

LEGISLATIVE

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**Environmental Site Assessment
Suwannee River Water Management District Parcel**

City of Gainesville
Recreation and Parks Department
Nature Operations Division
October 11, 2002

Site Description

This report is an environmental assessment of Alachua County parcel 07781-002-000, subsequently referred to as the Suwannee River Water Management (SRWMD) Parcel. The SRWMD Parcel is approximately 60 acres in size. The property is located in a rural section of the County, a little over a mile north of the City of Gainesville city limit. The property is surrounded primarily by timber agriculture, with a few residential parcels to the south.

The SRWMD Parcel is currently owned by the Suwannee River Water Management District and is adjacent to the GRU Wellfield Conservation Easement, a 7102-acre parcel owned by The Paper Company under a conservation easement in cooperation with SRWMD, St. Johns River Water Management District, and the City of Gainesville for protection of water resources.

SRWMD has contacted the City of Gainesville in the interest of donating the property to the City for use as a recreational park. This report describes the environmental features and management potential of the property.

Environmental Features

The SRWMD Parcel consists of primarily three distinct vegetative communities. The entire site has been disturbed to varying degrees. Approximately 1.61 acres of the site most closely resembles a Basin Swamp natural community as described by FNAI (1990). Vegetation in this area includes red maple (*Acer rubrum*), cypress (*Taxodium* spp.), tupelo (*Nyssa* spp.), red bay (*Persea borbonia*), and laurel oak (*Quercus laurifolia*). The dominant groundcover is grapevine (*Vitis rotundifolia*), others include lizard tail (*Saururus cernuus*) and various ferns. No water was present in the wetland during the site visit, and it appears that the hydrology has been altered as evident by a ditch running from the wetland south into an adjacent property.

The rest of the site consists of upland areas. Approximately 19 acres are a naturally regenerating Mesic Pine Flatwoods. This area was previously a pine plantation, however all pines have been harvested from the area. Old bedding is evident, but has eroded with time and is now minimal. The site appears to have been harvested several years ago. The site has many typical species of a pine flatwoods natural community such as gallberry (*Ilex glabra*), saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*), grapevine, blackberry (*Rubus* spp.), dog fennel (*Eupatorium* spp.), and winged sumac (*Rhus copallina*), with an overstory of widely scattered water oaks (*Quercus nigra*), laurel oak, and persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*). A pine overstory is no longer present, although a few slash pines (*Pinus elliotii*) are regenerating in the area.

The remainder of the site, approximately 38 acres, is a pine plantation, with about 5-7 year old slash pines planted in bedded rows. Understory species include those present in the other upland community of the site, but is less diverse probably due to the high degree of soil disturbance (bedding) and the shading by the dense pine overstory.

Management Considerations

The SRWMD Parcel, although highly disturbed, has potential for restoration. The naturally regenerating portion of the uplands has many of the typical species that is expected in a pine flatwoods community with the exception of the pine overstory. The groundcover present would readily carry fire, which is the dominant ecosystem process necessary to maintain this natural community. The application of a fire regime at 3-5 year intervals, with subsequent planting of longleaf pines, may be all that is necessary to restore this upland to a high quality mesic flatwoods community. The remainder of the uplands, however, would require a higher degree of restoration effort, including a substantial thinning of the pines, and grading of the soil beds may be necessary.

Restoring the wetland hydrology, which may be accomplished by filling in any outflow ditches, would be the major objective for restoration of the wetland community. There is still evidence of adequate wetland hydrology, including the dominance by hydrophytic vegetation and recent high water marks on trees. However, the majority of the wetland is located off site on the Paper Company property, which could impact restoration efforts. Extensive long-term restorations efforts would be required to return the property to a more natural assemblage.

The 60-acre parcel does not lend itself to use as a nature park due to the condition of the property and the lack of intact natural communities. A more appropriate use for this parcel might be for active recreation such as soccer or baseball fields. Charlie Houser, Director of the Department of Land Acquisition and Management, SRWMD, indicated that the parcel could be utilized by the City for active recreation. This use would help address the need for recreational facilities in northern Gainesville. Mr. Houser would be glad to provide additional information and to meet with City staff to discuss developing a park for active recreation at this site. He can be reached at (386) 362-1056 or houser_c@srwmd.state.fl.us.