

Section 4(f) Resources

Florida Department of Transportation

SR 70 FROM JEFFERSON AVE TO CR 29

District: FDOT District 1

County: Highlands County

ETDM Number: 3054

Financial Management Number: 414506-1-22-01

Federal-Aid Project Number: 1502-018-P

Project Manager: Kathern Cothorn

The environmental review, consultation, and other actions required by applicable federal environmental laws for this project are being, or have been, carried out by the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) pursuant to 23 U.S.C. § 327 and a Memorandum of Understanding dated May 26, 2022 and executed by the Federal Highway Administration and FDOT. Submitted pursuant 49 U.S.C. § 303.

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Summary and Approval

Resource Name	Facility Type	Property Classification	Owner/Official with Jurisdiction	Recommended Outcome	OEM SME Action
Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area (LWRWEA) Lake Placid Scrub Tract	Wildlife Management Area	Park/Rec Area, Wildlife/Water Fowl Refuge	Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission	<i>de minimis</i>	Pending

Director of the Office of Environmental Management
Florida Department of Transportation

Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area (LWRWEA) Lake Placid Scrub Tract

Facility Type: Wildlife Management Area

Property Classification: Park/Rec Area, Wildlife/Water Fowl Refuge

Address and Coordinates:

Address:

Latitude: Longitude:

Description of Property:

The Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area (LWRWEA) consists of nineteen (19) separate geographic units or tracts scattered over approximately 75 miles of the Lake Wales Ridge and Winter Haven Ridge in Polk and Highlands counties. The Lake Placid Scrub Tract is 3,161 acres in size and is located north of SR 70, approximately 4.19 miles southwest of the City of Lake Placid in Highlands County. The Lake Placid Scrub Tract was the first property acquired as part of the LWRWEA in 1993. The Lake Placid Scrub Tract property is used by the public for various outdoor recreational activities including hunting, fishing, hiking, bicycling, and horseback riding.

The Lake Placid Scrub Tract contains several important (and increasingly rare) native Florida habitat types, including scrubby flatwoods, mesic flatwoods, scrub, sandhill, hydric flatwoods, and baygall. The FWC implements prescribed burning on this property to manage the tract's habitats. Multiple rare species utilize the habitats present in the Lake Placid Scrub Tract, including the federally-threatened Florida scrub-jay, eastern indigo snake, and sand skink.

The Lake Placid Scrub Tract includes a public dirt parking lot located east of Placid View Drive with trails accessible from this parking lot. There is an informational kiosk located in the parking lot. The trails allow for hiking and cycling through Florida scrub and along the banks of Lake Placid. Boat access is also provided at Lake Placid. In addition to hiking, biking, and boating, the Lake Placid Scrub Tract provides the public with opportunities for wildlife viewing, fishing, and horseback riding. There is an observation platform located on the northern property boundary. The Lake Placid Scrub Tract also includes a homestead near the southwest corner of the property. This homestead is considered a cultural resource and is protected during management activities.

Owner/Official with Jurisdiction: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Recommended Outcome: *de minimis*

Yes No

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| ☒ | ☐ | Was there coordination with the Official(s) with Jurisdiction to identify an opportunity for a <i>de minimis</i> finding? |
| ☒ | ☐ | Was the OWJ informed by the District of FDOT's intent to pursue a <i>de minimis</i> approval option? |
| ☒ | ☐ | Was the OWJ informed in writing that their concurrence with a no adverse effect finding to the activities, features or attributes which qualify the property for protection may result in FDOT making a <i>de minimis</i> approval under Section 4(f)? |
| ☒ | ☐ | Did the OWJ concur that the proposed project, including any enhancement, mitigation and minimization of harm measures, will result in no adverse effects to the activities features or attributes of the property? |

Basis on Which the Determination was Made

Access to the LWRWEA Lake Placid Scrub Tract will not be affected by the proposed project improvements. Additionally, the project will not impact any portions of the Lake Placid Scrub Tract property which provide recreational uses to the public. The impacted lands are solely conservation lands and will be appropriately replaced as part of the Section 4(f) and Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) replacement land process. While the project will result in 46.37 acres of impacts to the Lake Placid Scrub Tract, this represents approximately only 1.5% of the entire Lake Wales Scrub Tract and 0.3% of the entire LWRWEA. To offset project impacts to the LWRWEA, FDOT is committed to implementing the mitigative measures which will be outlined in the final FWC Consent Letter to the FDEP, as agreed upon by the FDOT and FWC. FDOT and FWC will continue to work through the ARC process and FDOT will adhere to the final conditions included in the final Consent Letter. The final Consent Letter is anticipated to include mitigative measures such as the following:

