

FLORIDA FOREST SERVICE
ANNUAL REPORT

To the Board of County Commissioners
For the
Hernando County Forest Area



Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

Florida Forest Service



COOPERATIVE FORESTRY ASSISTANCE
AND THE
FIRE CONTROL PROGRAM
JULY 1, 2023 - JUNE 30, 2024

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Hernando County Cooperative Forestry Assistance Program

Purpose

This is the Annual County Commissioner Report for the Hernando County Cooperative Forestry Assistance (CFA) Program and Hernando County Fire Control Program. This report describes activities and accomplishments during the period July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2024. The Fire Control Agreement is carried out primarily through personnel stationed at Weeki Wachee, Brooksville, and Tucker Hill under direct supervision of Forest Area Supervisors Brian Prill, Jason Packard, and Gary Sisson respectively. Refer to the Hernando County Mutual Aid Operating Plan for complete understanding of the Hernando County Fire Rescue and Florida Forest Service's powers, authority, and duties. The Mutual Aid Operating Plan is a working document that outlines the capabilities and responsibilities of each cooperating agency in Hernando County and the Florida Forest Service.

The services of the CFA Sr. Forester are provided to the County and its residents through the Cooperative Forestry Agreement between the Board of County Commissioners and the Florida Forest Service (FFS). As part of the agreement, Hernando County contributes \$3,000 annually to fund a portion of the program each fiscal year.

Duties performed by the CFA Forester as part of the Cooperative Forestry Assistance (CFA) Program include but are not limited to:

- Writing detailed forest management plans for forest landowners.
- Assisting with reforestation of private lands.
- Acting field agent for the Forest Stewardship Program, the American Tree Farm System, and various cost-share programs.
- Providing technical and forest health advice to landowners through site visits and/or phone contact.
- Assisting in the diagnosis of forest pathogens and forest insects.
- Assisting communities with urban forestry needs.
- Working with municipalities to promote Tree City USA.
- Assisting local cities and the county with various environmental programs and activities.
- Creating and implementing educational programs for various groups.
- Assisting with management of state lands in Hernando County, such as prescribed burning and state lands inventory.
- Continuing education and training to become better equipped to serve the growing needs of the residents of Hernando County.

Forests of the South

Southern forests cover over 200 million acres, or approximately 40% of the timberland in the United States. Diverse plant communities thrive due to our temperate climate, abundant rainfall, and topography. This forest region is referred to as the *nation's wood basket*. The forest management activity in this region provides benefits such as employment, tax revenue, habitat for wildlife, recreational opportunities, clean water and fresh air. These benefits improve the quality of life for residents and help attract nature-based tourism to Florida.

In Florida, agriculture is the second largest sector of the economy and forestry is the largest segment within the agricultural sector. In 2016, which is the most recent data, Florida's nearly 17.2 million acres of forestlands supported economic activities which generated \$50.2 billion in total output impacts. Florida's Forest Industry provided 124,104 jobs last year – a 60% increase since 2014. Forestry, wood & paper product industries collected \$25.1 billion in revenues. Forestry and the forest products industry paid \$483 million in taxes in 2013.

In 2015, Florida timberland ownership, which supports forest product industry, was 71% private (66% non-industrial, and 5% forest industry), 18% state and local, and 11% federal. That translates into 11.0 million acres in private ownerships, 2.8 million acres in state and local, and 1.7 million acres in federal government ownerships.

General Assistance

Over 136 assists were made to the residents of Hernando County during the 2023-2024 FY. These assists ranged from advice on forest management activities, forest health, insect and disease problems, invasive exotic plant control, shade tree care, educational programs, general forestry information, wildlife issues and wildfire mitigation. On some occasions, the CFA Forester will provide information on contacting other county officials or recommend the use of a forestry consultant to assist with large timber sales or other management activities that may take excessive man hours away from other citizens of Hernando County.

