

Savanna preserve is on tap

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Purchase would lock up key preserve chain

□ If the state buys the Triple-N Ranch, it would own a link between key wildlife areas in Osceola.

By Beverly Keneagy

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

HOLOPAW — A 41,459-acre tract of prairie and wetlands between the Bull Creek and Three Lakes wildlife management areas is being targeted by environmentalists for acquisition and preservation.

The project, known as the Osceola Pine Savannas, is south of U.S. Highway 192, east of U.S. Highway 441 and ends at Three Lakes near Kenansville. The tract has been nominated by two state agencies for the Florida Conservation and Recreation Lands priority list for acquisition.

If it is bought, it would preserve a wildlife and hydrologic corridor between the two wildlife management areas, and it would be available to the public for camping, hiking and hunting.

A partner in the acquisition might be the St. Johns River Water Management District, which is considering buying 10,322 acres at the northern end of the tract.

Water managers who toured the site Friday by four-wheel-drive vehicle and helicopter said they liked what they saw.

"It's a gorgeous piece of property," said Bill Segal, a district board member from Orlando. "It would make a fine acquisition. It has tremendous resource value."

Segal and the others on the scouting trip looked at cypress domes, oak scrub and open prairie dotted with pockets of wetlands. They saw herons, hawks and some pitcher plants, a threatened species.

The land, known as the Triple-N Ranch, is owned by Central Florida real estate broker Maury L.

Carter and investors, who are willing sellers.

The water management district already owns 20,000 acres in the Bull Creek Wildlife Management Area, which borders Brevard County.

With Bull Creek already preserved and the Osceola Pine Savannas on the horizon, "If we're able to get all the pieces, that would be an impressive collection of land," said Robert Christianson, the district's director of planning and acquisition.

The Bull Creek area is where Brevard County wanted to sink drinking water wells and pump the water to Melbourne. That idea was stopped due to environmental concerns and opposition from Osceola County.

If the latest tract is bought, it's unlikely the drilling proposal could be revived because of the same environmental reasons, Christianson said.