- Purchase of appropriate replacement lands by FDOT in accordance with the State Linear Facilities Policy and chosen in coordination with FWC
- Replacement Lands will be conveyed to FWC by FDOT
- FDOT will provide funding for restoration and management for replacement lands as requested by FWC
- FDOT will coordinate with FWC on other items for the replacement lands such as vegetation control, fencing, and firebreaks
- FDOT will coordinate with FWC on wildlife crossing locations within the project limits

Based upon the above information and that the impacts to the LWRWEA will be replaced at a level to meet or exceed the minimum mitigation requirements at locations acceptable to the applicable State agencies, FDOT anticipates there will be no adverse effects to the activities, features, and attributes that qualify the LWRWEA for protection under Section 4(f).

Public Involvement Activities:

OEM SME Concurrence Date: Pending

Project-Level Attachments

None

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Resource Attachments

Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area (LWRWEA) Lake Placid Scrub Tract

Lake Placid Scrub Tract Map

FWC De Minimis Concurrence Letter

Section 4(f) de minimis letter to FWC

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Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area (LWRWEA) Lake Placid Scrub Tract

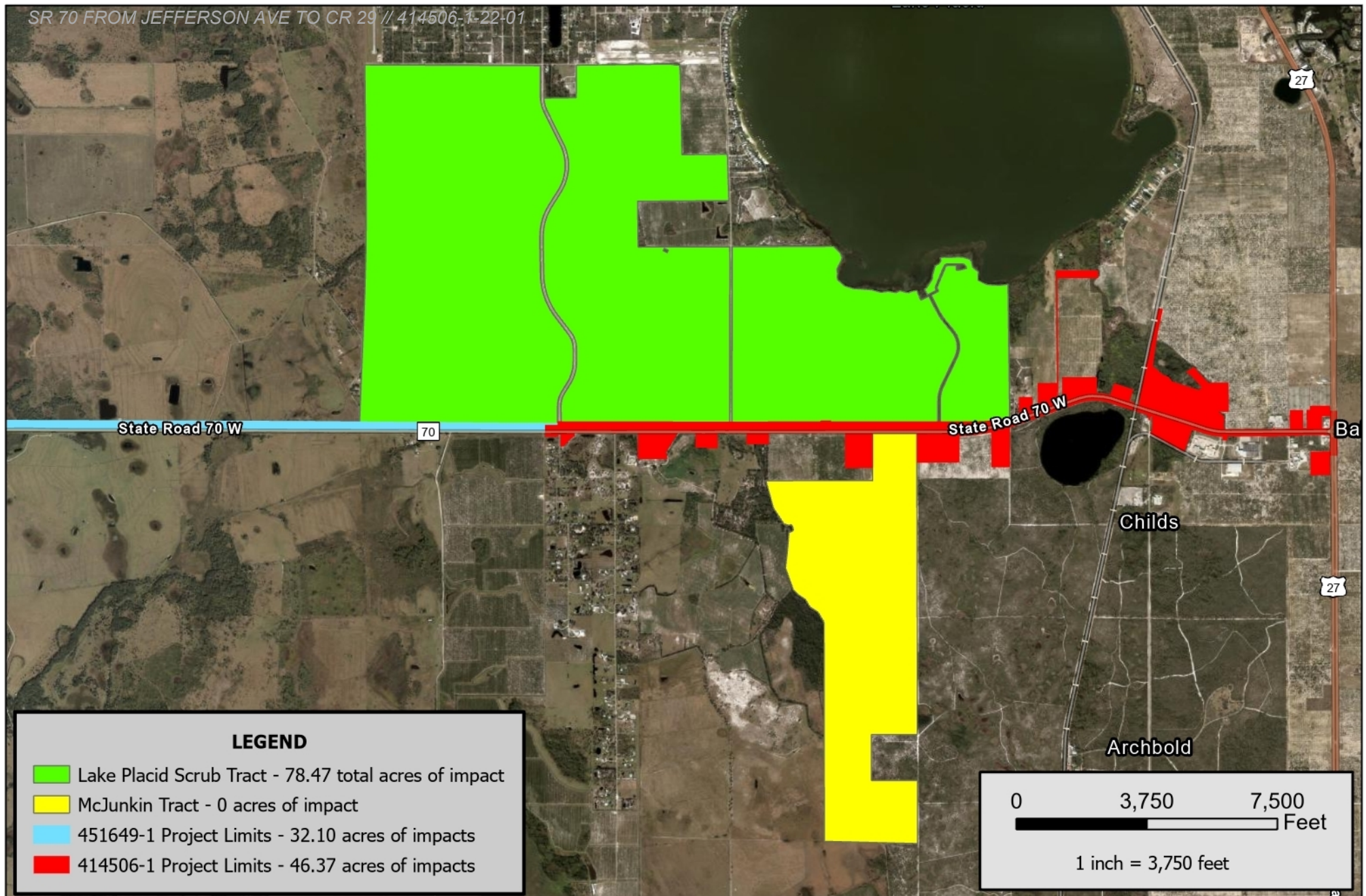
Contents:

