

Consideration of the acquisition of the Barry's Ranch parcel as a Mitigation Park under the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Land Acquisition Trust Fund Wildlife and Habitat Acquisition Program.

**COUNTY:** Alachua

**SELLER:** Barry's Ranch, Inc., Harris K. Solomon and Katherine S. Barry, husband and wife and W.N. Barry, Jr.

**PURCHASE PRICE:** \$13,000,000.00 (contingent upon final approval of appraisals) and all other costs of acquisition.

**ACREAGE:** 1,306 acres +/-

**STAFF REMARKS:** This parcel is one of a group of parcels being reviewed for the establishment of a proposed Gopher Tortoise Mitigation Park. This tract is currently zoned agricultural and is presently being managed as a cattle grazing/row crop operation. This property is currently being offered for sale by Southern Property Services, Inc. It was selected for review due to its match with the gopher tortoise soils complex criteria, its location (rural agricultural land) and conformity with minimum acceptable management criteria, i.e., legal access, contiguous lands, good boundaries, prescribed burning suitability. No further information is known about other previous uses of the property at this time.

Barry's Ranch is located in the southwest corner of Alachua County, 1.25 miles both north and east of the Alachua County/Levy County line. The parcel is on the south side of the city of Newberry, with road frontage on SW County Road 28. The subject parcel is connected on the southwest corner to lands currently owned by the State of Florida, known as the Watermelon Pond Florida Forever Project, connecting important wildlife habitats.

There are no significant building improvements on the site other than fences, a cow pen, and several wells all of which are typical for a beef cattle operation. The parcel contains approximately 1,173 acres of uplands and 133 acres of wetlands. The site is listed in the *Alachua County Comprehensive Land Use Plan* as "Rural/Agricultural", which corresponds to the agricultural zoning designation. The area surrounding the parcel is primarily rural in character with limited development in the immediate vicinity.

Approximately 50% of Barry's Ranch is included within the Watermelon Pond Florida Forever project in which the Division of Forestry (DOF) is the

designated lead managing agency. A portion of the ranch abuts lands being managed by the DOF as a unit of Goethe State Forest (GSF). However, this project is currently designated as a Category B Florida Forever project essentially unfunded under Florida Forever except for a potential bargain purchase acquisition. Further, this proposed purchase does not qualify as a bargain purchase under the Florida Forever criteria.

On May 26, 2006, FWC entered into a Multi-Party Acquisition Agreement (MPAA) with The Nature Conservancy (TNC), and the Department of Environmental Protection, Division of State Lands (DEP/DSL) for this project in order to accelerate acquisition of this tract and work within the landowners' timeframe. TNC had previously been working on this project with Alachua County and has established communications with the owners. Barry's Ranch is also on the Alachua County Forever acquisition list.

Although Alachua County has expressed an interest in participating in the purchase of the ranch; at present, it does not have available funds to participate. Staff also explored having DEP/DSL partner in the acquisition but that is not an option given the Category B designation of the Florida Forever project. In addition, while the owners have expressed an interest in a conservation sale, they are only interested in selling the ranch in its entirety and are actively marketing the property as such. Therefore, if the ranch is going to be acquired it has to be acquired as one tract and the opportunity to acquire the ranch is in a limited time frame given the landowners' time frame and the development pace in this region. Accordingly, TNC now has an option to purchase the entire Barry's Ranch under the terms of the MPAA.

Lying within the Brooksville Ridge physiographic region, the ranch is a mosaic of remnant longleaf pine-turkey oak-wiregrass sandhills; xeric hammock; wet prairie; basin marsh and sandhill lakes; as well as former sandhill natural community that has been converted to row crop/pasture agricultural use. A review of soil data indicates a predominance of desirable upland soils on the site, including a combined 841-acre (64%) coverage of sandhill-supporting Candler and Tavares soils. Within these soil types, roughly 435 acres (33% of the site) support extant sandhill vegetative cover in varying degrees of disturbance and succession. Of the remaining uplands, approximately 325 acres (25%) consist of soils indicative of mesic pine flatwoods and 36 acres (3%) support hardwood hammock.

