Eglin - Perdido Critical Linkage

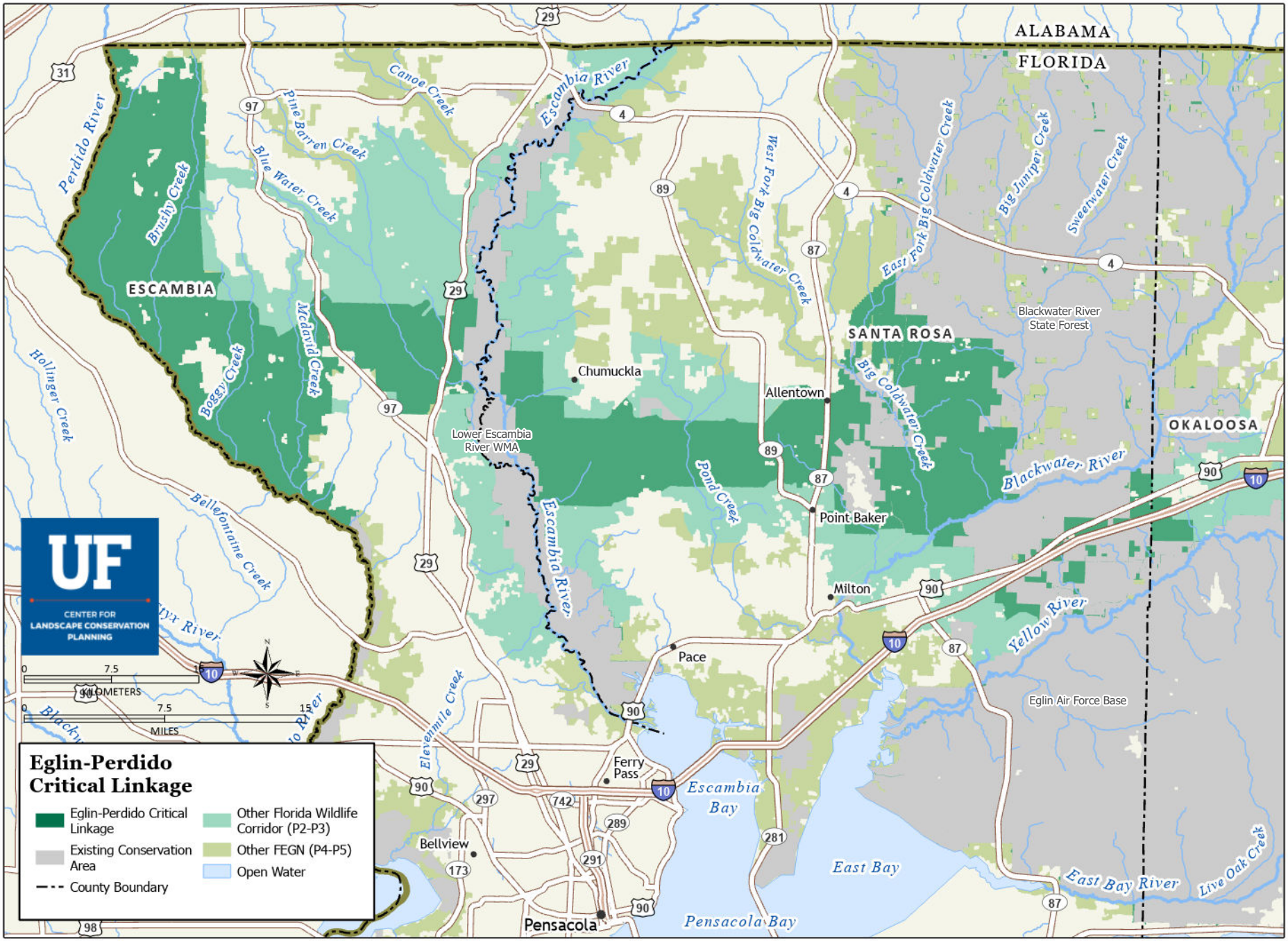
The Eglin–Perdido Critical Linkage is the westernmost linkage in the Florida Ecological Greenways Network (FEGN), forming the essential connection between Florida's corridor network and conservation lands in Alabama. This corridor links Eglin Air Force Base with Perdido Wildlife Management Area, while also connecting the Escambia River Wildlife Management Area and Blackwater River State Forest. Beyond its role within Florida, the linkage raises a broader conservation question: How can statewide connectivity goals be coordinated across state boundaries to ensure functional linkages with Alabama and Georgia? The Center for Landscape Conservation Planning is working with out-of-state partners to address this challenge and secure a truly regional network of protected lands in the southeastern coastal plain, a global biodiversity hotspot.

The Eglin–Perdido landscape is one of the most biologically diverse in Florida, supporting rare natural communities. Within the linkage is a significantly large tract of upland pine habitat adjacent to the Perdido River. The linkage supports pitcher plant bog ecosystems and rare species including the pine barrens tree frog, Bachman's sparrow, Florida flame azalea, white-top pitcher plant, panhandle lily, Turk's cap lily, west Florida cow lily, small-flowered meadowbeauty. The timberlands of the linkage provide timber production, wildlife habitat, carbon storage, and opportunities for long-term ecological restoration, particularly to historic longleaf pine ecosystems. Other natural communities include extensive bottomland forest and blackwater streams.