Forest Landowner Programs

Private Non-Industrial Landowner Assistance

To assist with the management of forestland belonging to private non-industrial forest (PNIF) landowners in Hernando County, the CFA Forester may produce a forest management plan or a tree planting plan. A forest management plan serves as a step-by-step guide for the landowner to achieve the landowner's desired management objectives. Typically, the timetable in a forest management plan will outline management practices that need to be accomplished over a period of five to fifty years. A total of twelve general forest management plans covering 325.4 acres were prepared for PNIF landowners during the 2023-2024 FY.

The CFA Forester can provide the PNIF landowner with assistance in Fireline construction and prescribed burning. These activities are designed to minimize wildfire occurrence and intensity, as well as property loss in

the event of a fire. Burning is a valuable management tool that can be used to ensure a pine forest is healthy and is growing at its fullest potential. In the 2023-2024 FY, three properties in Hernando County had firelines installed or maintained.

Forest Stewardship Program

Forest Stewardship is defined as active management of forests and related resources to keep these lands in a productive and healthy condition for present and future generations, and to increase the economic, environmental and social benefits of these lands. Forest Stewards are those landowners who manage their forestlands on a long-term basis by following management objectives that are multiple resource based, economically viable, conservative of natural resources and socially, environmentally and ecologically responsible. The Forest Stewardship Program addresses the improvement and maintenance of timber, wildlife, soil and water, recreation, aesthetics, as well as forage resources.



Forest landowners with at least 20 acres are encouraged by the County Forester to participate in the Forest Stewardship Program. Landowners involved in the program receive assistance and information on timber, soil and water conservation, wildlife, aesthetics, recreation, grazing, and wetlands. They receive a written management plan that is tailored to their management objectives as well as the resources listed above. Once a property is certified, the landowners will be given a plaque and a sign for their property in recognition of their efforts. There are currently 21 Forest Stewardship Properties in Hernando County totaling almost 6,138 acres. More information can be found on the Florida Forest Service webpage [Forest Stewardship Program / Programs for Landowners / For Landowners / Forest & Wildfire / Home - Florida Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services \(fdacs.gov\)](https://www.foreststewardship.org/).

The American Tree Farm System

The American Tree Farm System (ATFS) is a non-profit organization that strives to conserve and ensure the sustainability of America's family forestland for future generations. ATFS is a network of 74,000 family forest owners sustainably managing 20.5 million acres of forestland and is the largest and oldest sustainable woodland system in the United States. ATFS is internationally recognized and meets strict third-party certification standards. For more than 75 years, ATFS has enhanced the quality of America's woodlands by giving forest owners the tools they need to keep their forests healthy and productive. America's woodlands are vital to our country's clean water and air, wildlife habitat, and recreational activities, as well as, producing jobs, wood and paper products for the American public. More information can be found on the American Tree Farm webpage <https://www.treefarmssystem.org>.



Through this program, landowners are educated and encouraged to protect and manage their private forestland. The main objective for the ATFS is sustaining timber, water, recreation and wildlife benefits. To be a part of this program, landowners must have a minimum of ten acres of forestland and a have written forest management plan. The CFA Forester currently assists with the management of 10 active Tree Farms in Hernando County totaling 1,562 acres, which display the green and white Tree Farm sign.

Cost Share Programs

Throughout the year, cost-share programs are available to forest landowners to assist with the expenses of managing their forestland.

Southern Pine Beetle (SPB) Prevention Program

This program provides landowners, who own a minimum of ten acres, incentive payments for conducting certain timber management practices in order to reduce the risk of future SPB infestations. Some of these practices include thinning harvests, prescribed burning, underbrush reduction, and the planting of longleaf pines. No forest landowners in Hernando County applied to this program this year. More information can be found on the Florida Forest Service webpage [Southern Pine Beetle Prevention / Programs for Landowners / For Landowners / Forest & Wildfire / Home - Florida Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services \(fdacs.gov\)](https://www.forestservice.gov/programs/landowners/for-landowners/forest-wildfire/home-florida-department-of-agriculture-consumer-services-fdacs.gov).



Forest Health

Another duty of the CFA Forester is to monitor disease and insect outbreaks in the county. The Hernando CFA Forester provides reconnaissance and diagnosis assistance to landowners experiencing insect and disease problems on forest land and shade trees.