Lake Placid Scrub Tract Map

FWC De Minimis Concurrence Letter

Section 4(f) de minimis letter to FWC

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LEGEND

- Lake Placid Scrub Tract - 78.47 total acres of impact
- McJunkin Tract - 0 acres of impact
- 451649-1 Project Limits - 32.10 acres of impacts
- 414506-1 Project Limits - 46.37 acres of impacts

0 3,750 7,500
Feet
1 inch = 3,750 feet

State Road 70 PD&E Study

From Jefferson Avenue to County Road 29 &
From Desoto/Highlands County Line to Jefferson Avenue
Highlands County, Florida
Financial Project IDs: 414506-1-22-01 & 451649-1-22-01
Federal Aid Project #s: 1502-018-P & TBD



February 9, 2026

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

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Melody Joyner, CPM
Corridors Project Development Manager
Florida Department of Transportation, District One
801 North Broadway Avenue
Bartow, FL 33830

RE: Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area Section 4(f) *de minimis* Impact Determination for State Road 70 Project Development & Environment Studies from Jefferson Avenue to County Road 29 (FPID# 414506-1-22-01) & from DeSoto/Highlands County Line to Jefferson Avenue (FPID# 451649-1-22-01) Highlands County, Florida

The Wildlife and Habitat Management Section of the Division of Habitat and Species Conservation of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) understands as part of the State Road (SR) 70 Project Development & Environment (PD&E) studies, the Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area (LWRWEA) was identified as having Section 4(f) applicability, and that in order to fulfill Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) obligations under 4(f) of the United States Department of Transportation Act of 1966 and the use of federal funds for the subject project, concurrence from the FWC regarding your assessment of the project's impacts on the LWRWEA and your proposed measures for minimizing and mitigating these impacts is needed. These assessments are contained in your Programmatic Section 4(f) Evaluation, as provided to us.

FDOT is proposing widening of approximately 17.2 miles of SR 70 in Highlands County. As FDOT states, the purpose of the PD&E studies (FPID# 414506-1 and 451649-1) is to address traffic safety conditions and roadway deficiencies on SR 70, maintain important east-west connectivity within the regional transportation network and accommodate freight activity within the area. The proposed actions for both studies include widening the existing two-lane undivided roadway to a four-lane divided roadway to accomplish the project purpose and need. For both project segments, the proposed improvements will include the construction of wildlife crossing features, roadway signing and pavement markings, and stormwater management facilities. These proposed activities would impact 78.47 acres of the LWRWEA.

The FWC manages the 17,715-acre LWRWEA under Lease 4034 from the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund (Board of Trustees). The FWC manages the Lake Wales Ridge Ecosystem Area to safeguard its unique environment, which is one of North America's oldest and most endangered ecosystems. The FWC's core mission is to conserve the area's rare, ancient shorelines and dunes, and the distinctive endemic plants and wildlife that exist exclusively in this region globally. The LWRWEA provides vital water quality protection for local water bodies and plays a critical role in safeguarding the Floridan aquifer, the state's primary source of drinking water. It protects a diverse array of natural communities, including scrub, mesic flatwoods, scrubby flatwoods, and prairie, along with associated swamps, marshes, and seepage slopes. Additionally, the area offers various recreational opportunities such as hiking, bicycling, wildlife watching, fishing, and horseback riding.

The FWC is constitutionally mandated, as the managing agency for the LWRWEA, to protect this state-owned conservation land. Legislation also mandates that state-owned conservation land is to be held in perpetuity. Under these guidelines and through its analysis of the potential impacts to the resources, operational management, and public use for each wildlife conservation area affected by other applications for use, the FWC strives to make recommendations to avoid or ameliorate those impacts. The FWC balances the indicated need for alternative uses of state-

owned conservation lands with ensuring its primary mission of conserving the State's natural resources is equitably maintained.

