the Board's interest in creating a sustainable stewardship program and are ready to participate in a discussion regarding this strategy under the direction of the County Manager.



5. Kayaker on Ledwith Lake at Barr Hammock. Photo credit: Mac Stone