

Congratulations to Hugh Thomas and SRWMD for Purchasing Jefferson County Wetlands

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SRWMD purchases Jefferson County wetlands

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The Ware Forest Tract, which the Suwannee River Water Management District purchased last week, will connect Sneads Lake (pictured) to Owens Pond, both also owned by the district.

The [Suwannee Democrat](#) has published the following good news for which we commend Hugh Thomas and the SRWMD.

Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.

-A river is like a life: once taken, it cannot be brought back-

LIVE OAK – A 160-acre tract of sensitive wetlands along the Aucilla River will be protected for years to come thanks to the dedicated efforts of public and private partners.

Located in eastern Jefferson County, Ware Forest Tract was brought into public ownership through purchase by the Suwannee

River Water Management District and connects two existing parcels of district property.

The tract contains an extensive stand of mature cypress trees which play a critical role in water quality for the Aucilla River, an Outstanding Florida Waterbody. Due to the high value of the tract's timber, public ownership of the property has been a multiyear process that relied heavily on public and private funding and partnerships across North Florida.

"Ware Forest is a pristine, untouched gem that the District is committed to not only maintaining, but improving over time," said Hugh Thomas, executive director for the district. "Without the work of dedicated stakeholders such as Tall Timbers, Jefferson County residents and leadership from the District's Governing Board, the public would not be able to enjoy this magnificent piece of property."

Former landowners planned to log the high-value cypress but public outcry from the small community of Ashville and Jefferson County residents prevented any logging from occurring.

"This is our home, our community. We did not move out here amongst the trees to have the trees moved," said BJ Nelson, president of the Ashville Area Homeowners Association and major advocate for putting Ware Forest Tract into public ownership.

Formalized efforts to protect the tract were initiated in 2015 by the Aucilla Wacissa River Group and resulted in purchase of the property by Tom Weller, conservationist and Jefferson County resident. The land was then sold to Tall Timbers, which used conservation grants funds to support the purchase. The SRWMD then purchased the tract from Tall Timbers for just less than \$245,000.

"The district is by far the best owners of the property to

protect the land its water resources,” said Shane Wellendorf, conservation coordinator for Tall Timbers. “This effort was a great chance for a group of people to do a well of good.”

The district plans to open the tract for public access in the coming months, once a management plan is established. The SRWMD owns more than 160,000 acres of public lands; 97 percent of which is open to the public for recreational use. Ware Forest Tract will increase the available space for public recreation.

“We are proud to be part of the transaction of the preservation of such an untouched, magnificent resource,” said Thomas.