As noted in FDOT's letter, FDOT understands that the LWRWEA is a significant resource and plays an important role in meeting recreational and environmental area objectives of the FWC. Also, as it relates to FDOT's proposed Section 4(f) *de minimis* determination per 23 Code of Federal Regulations Part 774 for this project, a *de minimis* determination does not mean that the proposed impact to the LWRWEA is insignificant. A *de minimis* impact is one that is found to be minimal, and after taking into account measures to minimize harm (e.g., avoidance, minimization, mitigation, enhancement measures), results in a determination that the SR 70 project would not adversely affect the activities, features, or attributes qualifying a park, recreation area, refuge, or historical/archaeological site for protection under Section 4(f), and that FWC, the Official with Jurisdiction, has concurred with these findings.

To offset proposed project impacts to the LWRWEA, FDOT has relayed their commitment to implementing the mitigative measures which will be further outlined in the final FWC Consent Letter to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), as agreed upon by FDOT and FWC, and in compliance with the Linear Facilities Policy, including mitigative measures such as the following:

- Purchase of appropriate replacement lands by FDOT in accordance with the State, which are to be conveyed to the Board of Trustees
- FDOT will provide funding for restoration and management for replacement lands
- FDOT will coordinate with FWC on other items for the replacement lands such as vegetation control, fencing, and firebreaks
- FDOT will coordinate with FWC on wildlife crossing locations in the project limits

The proposed SR 70 widening project will not affect access to the LWRWEA. Impacts to conservation lands will be mitigated through appropriate replacement as part of the Section 4(f) and Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) coordination processes. In view of the above, and contingent on satisfactory coordination and adequate mitigation – meeting or exceeding minimum requirements at approved state locations – we concur that the project would not impair the LWRWEA's use, as documented in the Section 4(f) Programmatic Evaluation.

This document does not grant land use approval. The final determination of impacts and mitigation will occur during the project's final design, adhering to all agency requirements. Authorization to use state conservation lands requires a separate application, review, and approval process with the property owner, the Board of Trustees, coordinated through the FDEP and ARC.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the findings of this letter, please contact Larame Ferry at (850) 487-9185 or Larame.Ferry@MyFWC.com.

Sincerely,

James C Conner III

James C. Conner, III, Leader
Wildlife and Habitat Management Section
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

CC: Jennifer Goff, HSC Deputy Director
William Burnett, HSC Conservation and Planning Services Director
Brad Richardson, Bureau Chief, Bureau of Public Land Administration, FDEP



Florida Department of Transportation

RON DESANTIS
GOVERNOR

801 N. Broadway Avenue
Bartow, FL 33830-3809

JARED W. PERDUE, P.E.
SECRETARY

December 1, 2025

Larame Ferry
Land Conservation and Planning Administrator
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
620 S. Meridian Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399

**RE: Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area
(LWRWEA) Section 4(f) *de minimis* Impact Determination
State Road 70 Project Development & Environment Studies
from Jefferson Avenue to County Road 29 (FPID# 414506-1-22-01) &
from DeSoto/Highlands County Line to Jefferson Avenue (FPID# 451649-1-22-01)
Highlands County, Florida**

Dear Ms. Ferry:

The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), District One, is conducting Project Development and Environment (PD&E) studies to evaluate the proposed widening of approximately 17.2 miles of State Road (S.R.) 70 in Highlands County, Florida. The first study is from Jefferson Avenue to County Road (C.R.) 29 (FPID# 414506-1) and is approximately 7.0 miles long. The second study is from the DeSoto/Highlands County Line to Jefferson Avenue (FPID# 451649-1) and is approximately 10.2 miles long. The purpose of these PD&E studies is to address traffic safety conditions and roadway deficiencies on S.R. 70, maintain important east-west connectivity within the regional transportation network and accommodate freight activity within the area. The proposed actions for both studies will widen the existing two-lane undivided roadway to a four-lane divided roadway to accomplish the project purpose and need. For both project segments, the proposed improvements will include the construction of wildlife crossing features, roadway signing and pavement markings, and stormwater management facilities. The limits of these studies are shown in **Figure 1**.

Section 4(f) of the United States (U.S.) Department of Transportation (USDOT) Act of 1966 requires USDOT agencies (and their legally authorized designees) to make specific findings when a USDOT-funded or approved transportation project requires the use of land from a Section 4(f) protected property. These properties typically include publicly owned land such as a public park, recreation area, or wildlife and waterfowl refuge of national, state, or local

significance, or land of a historic or archeological site of national, state, or local significance. Section 4(f) applies through the use of federal funding for the subject project.