The ranch is adjacent to the northern end of the 3,280-acre Watermelon Pond tract of GSF (53,398 acres). This tract of GSF is composed of a checkerboard pattern of 640-acre sections distributed within a similar pattern of private property.

A 1¼-mile common boundary between Barry's Ranch and one GSF section occurs along the ranch's southwest boundary. This common boundary lies primarily within a sandhill lake that apparently experiences periodic flooding. A field review of the site revealed a high manageability potential. Adequate access from public roads, well-defined boundaries, extant natural communities, and the rural nature of the area would support common management activities currently employed by FWC, such as prescribed burning and ground cover restoration. Although the general area is designated by the U.S. Census Bureau as an Urban Area, the nearest significant smoke sensitive area is US 27, approximately four miles to the northeast.

The potential for listed species to be located on or to use the parcels is considered high. A gopher tortoise survey of the ranch conducted by FWC staff revealed an average tortoise density of .48 burrows per acre. Listed species that were seen on the tract include Sherman's fox squirrel. Other listed species that occur or are likely to occur on the tract are sandhill crane, eastern indigo snake, Florida pine snake, short-tailed snakes, and gopher frogs, among others. Habitat enhancement and restoration would benefit the long-term viability of listed upland species.

Additionally, Barry's Ranch has a number of resource attributes that make it an excellent candidate as a conservation acquisition proposal. Portions of the ranch have already been evaluated and ranked high enough to be selected for state acquisition as a Florida Forever project. One area of the ranch already borders public conservation land and the other portions of its boundary offer good buffers for prescribed burning. For these reasons, the tract appears to possess the primary characteristics necessary for effective future management, such as its location in a predominately rural area within close proximity too other public conservation lands.

Although the Gopher Tortoise Survey analysis of the tract revealed a viable gopher tortoise population on the ranch, the density of burrows per acre on this tract is less than FWC's generally recommended density of 0.80 burrows per acre for the establishment of Mitigation Parks. This is mainly due the fact that current agricultural operations on portions of the ranch have altered the natural habitat thereby reducing the natural habitat available for gopher tortoises. However, the potential to increase the per acre ratio of gopher tortoises is considered high given the mix of xeric soils and remaining sandhill habitat on the ranch. Consequently, it has very good potential for restoration of the habitat along with a concordant increase in the gopher tortoise population and many of its commensally associated species to historic levels that were likely present on the ranch.

Moreover, the mosaic of existing natural communities on the ranch provides habitat for a diversity of wildlife species. Also, it has good potential for passive resource based recreation, such as hiking and wildlife viewing. For the reasons stated above, Barry's Ranch is recommended for acquisition as a Gopher Tortoise Mitigation Park at this time. Given its resource characteristics and strategic location, this acquisition would provide benefits meriting acquisition under the FWC's Land Acquisition Trust Fund Wildlife Habitat Program.

Acquisition of this tract will help to ensure the survival of wildlife like the gopher tortoise, and other associated fish and wildlife resources. Habitat types exemplified by the gopher tortoise are under increasing pressure for residential development. Thus, the acquisition will conserve an important segment of that habitat. It will also aid in buffering adjoining conservation lands from the fragmentation of wildlife habitat.

Currently, FWC has an agreement to maintain a dove field on the property. If the tract is acquired prior to the close of dove hunting season, the agreement will be terminated at closing and the dove fields would no longer be maintained on the property in order for the property to be restored and managed as gopher tortoise habitat.

In summary, this tract of land is an important and integral component of the Commission's acquisition plans to conserve gopher tortoise habitat along with other fish and wildlife resources in this region of Florida. If acquired, title to the tract will be vested in the Board of Trustees with a long-term lease to the FWC for it to be managed as a Gopher Tortoise Mitigation Park. The property will be managed by the FWC as a Gopher Tortoise Mitigation Park for natural resource conservation, restoration, and resource-based public outdoor recreation within a single-use gopher tortoise habitat management regime.

**RECOMMEND: APPROVAL CONTINGENT UPON FINAL APPROVAL OF THE APPRAISALS AND UPON EXECUTION OF AN OPTION OR AN ASSIGNMENT OF OPTION CONTRACT AND APPROVAL BY THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES**