

## The Birth of a Forest

by Dr. Rob Norman

Imagine witnessing the birth of a forest, an event rarely seen anywhere in this country, especially given today's political and economic environment. The birth of a forest, in this case, refers to the Silver Springs Forest, a key purchase from Rayonier of a property that is crucial to the survival of our rivers, provides wonderful recreational opportunities, and establishes an important wildlife corridor.

On Dec. 16, 2015, the birth happened at a gathering of 70 or so that included the former Florida Governor Buddy MacKay and State Senator Charlie Dean. People from state and local government, the forestry industry and the environmental community came together in the new forest to celebrate the purchase of Silver Springs Forest that places the 4,900-acre tract north of Silver Springs into public ownership. The act will protect Silver Springs and the Silver and Ocklawaha rivers and provide wonderful lands for all of us to explore and cherish.

"Today's celebration gave us a glimpse of the exciting restoration and enhancement opportunities to come," said St. Johns River Water Management District Executive Director Ann Shortelle. "Thanks to the creative partnership and vision of many people, public ownership of Silver Springs Forest creates excellent potential for water storage

projects, as well as allowing for restoration that will improve water quality in waters flowing to one of Florida's most iconic spring systems."

Guy Marwick, a long-time environmental activist, wrote, "The purchase of the Silver Springs Forest was one of the best acquisitions of land that could have happened in Marion County. This 4,900 acres was the missing piece of a puzzle that now connects the Silver Springs State Park and the Cross Florida Greenway to the Indian Lake State Forest."

The district, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Conservation Trust for Florida (CTF) partnered on the \$11.5 million purchase from Rayonier, Inc. On December 10, the district took ownership of the property, which was purchased with \$2 million in funding from DEP, \$488,000 from CTF and \$3 million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forestry Service's Forest Legacy Program. The St. Johns River Water Management District handled the balance.

"This 4,900-acre acquisition is one of many projects made possible due to the record funding for springs restoration provided by Governor Scott and the Florida Legislature this year, is a clear demonstration of the state's ongoing commitment to protecting our important water resources," said DEP Secretary Jon Steverson.

"Springs are among the state's highest environmental priorities, and Silver Springs is one of Florida's most precious natural resources," said Senator Charlie Dean. "Purchasing the forestland just north of the spring will protect Outstanding Florida Waters that flow into the

Silver and Ocklawaha rivers and provide significant opportunities for aquifer recharge. I am proud to have been part of this event to commemorate this very successful public private partnership."

"We are proud to partner with the district, the state, U.S. Forest Legacy, and CTF to preserve this important piece of forest," said David L. Nunes, president and CEO of Rayonier. "Large, contiguous forested landscapes, such as this one, filter rainwater, remove pollutants, and protect fish and wildlife habitat. This innovative public-private partnership will assure that these public benefits are provided in perpetuity thanks to the hard work by all the stakeholders involved."

"I'd like to thank Dr. Ann Shortelle, the district's executive director, for her commitment to the Silver Springs Forest project and the district's Governing Board for unanimously approving to purchase and manage the property," said Susan Carr, CTF president. "We are thrilled to report that CTF helped affect this acquisition by negotiating the purchase contract and raising needed funding. We could not have done it without substantial donations from the Felburn Foundation, the Rick and Nancy Moskovitz Foundation, Matt and Ellen Dube in memory of Bill and Bonnie Huntley, Dr. Robert Norman and others."

Carr noted that the 4900 acre property "lies in the heart of the spring shed, meaning that these lands are roughly in the center of the two year recharge zone, where surface water infiltrates the surface and contributes to the groundwater and aquifer. The quantity and quality of this water influence the health and ecology of Silver Springs, the Ocklawaha River, and surrounding

floodplains. Similarly, Silver Springs Forest contains the headwaters of two tributaries that feed the Silver and Ocklawaha rivers. Protection and restoration of local hydrology will benefit these rivers. The St. Johns River Water Management District is well funded and qualified to implement the needed hydrology and ecological restoration on the Forest.”

The public will have the opportunity to influence the management of Silver Springs Forest since it is now public land. “Cessation of commercial timber production and associated chemical applications as part of management will reduce nutrient pollution in the Silver and Ocklawaha river watersheds,” Carr said. “The Silver Springs Forest provides a buffer between Silver Springs (Silver River) and the rapidly expanding beef and chicken processing facilities directly to the North.”

"As both a district Governing Board member and a resident of Marion County, the purchase of Silver Springs Forest is a very special opportunity," said district Board Vice Chairman Fred Roberts of Ocala. "Through this acquisition, we are able to conserve and expand the natural, cultural and recreational resources of Marion County. Linking these thousands of acres of public lands creates a 20-mile ecological greenway that will increase public recreational opportunities and enhance the area's wildlife habitat."

“Fragmentation of habitat is one of the big ecological problems facing both wildlife corridors and hiking trails for people,” Marwick said. “There are many other benefits to this new acquisition that will help the health of Silver Springs. Filtration and recharge of both surface and groundwater recharge help both quality and quantity of water in an already imperiled ecosystem.

The St. Johns River Water Management District made a wise decision when they bought this important property from Rayonier. Ecotourism will be an additional benefit to all the people who live in Florida and the many visitors who will come to enjoy the great experiences in nature this will provide.”

In summary, the benefits of the acquisition include:

Protecting the headwaters of Halfmile Creek and an unnamed tributary that flow into the Silver and Ocklawaha rivers, which are designated as Outstanding Florida Waters.

Contributing to an eight-mile buffer zone where forests "capture" rainwater to recharge the aquifer and augment the springs' flow.

Linking Indian Lake State Forest, Silver Springs State Park, the Cross Florida Greenway and district-managed lands to the Ocala National Forest.

Creating a 20-mile ecological greenway that will enhance wildlife habitat.

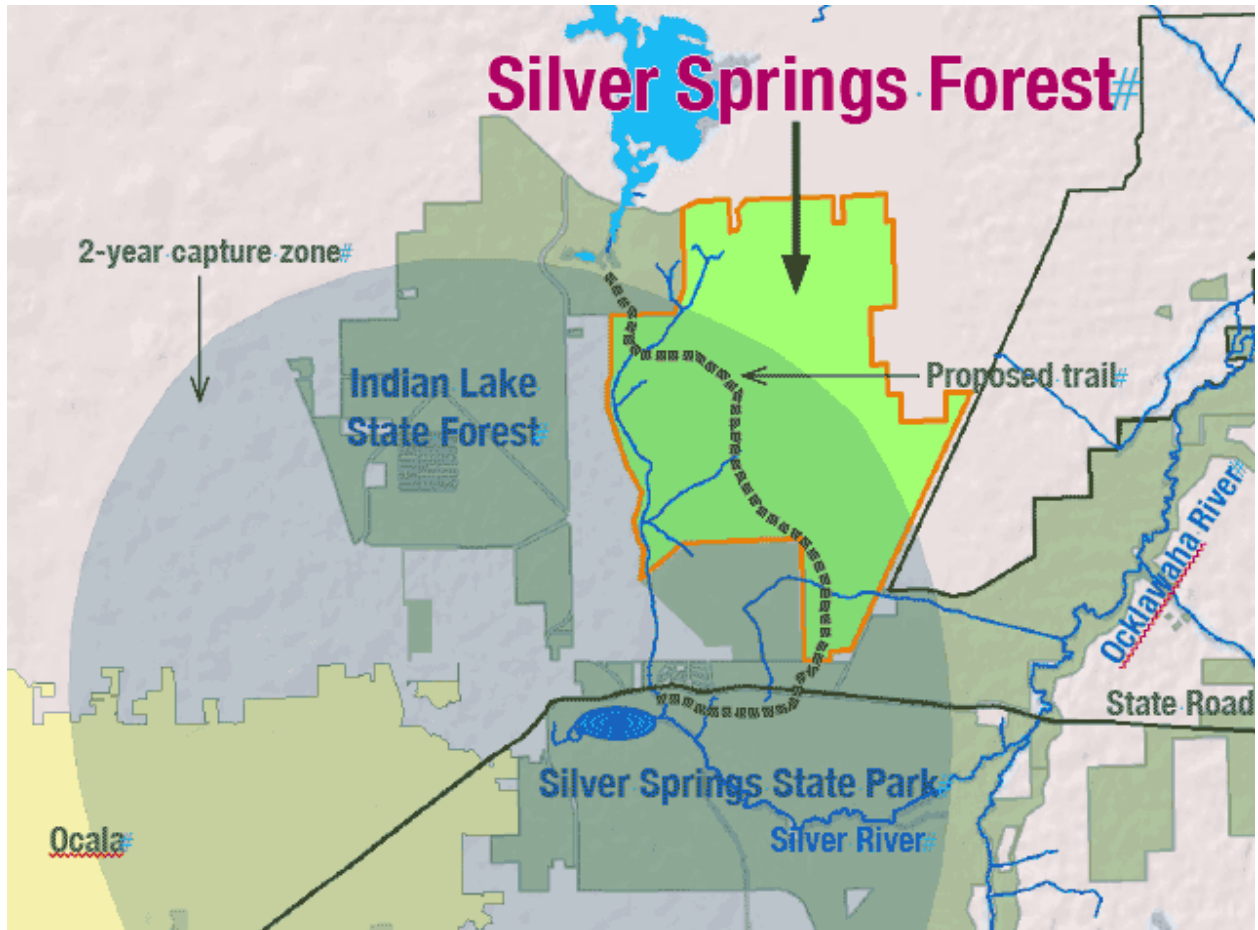
Increasing public opportunities for outdoor recreation.

“Moments like today is a dream come true,” Senator Dean told the crowd. While years ago this might have seemed impossible, “It's a reality today.”

Come out and enjoy our new forest!

Thank you to the St. Johns River Water Management District for help with this article. I have enormous appreciation for all those who contributed to the birth of the new forest.

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The Silver Springs Forest is an important link between existing public lands: The Ocala National Forest, Indian Lake State Forest, and the Silver Springs State Park.

<http://conserveflorida.org/silver-springs-forest/>