

Analysis of Critical Safety and Efficiency Need: Land Conservation Office and Operations Facility

Alachua County's acquisition and management of conservation lands began in the year 2000 with the Alachua County Forever program. In the past 22 years, the program has grown from an initial land acquisition program with limited preserve management responsibilities to a dynamic program with equally demanding commitments in both land acquisition and land management. As the landbase has grown, so too have the land management duties and logistical challenges and needs. In 2022, staff now manage 25 geographically distinct preserve properties ranging from 40 acres to 6,000 acres in size, county-wide. To accomplish this work, staff work from an office and scattered storage of tools, supplies and equipment at three different field locations, requiring daily travel to multiple sites to collect needed supplies before work on the county preserves can begin. A unified office and operations facility was identified by staff as a critical need in 2015, and has remained a program priority, receiving BoCC support in 2015, 2021, and 2022.

The Work of Managing Preserves:

The stewardship of these County-owned lands requires a team of natural resource professionals who employ standard office space and equipment for planning, data management, communication, and administration. They also require a broad range of equipment and supplies for field responsibilities. These include:

- wildfire fuel reduction
- invasive species removal
- solid waste removal
- hydrologic restoration
- establishment of basic infrastructure (service roads, trails, culverts, firelines)
- restoration and application of prescribed fire
- establishment of infrastructure for public recreational access.
- maintaining site security and public safety on open preserves, and more....

The Current Logistical Challenges:

Staff, equipment, tools, and supplies are located in four different sites in the County. No single location adequately supports invasive plant management operations (herbicide mixing and storage, sprayer maintenance and cleaning). An Environmental Specialist will need equipment and materials from two or three of these locations on a typical day, resulting in work time losses due to travel between sites and interruptions in work flow. Additionally, available covered space is inadequate to protect equipment or provide shop space.

Operational resources are currently distributed among the following locations:

1. **Seagle Building:** Staff Office and pick-up trucks (no equipment/materials storage possible).
2. **County Facilities Headquarters:** Three used shipping containers hold herbicides, sprayers, signs, hand tools, fuels, chainsaws, weed trimmers, shovels, small lumber, hardware. Smaller and more frequently used items are kept here. This location is ten minutes (3 miles) from Seagle Building.
3. **County Public Works:** A small pole barn with adjacent yard space provides storage for heavy lumber, gates, bollards, trailers, tractors, tractor implements, UTVs and other materials. This location is 25 minutes (10 miles) from Seagle Building.
4. **Black Lake Preserve Barn (Melrose):** This enclosed barn on a recent acquisition stores supplies and small equipment that are used less frequently. This location is 25 minutes (17 miles) from Seagle Building.

The County Staff:

Staff in the ACF program possess a combination of skills ranging from office-based (planning, GIS mapping, contract development, data analysis, etc.) to field-based (operation of tractors, skid steers, pick-up trucks, UTVs pumps, wildland fire engines, public outreach, infrastructure maintenance, herbicide application, execution of prescribed burns, management of contractors, road and trail installation and repair, etc). Staff complete this work with myriad professional certifications, degrees (undergraduate and graduate), and skills gained over decades of experience; and a high level of commitment to Alachua County's exceptional legacy of conservation for the present and future quality of life for its citizens. *Every current staff member has come to ACF from a program where staff and equipment are in a unified location. The logistics of this situation are unique and challenging enough that they are addressed during hiring interviews. Departing staff frequently cite the logistic challenges as a contributing factor in the decision to seek alternate employment or an area for program improvement.*

