

Watermelon Pond Conservation Cooperative: Using Public-private Partnerships and Leveraging Technical and Financial Resources to Achieve Florida's Wildlife Legacy Initiative Goals

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Abstract: As part of the nation-wide state wildlife grants effort, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) created Florida's Wildlife Legacy Initiative to serve the agency's commitment to conserve all native wildlife and their habitats. The Initiative identified sandhill and scrub habitat as the highest priority terrestrial habitats based upon current threats such as development and altered fire regime. Following goals set by the Initiative, we identified an area of remnant sandhill and scrub habitat in southwest Alachua County and northeast Levy County, known as Watermelon Pond, for an ecosystem restoration effort termed the Watermelon Pond Conservation Cooperative. The goal of the Cooperative is to enhance sandhill and scrub habitats and improve ecosystem connectivity by working with private landowners to implement land management activities. The approximately 17,000-acre area contains a mosaic of private and public ownerships. Formation of this ground-root local conservation effort will foster increased cooperation and communication between area private landowners and public lands managers. Eight landowners, who own approximately 1,300 acres, have begun to participate through a cost share and technical assistance program funded by State Wildlife Grants (Common Species Common Program). Additional landowners who own 11,200 acres were invited to participate in a workshop in April 2007. The workshop provided an opportunity for public land managers and private landowners to meet and discuss the importance of Watermelon Pond to wildlife and discuss technical assistance, cost-share programs, and conservation easements available to landowners. Participation in the development of this Cooperative was also solicited. Thirty landowners attended the workshop and discussed their concerns, need for technical assistance, and commitment to conservation. Fifteen landowners agreed to pursue forming a Watermelon Pond steering committee, and signed up for technical assistance. Management plans for these landowners are currently being developed and reviewed.

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