FDOT has identified the Lake Placid Scrub and McJunkin Tracts of the Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area (LWRWEA) as publicly owned, officially designated, and managed by your agency, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). Considering this, the LWRWEA qualifies as a Section 4(f) resource, with the FWC being the Official with Jurisdiction (OWJ). Although primarily serving conservation purposes, the Lake Placid Scrub Tract of the LWRWEA provides various public outdoor recreation activities such as hiking, cycling, model airplane usage, wildlife viewing, fishing, and horseback riding. Public recreational use is not similarly permitted within the McJunkin Tract. **Figure 2** and **Figure 3** provide maps showing these tracts and their relationship to the proposed improvements.

Based on FDOT's prior coordination with FWC regarding the LWRWEA, FDOT understands that the Lake Placid Scrub Tract of the LWRWEA is a significant recreational resource. In this context, "significance" means that in comparing the availability and function of the Lake Placid Scrub Tract with the recreational, park, and trail objectives of FWC, the tract plays an important role in meeting those objectives.

A letter dated April 21, 2020 was sent to Mr. Richard C. Mospens of FWC regarding these projects' involvement with the LWRWEA as it relates to FDOT's proposed *de minimis* Section 4(f) determination per 23 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 774. A *de minimis* determination does not mean that the impact to the LWRWEA is insignificant. A *de minimis* impact is one that is found to be minimal, and after taking into account measures to minimize harm (such as avoidance, minimization, mitigation, or enhancement measures), results in a determination that neither the S.R. 70 from Jefferson Avenue to C.R. 29 project (FPID# 414506-1) or the S.R. 70 from DeSoto/Highlands County Line to Jefferson Avenue (FPID# 451649-1) would adversely affect the activities, features, or attributes qualifying a park, recreation area, refuge, or historical/archaeological site for protection under Section 4(f), and that the Official with Jurisdiction (OWJ) has concurred with these findings.

Since the 2020 letter was submitted to FWC, the project footprint has undergone multiple changes and therefore the projects' anticipated impacts to the LWRWEA have changed. FPID# 414506-1 is anticipated to impact 46.37 acres of the Lake Placid Scrub Tract and FPID #451649-1 is anticipated to impact no more than 32.10 acres of the Lake Placid Scrub Tract, for a total of 78.47 acres between the two projects. No impacts are proposed to the McJunkin Tract based on evaluations conducted by FDOT. No historical or archaeological resources which qualify for Section 4(f) protections occur within the portion of the Lake Placid Scrub Tract that will be impacted by the project.

FDOT met again with FWC on October 18, 2023 and January 5, 2024 for continued discussions of the projects' involvement with FWC-owned property. These meetings

included discussion of FDOT's Section 4(f) process and the State's Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) process.

As stated in FWC's January 2015 *Management Plan for the Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area*, the total acreage of this facility is listed as 15,923 acres across the entire resource. The Lake Placid Scrub Tract is approximately 3,161 acres in size. Based on the projects' combined total 78.47 acres of impacts, this represents approximately 0.49 percent of impacts to the total LWRWEA property and 2.48 percent of impacts to the Lake Placid Scrub Tract itself.

To offset project impacts to the LWRWEA, FDOT is committed to implementing the mitigative measures which will be outlined in the final FWC Consent Letter to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), as agreed upon by FDOT and FWC. FDOT and FWC will continue to work through the ARC process and FDOT will adhere to the final conditions included in the final Consent Letter. The final Consent Letter is anticipated to include mitigative measures such as the following:

- Purchase of appropriate replacement lands by FDOT in accordance with the State Linear Facilities Policy and chosen in coordination with FWC
- Replacement lands will be conveyed to FWC by FDOT
- FDOT will provide funding for restoration and management for replacement lands as requested by FWC
- FDOT will coordinate with FWC on other items for the replacement lands such as vegetation control, fencing, and firebreaks
- FDOT will coordinate with FWC on wildlife crossing locations in the project limits

Access to the LWRWEA will not be affected by the proposed project improvements. Additionally, the projects will not impact any portions of the Lake Placid Scrub Tract property which provide recreational uses to the public. The impacted lands are solely conservation lands and will be appropriately replaced as part of the Section 4(f) and ARC replacement land coordination processes.

Based upon the above information and that the impacts to the LWRWEA will be replaced at a level to meet or exceed the minimum mitigation requirements at locations acceptable to the applicable State agencies, FDOT anticipates there will be no adverse effects to the activities, features, and attributes that qualify the LWRWEA for protection under Section 4(f).

