

St. Marks – Apalachicola Critical Linkage

The St. Marks - Apalachicola Critical Linkage is a strategically important component of the Florida Ecological Greenways Network (FEGN) and the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Though one of the smallest linkages, at approximately 101,787 acres, it serves as the essential connector between Panhandle and Peninsular Florida. These currently unprotected lands connect major conservation areas including St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, Apalachicola National Forest, Tate's Hell State Forest, and Wakulla Springs State Park. Maintaining connectivity across this landscape is critical for wide-ranging species such as the Florida black bear and is particularly important given the corridor's role as a bottleneck (a spatially narrow region of the corridor that restricts wildlife movement) within the FEGN. High rates of bear mortality occur along U.S. 319, State Road 61, Woodville Highway, and State Road 267, where the absence of wildlife crossings fragments habitat; the narrow nature of the linkage compounds this risk. The corridor also overlaps with potential reintroduction areas for the Florida panther, linking Apalachicola National Forest with Big Bend and Northwest Peninsula habitats.

Most of the unprotected parcels within this linkage consist of working timberlands. Upland natural communities are predominantly hardwood forests, while lowlands are often mixed wetland hardwoods and floodplain swamp. Both natural systems and working lands are essential to not only this critical linkage but the function of the broader FEGN and the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Timberlands within this linkage play a critical role in maintaining wildlife movement, supporting hydrological processes, and providing ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, flood storage, and aquifer recharge. The linkage also supports interconnected aquatic systems that sustain the Wakulla springshed and downstream estuaries, which in turn support both ecological productivity and regional aquaculture. These systems face ongoing pressures from saltwater intrusion and nitrate pollution, underscoring the importance of land conservation for aquifer recharge and water quality.

By securing protection of the St. Marks - Apalachicola Critical Linkage, Florida can ensure functional connectivity for wide-ranging species between the Panhandle and Peninsula, while also maintaining ecosystem services that benefit human communities. These include aquifer recharge, water purification, storm protection, and opportunities for nature-based recreation and aquaculture, which supports local economies. Protection of this linkage is also essential for supporting long-term resilience of the natural and human communities of the region in the face of climate change, sea level rise, and continued development pressure.

Even limited incursions can compromise the corridor's ecological function, especially in a landscape as narrow and fragmented as this critical linkage. Sprawl from the Tallahassee region and development pressure along the Gulf Coast increase the urgency of conservation action to secure the long-term integrity of this key wildlife and water corridor, making the protection of the remaining unprotected lands of the linkage essential.



