

State agrees to buy 347 acres along Holmes Creek

Neighboring Washington County property has 51 springs within 25 miles of the creek

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by **Deborah Buckhalter**

The state will buy 347 acres in Washington County at a cost of \$780,000, to protect springs and other natural resources on the parcel. Gov. Rick Scott and the Florida Cabinet approved the purchase from Plum Creek Land Company Tuesday.

The land lies within Florida's First Magnitude Springs Florida Forever Project Boundary and contains a 3 rd magnitude spring with more than 2,200 linear feet of water frontage along Holmes Creek, according to the Northwest Florida Water Management District. That agency will manage the property.

The District is grateful to Governor Scott and the Cabinet for approving this purchase and their continued commitment to the protection and restoration of Florida's springs resources," said Governing Board Chairman George Roberts. "By securing land along Holmes Creek, the state and District are partnering to protect the Creek and the more than 50 crystal-clear springs that feed its flow."

In addition to Brunson Landing Spring, a 3 rd magnitude spring that produces an average of 2.6 million gallons of water per day, the property also has two smaller seeps which feed Holmes Creek.

The parcel consists primarily of bottomland forest and hardwood swamp and lies adjacent to Choctawhatchee River Water Management Area, also owned by the District. Leaders of the agency say its management strategy will be to ensure greater environmental protection while providing public access for recreation.

The parcel includes a popular boat ramp which will remain open and continue to be managed by Washington County.

" Holmes Creek and its many crystal clear springs are a wonderful source of family-friendly recreation and a major attraction to our area," said Ted Everett, Executive Director of the Washington County Chamber of Commerce. "Projects like this are a win-win for our communities, as they protect our waterways and make it easier for families to get out and enjoy them."

The District owns and manages more than 60,000 acres along Holmes Creek and the downstream Choctawhatchee River. Holmes Creek is the largest tributary to the Choctawhatchee, and a popular state-designated canoe trail. The purchase-approved property is adjacent to a parcel already owned and managed by the District.

Holmes Creek is primarily a spring-fed creek and includes 51 springs within 25 miles of the creek. Officials said the acquisition will ensure greater spring protection, while maintaining the current public access for fishing, hunting, canoeing, kayaking, boating and hiking.

The nod from Scott and the Cabinet on Tuesday now clears the way for the purchase of this and another Florida Forever project, that one in Monroe County.

“This more than \$4-million investment will protect our springs and environment to ensure future generations can continue to enjoy Florida’s natural treasures,” Scott stated.

The other purchase approved involves a 928.3-acre parcel within the Florida Keys Ecosystem Florida Forever project, which will help safeguard the Outstanding Florida Waters of the Keys, according to a release from the Department of Environmental Protection. In addition, securing the property will preserve hardwood hammocks and many rare plants and animals, including the North American crocodile, Lower Keys marsh rabbit and Key deer.

This parcel, with a purchase price of \$3.6 million, will also help protect recreational and commercial fisheries, reefs around the islands and give residents and visitors more areas for enjoying the natural beauty of the Keys. It will be managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission as an addition to the Florida Keys Wildlife and Environmental Area.

Earlier this month, DEP said the Division of State Lands exceeded its goal of selling \$40 million of non-conservation land to purchase new, valuable conservation lands. These two acquisitions are among those being bought with the funds earned in the sales of the non-conservation lands.