

## Advocates applaud Blue Springs purchase

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The 407-acre acquisition will stave off activities that could degrade the springs' water quality and the Santa Fe River had the park been bought by a private owner.

"We're happy to see it in public ownership and we look forward to the park restoring it and managing it," said Robert Knight, executive director of the High Springs-based Florida Springs Institute. "We are really looking forward to the state having the resources to upgrade the infrastructure there."

The park is off Gilchrist County Road 340 just west of the Alachua County line near High Springs and has been owned by a single family, now represented by siblings Kimberly Davis and Matt Barr, since 1958. It has been on the market since 2013.

Davis was quoted Wednesday in a Florida Department of Environmental Protection news release as saying the park will be in good hands.

"For decades, my family has worked to protect one of this state's most beautiful natural treasures," said Davis, of Blue Springs Properties Inc. "We're excited that this acquisition will allow this legacy to continue."

In 2015 DEP's Acquisition of Restoration Council voted to add the Blue Springs proposal to the Florida's First Magnitude Springs project.

The Florida Forever land acquisition program is providing the money for Blue Springs and a 6,000-acre project in Polk and Hardee counties that was also approved Wednesday.

DEP Secretary Noah Valenstein, appointed to the position May 23, said Wednesday he intends to continue using the money in the Florida Forever account.

"We want to bring in more great acquisitions like the two today, ones that really resonate with the local community as jewels for Florida," said Valenstein, who grew up in Gainesville.

Blue Springs will be the latest spring-based park along the Suwannee and Santa Fe rivers. Others include Ichetucknee, Lafayette Blue, Manatee and Fanning.

Knight said many of the springs are suffering from a drop in the Floridan aquifer, which produces spring water. That decline is primarily due to population growth in the immediate area and as far as Jacksonville.

Valenstein, director of the Suwannee River Water Management District before being tapped as DEP secretary, drew praise from Knight for his attention to springs.

"This is a great first step for (Valenstein), who has been very good at working with various environmental groups including the Springs Institute," Knight said. "My understanding is he has a long history with the springs in this area and is very familiar with the springs. He recently went on a spring hopping field trip on the Santa Fe and really enjoyed the outdoors and environmental aspects of the trip."

— *The News Service of Florida contributed to this report.*