# Blackwater River State Forest adds nearly 3,500 acres of land to buffer NAS Whiting Field

Annie Blanks, Pensacola News Journal



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The Blackwater River State Forest — one of the last remaining natural crown jewels of the Florida Panhandle, nestled on about 210,000 acres of land in Santa Rosa County — is expanding its footprint once again.

The Trust for Public Land announced recently that, along with the U.S. Navy, the Florida Forest Service, the Santa Rosa County Commission, the U.S. Forest Service and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, it has acquired almost 3,500 acres of land in Santa Rosa County to add to the Blackwater River State Forest.

The $9.2 million land acquisition will help protect the critical longleaf pine habitat, as well as prevent land development that could interfere with the military mission at Naval Air Station Whiting Field, which is located adjacent to the forest.

"There are not many land transactions that check all these boxes," said Doug Hattaway, senior project manager for the Trust for Public Land. "This helps Santa Rosa County further its eco-based tourism, and it also adds base buffering to NAS Whiting Field, which is a huge

economic driver both for the county and the region.

"It also adds to all of the public recreation activities that are going to be closer for residents and closer to home. Not to mention the benefit to the plant and animal species that reside there. It provides all of these benefits to Santa Rosa County residents, well and above just protecting a plant or a critter. It's a win-win for everybody."

A recent acquisition of 1,700 acres comes on the heels of another 1,786 contiguous acres conserved at the end of June by the TPL and FDEP, for a total of 3,486 acres.

**Things to do:** Go take a hike! Blackwater River State Forest offers miles of trails

The Trust for Public Land acquired both tracts together for $9.2 million, according to Hattaway. The state of Florida then purchased 1,786 acres from the TPL utilizing Florida Forever funding, and Santa Rosa County purchased the remaining 1,700 acres from the TPL with Federal Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration and Forest Service Forest Legacy program funding.

"Santa Rosa County didn't use its own county funds, they were just being a good partner and were the conduit to help make it work," Hattaway said. "The Navy has money they set aside for trying to prevent land use conflicts, and the county utilized that money, as well as other federal programs."

All of the new property will be managed by the Florida Forest Service as additions to the Blackwater River State Forest.

"This most recent (acquisition) was the second one we've done in my time here, and it adds to the Blackwater forest in its native state," said Santa Rosa County Administrator Dan Schebler. "I don't think there are any plans to add amenities to it immediately at this point, but it is available to the public just like the rest of the Blackwater Forest. Some of the acquisitions do enable a future extension of the Blackwater trail and the bike path, but there are still some acquisitions that are necessary to connect it all together."

The Blackwater River State Forest contains more than 75 miles of hiking trails that run through Santa Rosa and Okaloosa counties from Eglin Air Force Base to the Alabama state line. Additionally, the area's longleaf pine and wiregrass ecosystem is one of the largest of its kind in the world.

The forest also contains a campground, private beaches, marsh habitats and, of course, the Blackwater River. According to the Florida Forest Service, the 30-mile Blackwater River is one of the few shifting sand bottom streams in the world that remains in its natural state for almost its entire length. The river offers tubing, canoeing, kayaking and swimming opportunities as well.

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