

# Tallahassee Democrat.

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## NEWS

# Scott, Cabinet poised to buy 11,000-acre parcel for conservation

*The fence went up more than a decade ago - closing off 10 springs to researchers and a section of the St. Marks to kayaking. Scott and the Cabinet will consider buying the land Tuesday.*

**James Call** Tallahassee Democrat

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The barbed wire fence and no trespassing signs would come down. Behind them sits a cropping of palms lining the shore of a stream bubbling up from an underground spring. The palms are in the sunlight while the cola-colored water flows in the shade of cypress before disappearing into a dense forest of palms, oaks, and maples. The water will eventually find its way to Wakulla Springs, or the St. Marks River while continuing a journey to the Gulf of Mexico. Scientists just don't know how or where it'll flow.

They may know more soon. The fence may be coming down. And that will provide an opening to learn more about Florida's unique limestone aquifer.

Gov. Rick Scott and the Cabinet are poised to set off a celebration among conservationists and outdoor enthusiasts. On the agenda for Tuesday's meeting is the purchase of 11,000 acres along the St. Marks River in Leon County above Natural Bridge Rd.

"It's a beautiful stretch of river. Scenic, canopy, a very wild stretch of river," said nature writer Doug Alderson, a Tallahassee native who has kayaked much of the state. "It's amazing how close it is to Tallahassee and being so remote feeling – totally undeveloped."

## Miracle for Wakulla Springs

The parcel is less than four miles south of Capital Circle and features several springs, sinks, streams and a section of the St. Marks River. It is bordered roughly by Tram, Natural Bridge, and Plank roads. On the east, it abuts land owned by the Nature Conservancy linking it to the Aucilla Wildlife Management Area.

If the state purchases it through the Florida Forever program it would create a wildlife corridor from about south Tallahassee through Wakulla and Jefferson and around the Big Bend into Taylor County. Scientists say the parcel is key to protecting and cleaning water that flows into Wakulla Springs and the Gulf of Mexico.

“This is like a miracle for Wakulla Springs,” said Sean McGlynn of the Wakulla Springs Alliance. “This land, the Horn Springs area, is the hydrological focal point of the region.”

And conservationists are hopeful that approval of the purchase signals an end to a near drought in spending money to preserve wild Florida. The \$16 million price tag is more than the state has spent on buying conservation lands in five of the last seven years.

“It is clearly the largest and most significant Florida Forever purchase in quite a few years,” said Charles Lee of Florida Audubon. “It is the kind of significant state land buy that was seen regularly under the Florida Forever program before funding was slashed in 2009.”

Lee said the purchase has been a long time in the making. It nearly completes a St. Marks River corridor project began in 2003. If Scott and the Cabinet vote yes on Tuesday, then 91 percent of the land targeted 13 years ago will have been bought by the state.

"DEP has had its eye on this ball for a long time," said Lee. "A lot of credit should go to DEP and Gov. Scott."

## **Land with value**

The parcel would appear to be a poster child for the land buying program. It meets just about all of Florida Forever’s goals including:

- Biodiversity protection
- Water supply protection
- Recreational opportunities
- Preserving archaeological sites
- Preserving historical sites, and
- Maintaining forestland

Lee and others will celebrate for an additional reason. They see the land buy as an important step in a long-range goal to create a wildlife corridor from Tallahassee to the Gulf of Mexico.

It’s a vision George Willson embraced around the turn of the century. The St. Joe Company owned the land then and Willson was the company’s vice president for conservation. He said given the area’s unique geology, it is important that the parcel remains undeveloped.

“This is a big deal. It is a project much bigger than the sum of its parts,” said Willson, now a board member of Tall Timber Research Station and Land Conservancy – a land trust based in Leon County.

The region sits on a karst plain. The lack of surface clay enables rainwater to filter quickly into the aquifer.

Hydrologists say North Florida sits atop a water-saturated rock. The sponge-like limestone is riddled with caves, caverns and tunnels creating an underground network of connections linking lakes, streams, rivers and springs.

### **Focal point**

Cave divers have mapped much of the system between Leon County and Wakulla Springs. Their work around the turn of the century proved water from the Tallahassee wastewater spray field eventually bubbled up in Wakulla Springs. Further study of the underground flow of water to the spring have been blocked.

About four miles south of Capital Circle is a barbed wire fence barring the public from what McGlynn called the region’s hydrological focal point.

“The whole Woodville area spring shed goes right through there and we have not mapped those caves,” said McGlynn. “This (will) give us access to the caves and caverns to explore and connect the dots. Gather data on direction and flow.”

### **Virgin forest**

Others are excited about the proposal for a variety of reasons. Lee said there is virgin forest on the property and almost every kind of habitat found in Florida, hardwood swamps, coastal flood plains and sand hills.

The land had been the frontier for much of written history. Native Americans, Spanish explorers, African slaves, Civil War combatants all have left evidence of their presence. The Florida forest conceals the remains of ancient settlements, cemeteries for slaves and forgotten villages. The land is next to the battlefield where a contingent of Tallahassee-based Confederates beat back an invasion of Union soldiers shortly before the war’s end.

The property is just south of what may have been the largest antebellum plantation in the Southeast. The Chaires Plantation ruins was a popular hangout for Tallahassee teens for years.

Both McGlynn and Alderson are middle-aged and remember roaming its springs and rivers in the woods south of Capital Circle as teenagers and recall giant cypress in swamps. McGlynn said they were as “wide as cars.” Alderson recalls a hollowed cypress in which “five people could fit.”

Alderson has written about kayaking this nine-mile section of the St. Marks in two books. In "Wild Florida Waters" he recalled artifact looters being busted and fishermen being startled by apparent cave divers in scuba gear surfacing near their fishing spot.

Although anglers, hikers, kayakers and outdoors people, in general, applaud the proposal, water advocates stress the proposal is about protecting water and further understanding how it flows in and out of the aquifer as it makes its way to the sea.

They explain the lack of clay on the surface allows water to quickly percolate into the aquifer. They are not exactly clear on what happens next but say a lot can be learned by mapping its flow through underground caves.

When asked his thoughts on the proposal, Gov. Rick Scott expressed a commitment to clean water. He declined further comment other than to say he and Cabinet members were looking forward to a public discussion Tuesday.

The environmentalists are also looking forward to the discussion. They’ve been practicing their talking points since long before the agenda was set.

“This will protect estuaries along the northwest Gulf coast,” said Willson about the purchase. “Forest land is the best land use for water resources.”

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