A CASE IN POINT: Prescribed burning at Watermelon Pond Preserve

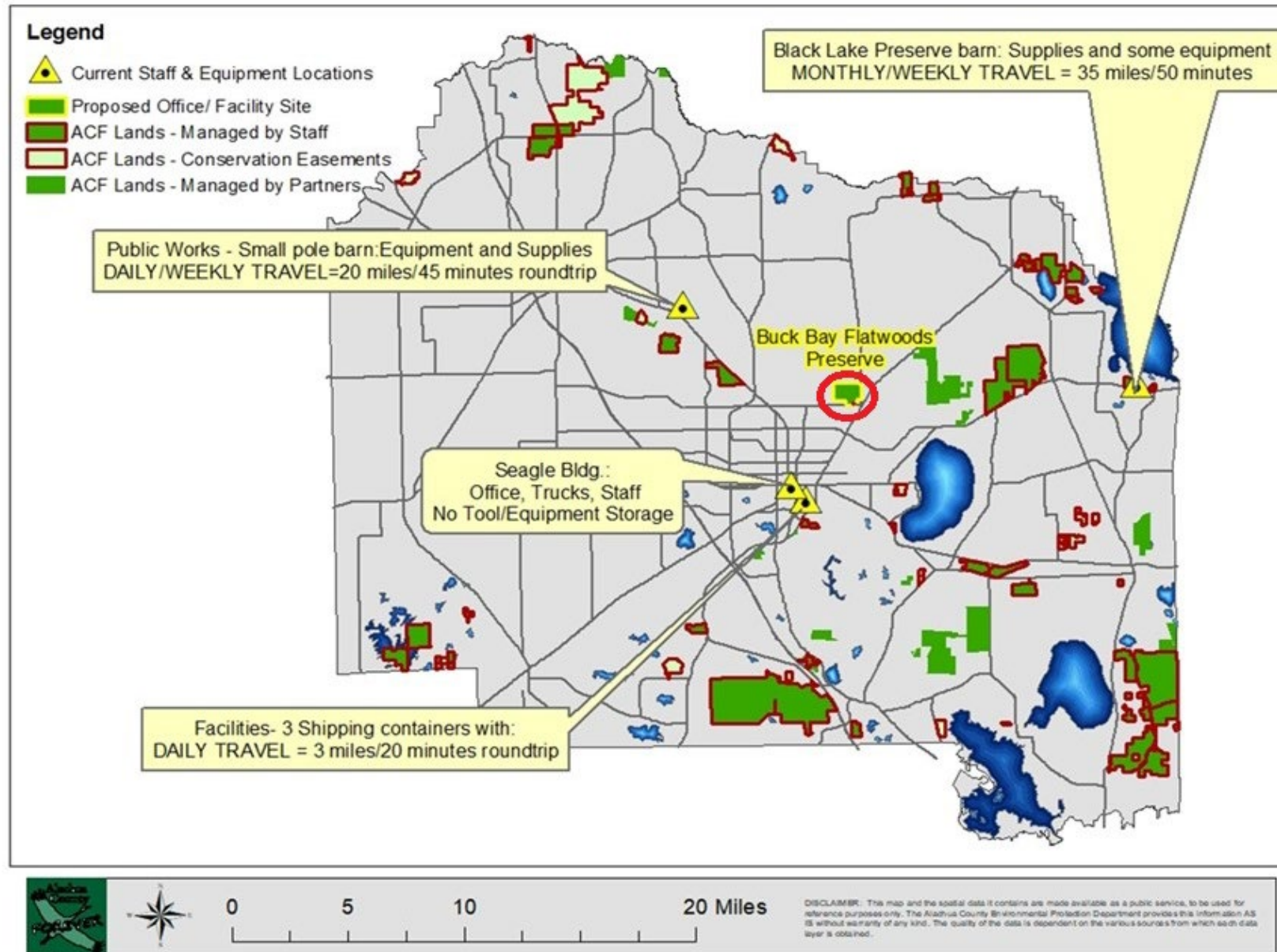
Prescribed burning is the single most cost-efficient tool for prevention of wildfire and restoration and maintenance of natural habitats in Florida. To safely and correctly apply prescribed fire, staff commit to 10 to 12-hour workdays, in challenging physical conditions. Each burn day, five to six vehicles carrying eight to ten staff members travel an additional 20 to 40 miles, spending an extra 45 to 90 minutes per person overcoming logistical hurdles. As outlined below, the lack of a central location for staff and their required resources exacerbates the difficulty of conducting a successful operation.

- **7:30am – SEAGLE BUIDLING** - Staff report to the office, conduct strategy briefing.
- **8:00am-8:25am – SEAGLE BLDG TO PUBLIC WORKS:** Staff drive 25 minutes to Public Works, pick up fire cache trailer, UTV trailer, and water and fuel trailer, other equipment.
- **8:40am to 9:25am - PUBLIC WORKS TO WATERMELON POND:** Staff travel 40 minutes to Watermelon Pond Preserve. Pumps and burn tools are set up, smoke signs placed on roads, test fire conducted at 10:30. Active burning period, and mop-up continues through 5:30pm. Staff conducts After Action Review, loads equipment and leaves preserve.
- **6:00pm to 6:40pm – WATERMELON POND TO PUBLIC WORKS:** Staff hauls fire trailers back to Fleet, disconnects and secures trailers, then drives 20 minutes back to office.
- **7:00pm – SEAGLE BUILDING:** Staff ends day after 11 hours of dedicated service in the smoke and heat.

