

LOCAL

Easement will protect land on Lake Wales Ridge

Agreement provides buffer for Avon Park Range



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A 320-acre property in Polk County surrounded by a state forest and near a military base has gained protection from potential development.

Phillip Rucks Citrus Nursery, a rectangle of land mostly encompassed by the Lake Wales Ridge State Forest, is now covered by a conservation easement through an agreement between the Department of Defense and the Polk County Parks and Natural Resources Division and facilitated by Conservation Florida. The property lies within half a mile of the Avon Park Air Force Range.

Under the easement, the nursery owners can continue their operations but permanently forego any significant development of the tract, bordered by the Arbuckle Tract of the Lake Wales Ridge State Forest near Frostproof. The easement also prevents the property from being subdivided, said Adam Bass, Vice President of Conservation for Conservation Florida.

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The land is set within the Avon Park Air Force Range Sentinel Landscape, a buffer zone surrounding the 106,000-acre base, the largest training range east of the Mississippi River.

Polk County used a combination of its own funds and a grant to cover the cost of the conservation easement. The county received a grant of \$242,500 from the Florida Defense Support Task Force, said Gaye Sharpe, director of Polk County's Environmental Lands Program.

That state-funded program seeks to prevent encroachment that could affect operations at military facilities, among other priorities.

The Polk County Commission voted in March to spend matching funds drawn from a small remaining pool of money in the tax-supported Environmental Lands Program. Sharpe said the money was originally intended for another project that didn't proceed.

The state program works with the Sentinel Landscapes Partnership, a coalition of federal agencies, state and local governments and private organizations. The program, founded in 2013 by the Department of Defense, Department of Agriculture and Department of the Interior, aims to strengthen military readiness and conserve natural resources.

Though the county holds the easement, Phillip Rucks Citrus Nursery retains ownership of the land.

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Hope on display: Nonprofit shares positive messages in Mulberry; improves individuals, community

Phillip Rucks established the nursery in 1987, Conservation Florida said in a news release. It is the largest screened nursery in the country, propagating citrus and peach trees, according to the company's website.

Lake Wales Ridge State Forest occupies nearly 27,000 acres in four tracts along a seam of high, sandy land stretching about 150 miles. The ridge, a remnant of a prehistoric era when water covered most of Florida, contains scrub habitat home to rare and endangered plants and animals, such as Florida scrub jays and sand skinks.

The Arbuckle Tract also contains expanses of pine and palmetto habitat.

The establishment of a conservation easement helps ensure that the Florida Forest Service will be able to continue conducting prescribed fires and other land-management activities, the release said. Development near the range can bring artificial light that interferes with nighttime training operations, Bass said.

"Rucks Nursery is a fantastic example of conservation partnerships in action," Bass said in the release. "Without these established relationships centered around the Avon Park Air Force Range Sentinel Landscape, landscape-scale conservation does not happen. I'm proud

that Conservation Florida, in partnership with Polk County and the Department of Defense, was able to provide a conservation outcome for Mr. Rucks and his family."

Bass, a Winter Haven native now living in Lake Wales, is a retired U.S. Marine. He has worked with Charles "Buck" MacLaughlin, the Range Operations Officer at Avon Park Air Force Range, on several projects.

Unwelcomed visitor: Police capture nearly 8-foot gator at Bartow elementary school

'We are criminalizing poverty': Polk faith leaders urge wider use of pre-arrest diversion

"Having a local partner like Conservation Florida brings trust that opens a lot of doors, or at least starts the conversation," McLaughlin said in the release. "He (Bass) has a great reputation among state landowners, and his military background brings common ground for things that can be difficult approaching from a federal perspective. It's that connectivity component Conservation Florida brings to the table that I think is incredible."

Conservation Florida has helped preserve more than 30,000 acres of land since its founding in 1999, the release said. The organization is actively attempting to protect more than 100,000 more acres, including six projects that include land in Polk and Highlands counties, Bass said.

A map provided by Conservation Florida shows a tract of similar size adjacent to the conservation easement. Bass said that is a separate property the organization is working to have protected.

Tabitha Biehl, Land and Water Natural Areas Manager for Polk County's Parks and Natural Resources Division, began her career working in conservation on the Lake Wales Ridge. She noted that the easement will contribute to preservation of the Florida Wildlife Corridor, a critical ribbon of intact land that allows large mammals to roam through the state.

"There are different tools to move forward with conservation, and conservation easements are a terrific tool to use to provide additional corridors and buffers to existing conservation lands," Biehl said. "This project actually is bordered on three sides by the Lake Wales Ridge State Forest, so this is just great conservation protection. But it also is within the priority area for the Avon Park Air Force Range for protection for them as well."

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