

## Blackwater River State Forest gets 626 acres of Wolf Creek Forest

**By special to the Daily News**

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NAS WHITING FIELD — The Trust for Public Land announced Tuesday that 626 acres of Wolfe Creek Forest has been acquired and added to the Blackwater River State Forest.

The acquired property includes frontage on Big Coldwater Creek, which is a popular kayaking, tubing, and canoeing stream, according to a press release. It also includes a spring-fed state paddling trail beloved by area paddlers and birdwatchers.

This acquisition will also protect Naval Air Station Whiting Field, water sources, public recreational activities, bird migration and habitat for endangered species and other wildlife.

The Trust for Public Land purchased the property Oct. 18 from CF Florida LLC for a little less than \$1.53 million. The land was sold to the state of Florida for the same price Nov. 4.

“Incorporating this section of Wolfe Creek Forest into the Blackwater River State Forest protects it from development, forever, protecting both the natural resources on the property as well as assuring continued naval air station operations. Our goal is to make sure this land remains a recreational hub and habitat center for generations to come while investing in the future of Whiting Field,” said Doug Hattaway, project manager for the Trust for Public Land.

Funding for the acquisition came by leveraging both Florida Forever funds with the U.S. Navy contribution through its Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program. Protecting the property ensures that land adjacent to the base will not be incompatibly developed in ways that might limit flight operations and vital military training.

NAS Whiting Field is the busiest aviation complex in the world, accounting for almost 15 million annual flight operations, including primary flight training for more than 1,200 students and is the host of 21 tenant activities. Additionally, approximately 600 new helicopter pilots are winged annually and all Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard pilots are trained at NAS Whiting Field. The base supports more than 14,000 local jobs and is a vital economic engine for the area with more than \$1.1 billion in economic impact on the local economy.

“Naval Air Station Whiting Field enjoys a tremendous relationship with the state of Florida and its partners in encouraging compatible land development, conservation of public and private lands and encroachment partnering initiatives,” NAS Whiting Field Commanding Officer Capt. Todd Bahlau stated. “These 600 plus acres are located underneath noise contours, flight track profiles and within a military planning zone. The execution of this project provides a substantial buffer in sustaining our military mission, as well as, safeguarding valuable natural resources.”

The acquisition will also accelerate efforts to fill in a strategic landscape-level gap of long leaf pine forest. Land management will see to the replacement of existing commercial tree species with the native long leaf pine species. Longleaf pine forests once covered more than 90 million acres in the Southeast, but logging reduced their range to only about 3 million acres. Bringing back the native trees will provide the habitat upon which several endangered animal and plant species, such as the red cockaded woodpecker, indigo snake, black-bear and gopher tortoise depend.

“We are excited to work with TPL to acquire the Wolfe Creek Forest property, which will enhance the protection of a variety of natural resources while balancing the public recreational and educational opportunities.” said David Clark, division of state lands director for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. “This property will also serve to provide additional protection to Naval Air Station Whiting Field from potential incompatible development.”