Consistent with the April 2020 letter, FDOT proposes a Section 4(f) *de minimis* determination. FDOT's next steps in the Section 4(f) process are to further coordinate with FWC to confirm the proposed replacement lands and seek public input on the projects, including the Section 4(f) impacts and mitigation. As part of the public outreach, information

regarding the proposed LWRWEA impacts and the proposed Section 4(f) *de minimis* determination will be included in project notifications leading to, and materials presented for public review and comment at a Public Hearing, tentatively planned for Summer 2026 (subject to change). The hearing will be advertised and conducted to satisfy all requirements of the federal Section 4(f) process. Following the Public Hearing, FDOT will continue coordination with FWC documenting all impacts, measures to minimize harm, mitigation, and public comments received. FDOT will seek FWC's written concurrence on the *de minimis* determination that the project, including all measures to minimize harm and mitigate, will not adversely affect the activities, features, or attributes that qualify the property for protection under Section 4(f).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the findings of this letter, please contact me at (863) 519-2822 or Melody.Joyner@dot.state.fl.us.

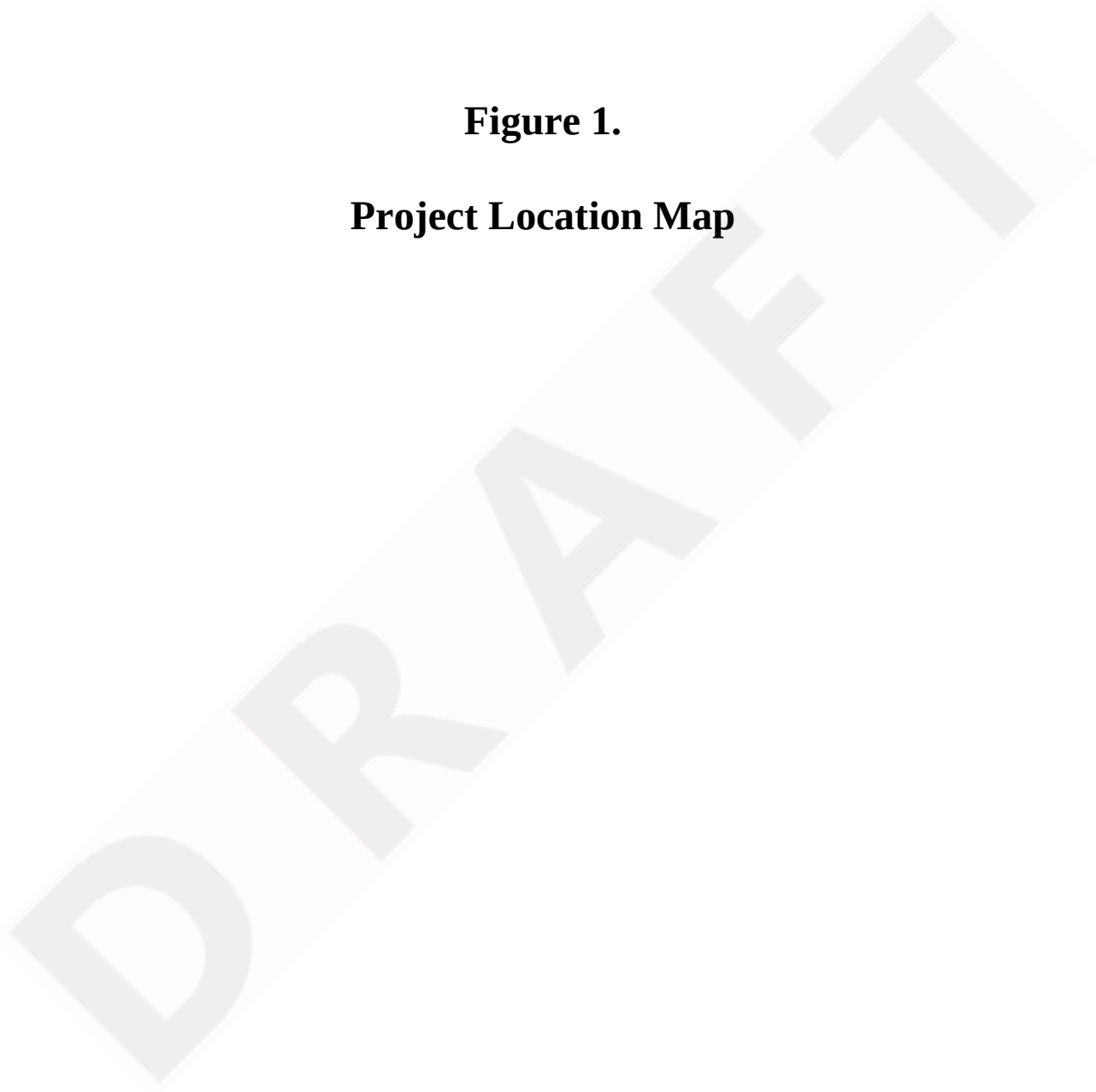
Sincerely,

Melody Joyner, CPM
Corridors Project Development Manager
Florida Department of Transportation, District One
801 North Broadway Avenue
Bartow, FL 33830