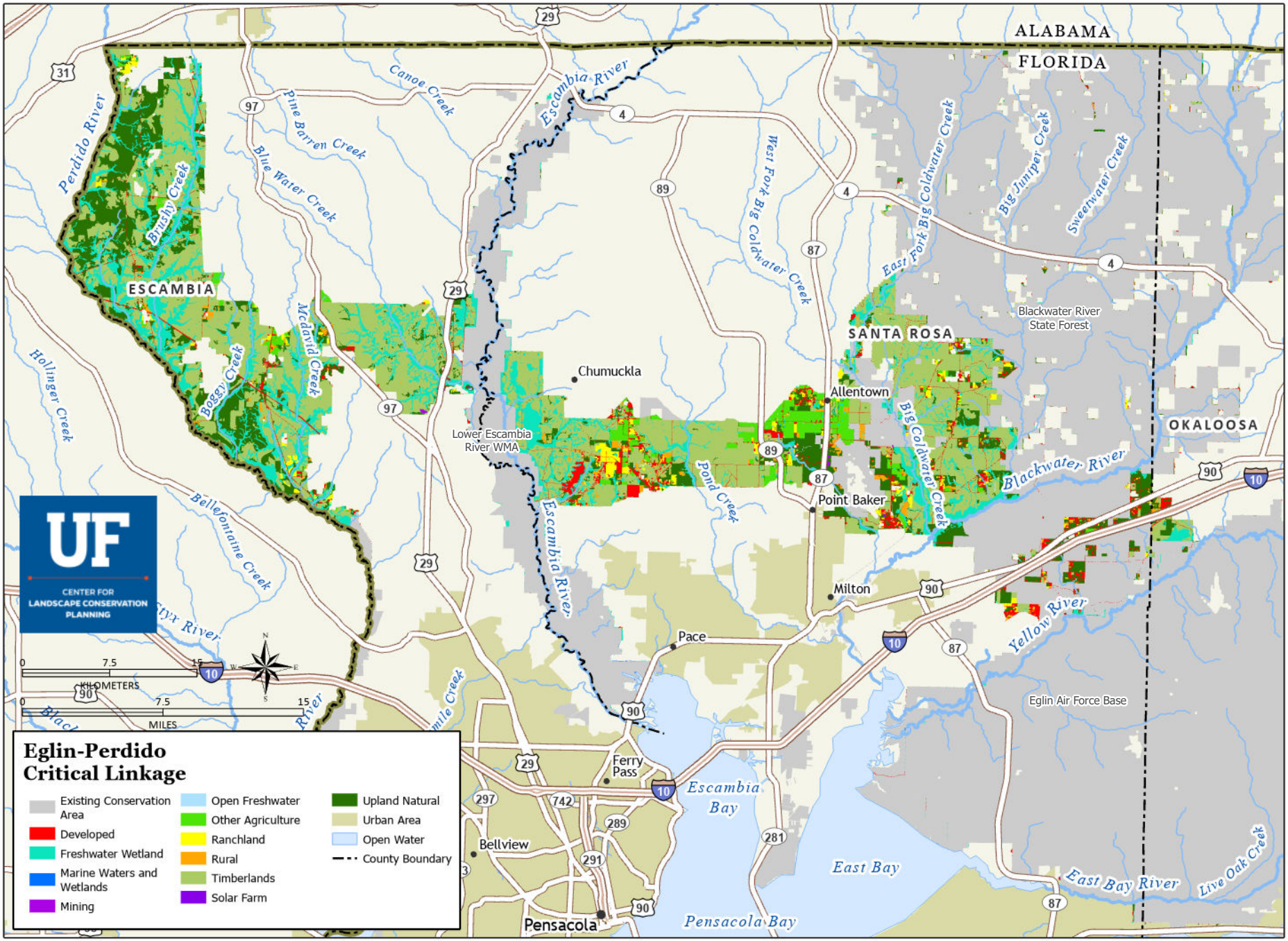
Despite its ecological importance, this landscape faces significant pressures from population growth and sea level rise. Escambia and Santa Rosa counties, where the linkage is located, are among the fastest-growing regions in Florida. Population projections show increases of more than 9% and 24%, respectively, between 2023 and 2040, with Escambia projected to grow by 22% and Santa Rosa by 59% by 2070. In addition to development pressure, approximately 6,000 acres are expected to be lost to sea level rise by 2040. Urban expansion from growing communities such as Milton and Pace presents a major long-term threat, with projections suggesting the linkage could be severed within the next 40–50 years if growth is not carefully managed.

There are, however, promising conservation opportunities. The Coastal Headwaters Longleaf Forest project, encompassing more than 99,000 acres, will secure working timberland while protecting the Escambia River watershed. This initiative will maintain timber production under sustainable forestry practices, incorporate a five-year prescribed fire rotation, and restore portions of the landscape to longleaf pine savanna. Protecting these lands would safeguard rare plant and animal species while also maintaining ecosystem services such as water quality regulation, storm resilience, recreation, and carbon sequestration.

The long-term viability of the Eglin–Perdido Critical Linkage depends on balancing rapid regional growth with large-scale conservation action. Strategic land acquisition, sustainable forestry, and cross-jurisdictional collaboration with Alabama will be necessary to secure this corridor and prevent fragmentation. Without such action, projections indicate the linkage is highly likely to be compromised within the next half-century, undermining both statewide and interstate connectivity goals.



11/12/2025. Data: Environmental Systems Research Institute, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Florida Geographic Data Library, Florida Natural Areas Inventory, University of Florida Center for Landscape Conservation Planning, U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Geological Survey. Projection: Web Mercator



10/22/2025. Data: Environmental Systems Research Institute, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Florida Geographic Data Library, Florida Natural Areas Inventory, University of Florida Center for Landscape Conservation Planning, U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Geological Survey. Projection: Web Mercator