

Wolfe Creek's 1,272-acre donation benefits forest, base

By GateHouse Media Florida staff report

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MILTON — Another 1,272 acres within the Florida Forever Project Wolfe Creek Forest was bought by The Trust for Public Land and added to the Blackwater River State Forest.

The property expands recreational opportunities, helps restore longleaf pines and prevents land use conflicts with Whiting Field's helicopter training mission and helps restore longleaf pines.

The Wolf Creek site encompasses a historic hardwood forest range along Big Coldwater Creek, a popular waterway for canoeing and kayaking.

Among other benefits are the protection of water sources, public recreational activities, bird migration, and habitat for endangered species and other wildlife.

The Trust for Public Land purchased the property for \$3.4 million Sept. 30 from Kingfisher Timberland, LLC. It then sold it for \$3.4 million Thursday to Santa Rosa County, which plans to donate it to Florida.

Doug Hattaway, The Trust for Public Land senior project manager, said the two miles of forest preserves Blackwater River State Forest and protects Whiting Field from encroachment that may limit flight operations and vital military training.

"This is a great example of collaborative private-public partnerships furthering both base buffering and conservation and recreation goals and filling in gaps of resource management areas," he said.

Funding for the acquisition came from the U.S. Forest Service through the Forest Legacy Program administered by the Florida Forest Service, a division of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and the U.S.

Navy through the Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program.

Whiting Field is the busiest aviation complex in the world, accounting for nearly one million annual flight operations. It includes primary flight training and advanced helicopter training for more than 1,200 Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard students.

Additionally, the naval base supports nearly 16,000 jobs and is vital to the local economy generating more than \$1.43 billion in economic impact.

NAS Whiting Field Commanding Officer Capt. Paul Bowdich said the military and community enjoy an “outstanding” relationship.

“These additional, 1,200 plus acres are located underneath flight track training profiles and are within a military airport influence area,” Bowdich said. “The execution of this project complements our efforts to sustain military mission training and preserve the environment in perpetuity.”

Jim Karels, state forester and director of the Florida Forest Service, also praised the land donation, which his agency will manage.

“Restoring the natural longleaf pine forest and the use of prescribed fire will greatly improve wildlife habitat, reduce wildfire threats and aid in water quality,” Karels said.

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