

Family looks to sell land to state

By Jake Martin

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Gov. Rick Scott and the Cabinet on Tuesday will be asked to buy 5,236 acres of timber land in St. Johns County, to be used as a conservation easement, for \$5,975,000.

David Clark, director of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Division of State Lands, said the deal allows the Meldrim family, which has owned the land since the early 1900s, to continue to harvest timber and maintain jobs in the area while permanently limiting development.

"The easement will create a significant watershed buffer for the St. Johns River, protecting and maintaining the water and wetland systems of the state," Clark said.

The land, part of the 26,272-acre St. Johns River Blueway Florida Forever track, runs along the eastern shore of the St. Johns River between Green Cove Springs and Palatka. It is adjacent to the Watson Island State Forest.

The property has four non-contiguous segments of river frontage, totaling about one mile, along the St. Johns River. Additionally, the property has frontage on the Toco Creek, which is a navigable waterway for small water craft.

Working out to about \$1,141 per acre, the sales price is 89 percent of the property's appraised value, according to a Cabinet report recommending approval of the purchase. The land is ranked ninth on the state's Florida Forever Climate Change Lands list.

According to DEP project documents, the St. Johns River Blueway, encompassing properties with a combined taxable value north of \$58.2 million, was added to the Florida Forever priority list in 2002.

"This project is located in one of the fastest areas of growth in the state," the document said, in reference to purposes for state acquisition. "The project is designed to preserve the last remaining shorelines of the St. Johns River and several of its tributaries.

The project also has numerous recorded archaeological and historical resources, and has the potential for many more."

Of the St. Johns River Blueway's 26,272 acres, 6,984 acres have been acquired or are under agreement to be acquired, the Cabinet's report said. If the state approves the deal with the Meldrim family, 19,288 acres, or 73 percent of the project, will remain to be acquired.

According to DEP's website, the state has purchased more than 718,126 acres of land at just over \$2.9 billion since the July 2001 inception of the Florida Forever program.

That page was last updated in February.

The state on March 29 OK'd deals to conserve 617 acres of ranch land in Pasco County and 8,138 acres of timber land in Dixie County. The Pasco purchase cost the state and Pasco county \$3 million each. The Dixie purchase cost the state \$4.2 million.

Both deals allowed current operations to continue while preventing future development.

The News Service of Florida contributed to this report.