CC: Joe Lauk, PE – PGA (on behalf of FDOT District One)
Matt Dockins, PE – HNTB
Brett Berube – RK&K
Bill Howell, PE – Lochner
Kevin Connor – Lochner
Brooke Feagle – AtkinsRealis (on behalf of FDOT District One)

Figures: 1) Project Location Map
 2) LWRWEA Location Relative to Projects
 3) LWRWEA Lake Placid Scrub Tract Location Map and Proposed Impact Acreage

Figure 1.
Project Location Map



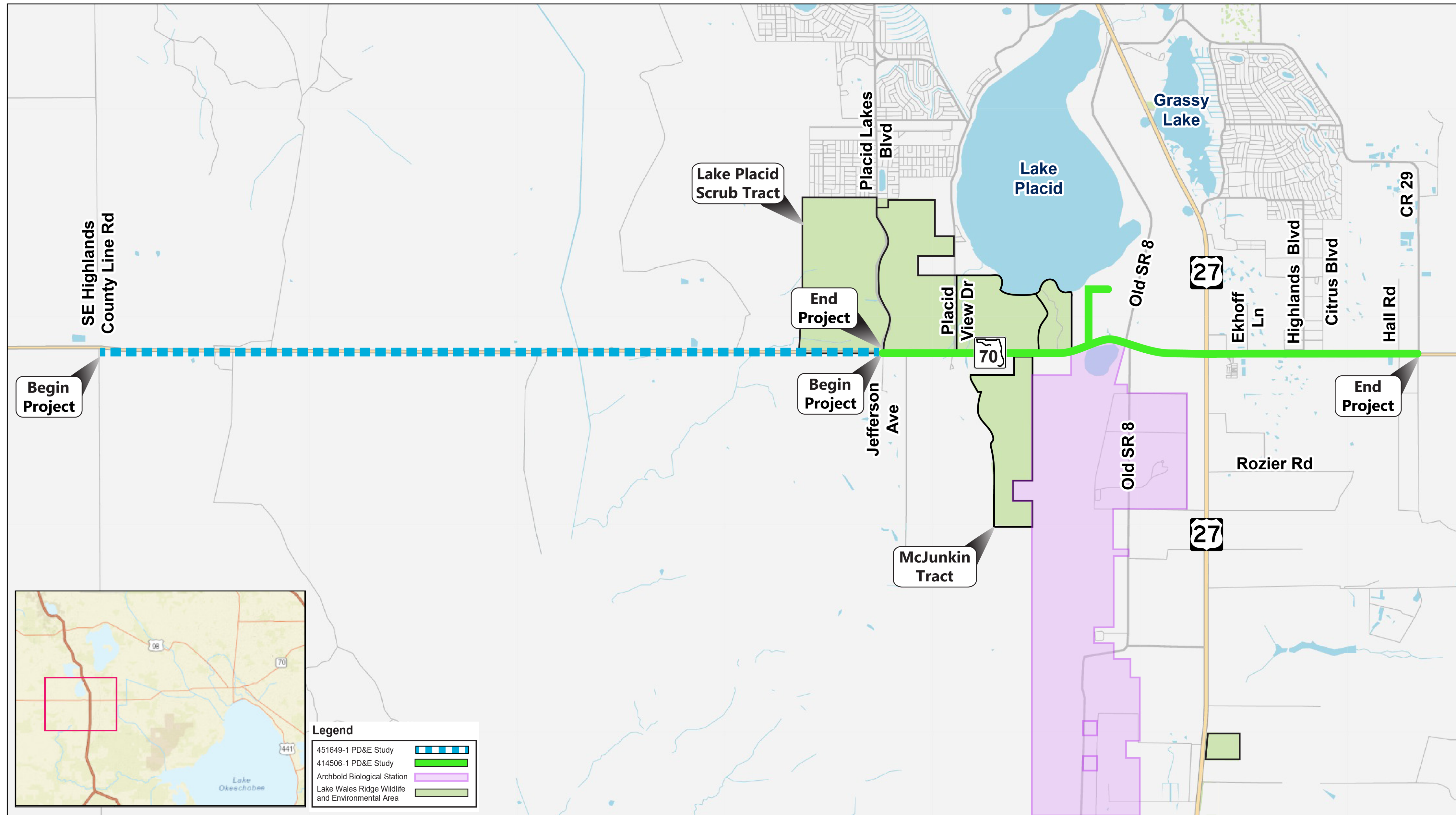


Figure 2.
LWRWEA Location Relative to Projects

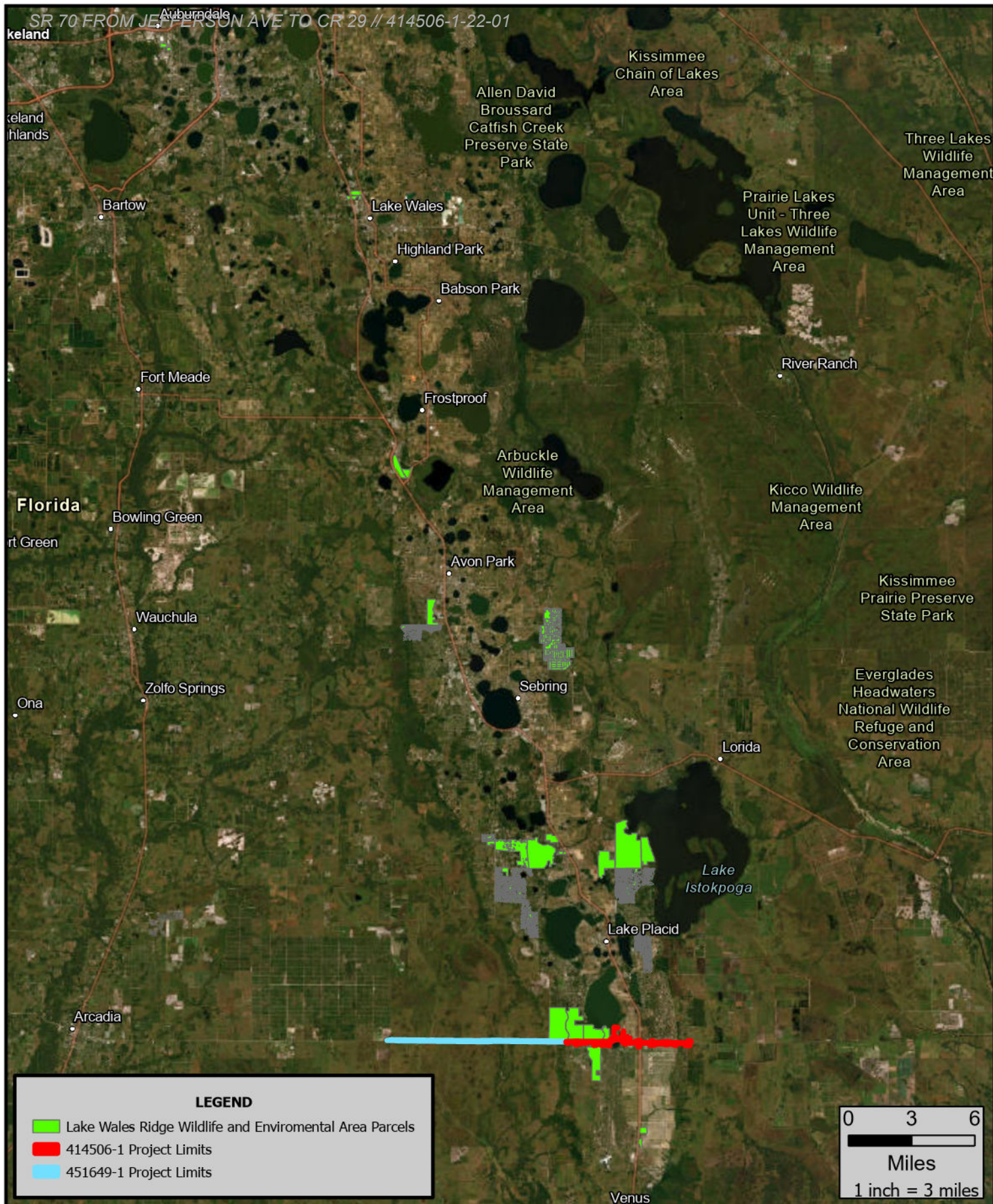


Figure 3.

**LWRWEA Lake Placid Scrub Tract Location Map and
Proposed Impact Acreage**