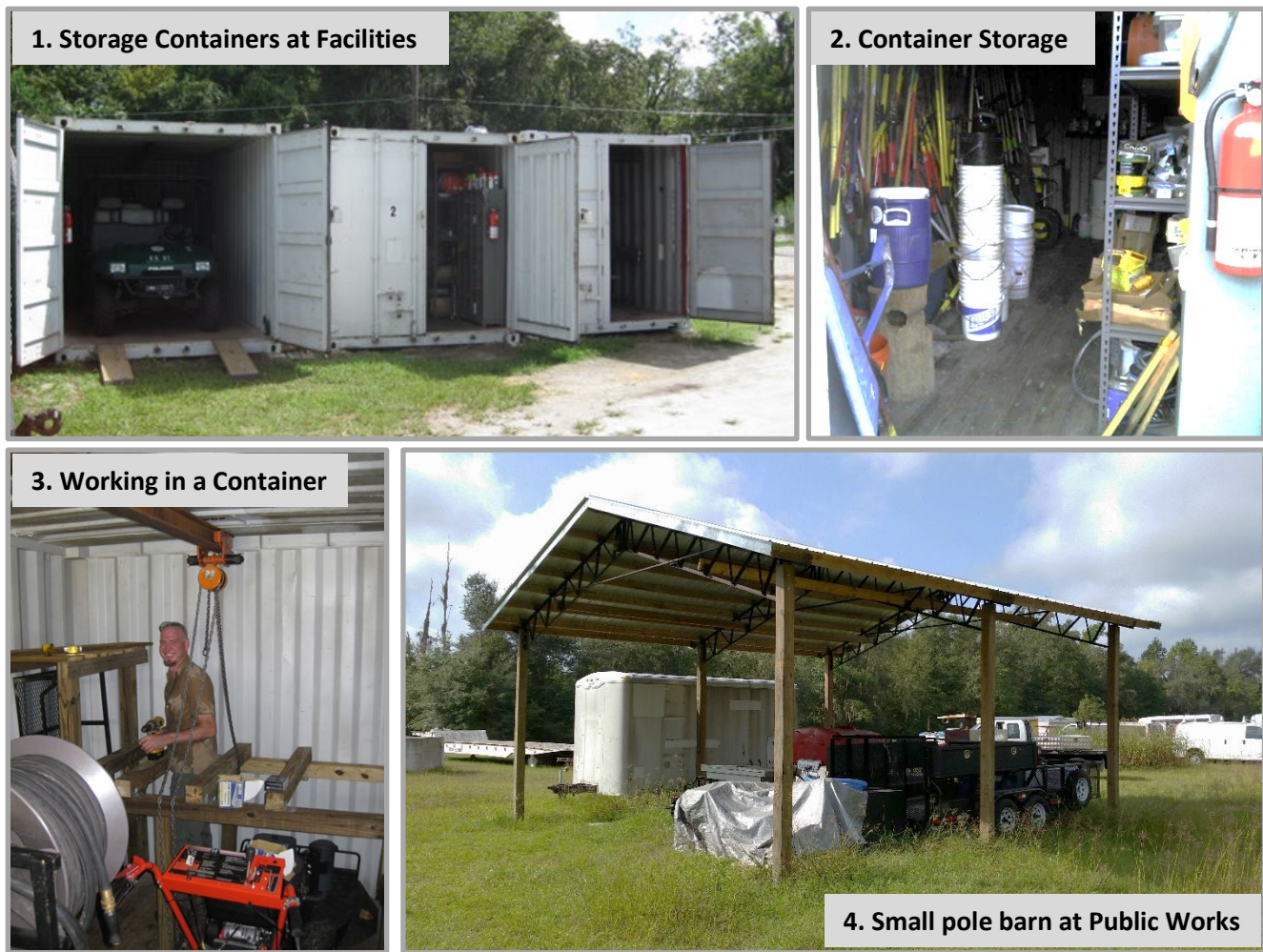
A unified location for staff and equipment will allow staff to report to the office, and directly drive fire engines, fuel and water trailers, fire tool cache trailer to the burn location, conduct the burn, and return staff and equipment to a unified location at the end of the burn day. This would shorten long workdays, improve staff safety and vehicle condition by reducing excess driving time (while pulling heavy trailers), and help maintain staff physical condition. This increased efficiency and safety will benefit both the staff and the County as a whole every workday that extra driving destinations are removed from daily work.

Staff has worked with the County Facilities Manager to develop a draft design and select location for this unified facility. An architecture firm has submitted a proposal for architecture and engineering design services at staff request. The Buck Bay Flatwoods site on NE 53rd Avenue has been determined to be the most central location for the management of County preserves. The latest addition to the Buck Bay Flatwoods Preserve has not yet been added to the Registry of Protected Public Places and is therefore available as the site for offices and a field support facility. The availability of utilities including fiber optic cable add to the favorability of this location.

Current Program Equipment and Storage Locations and County Preserves with Proposed Unified Office & Operational Facility Location:



Current Storage Locations at Facilities and Public Works:



Standard Example Office and Operations Facility Design (proposed facility layout is similar):