Southern Pine Beetle Survey

Due to the potential destructive nature of a severe Southern pine beetle (SPB) attack to pine trees in Hernando County, the Hernando CFA Forester, in conjunction with the Forest Health Section in Gainesville, conducts annual Southern pine beetle surveys to predict SPB activity levels and to look for active infestations.

On an annual basis, two types of surveys are conducted. The first one takes place during the month of March and uses an in-woods trapping device called a Lindgren funnel. Insects are lured into the trap with the use of pheromones and samples are collected once a week for six weeks. After samples have been collected, they are sent to the Forest Health Section for analysis. After the analysis is complete, the Forest Health Section releases a map predicting Southern pine beetle activity levels. The pheromone trap survey in March of 2024 predicted a 3.5% chance of SPB spots in Hernando County and a 3.8% chance in Lake County. The Hernando County trap was set close to the



Hernando / Sumter County line, and it caught no SPBs over a six-week period. Marion County's three traps caught zero SPBs over a six-week period. There is a 3.5% chance that Marion County will have SPB spots. This information can be found at the following link: [Southern Pine Beetle / Forest Insects / Forest Health / Our Forests / Forest & Wildfire / Home - Florida Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services \(fdacs.gov\)](https://fdacs.gov/Forest-Insects/Forest-Health/Our-Forests/Forest-Wildfire/Home).

The second pine beetle survey is usually conducted around the month of July utilizing the Florida Forest Service wildfire detection airplane. While in the air, the Hernando CFA Forester looks for pine tree canopies that have changed colors from green to yellow/brown. If a spot is seen with six or more trees together with changing canopy colors, a global positioning system (GPS) waypoint is taken, so ground check the spot for possible Southern pine beetle infestation. If the Southern pine beetle infestation is detected, a letter is written and sent to the landowner informing them of the infestation and assistance is offered to help mitigate the problem. SPB aerial survey flights were flown on August 19 and 23, and September 17 and 19, 2024, that covered Sumter, Lake, Citrus, Pasco, and Hernando Counties. All the flights were flown by pilot Liege Higginbotham and the Sumter CFA Forester. The Hernando and Pasco CFA Forester was on the last two flights. No SPB spots were observed during the 9.5 flight hours that covered 1,107 miles.

Laurel Wilt

Throughout Hernando County many small trees, as well as a few large ones, have been killed and their dead brown leaves remained attached for one to two years. These trees are red bays that have been killed by the fungal disease, laurel wilt. Laurel wilt is vectored by the red bay ambrosia beetle which is native to India, Japan, Myanmar (Burma) and Taiwan. The country of origin for the laurel wilt fungus is unknown. The red bay ambrosia beetle entered the United States through Port Wentworth, Georgia in wooden shipping pallets in 2002. The rate of spread for the red bay ambrosia beetle has been estimated at 15-34 miles per year; however, the actual rate of spread has been much faster due to the movement of red bay firewood, wood chips and plants infected with the pathogen. In Sumter County, laurel wilt was observed on Half Moon Ranch in 2011 and it has since become wide spread throughout the county. In 2012, the avocado-producing areas in Miami-Dade County started to be impacted by laurel wilt. By 2014, laurel wilt was present in every Florida County. Red bay is a relative of the avocado, which is a major agricultural crop in Florida. "Over the last few years, about eight percent of Florida's avocado trees have been hit by laurel wilt," according to the Florida Department of Agriculture. Fungicides injected over a period of hours or days have proven effective in protecting trees only if administered prior to the attack of the beetles. The fungicide treatments need to be repeated at a two-year intervals. These treatments are expensive and not practical for more than a few ornamental or specimen trees. More information can be found on the Florida Forest Service website [Redbay Ambrosia Beetle and Laurel Wilt / Forest Insects / Forest Health / Our Forests / Forest & Wildfire / Home - Florida Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services \(fdacs.gov\)](https://fdacs.gov/Forest-Insects/Forest-Health/Our-Forests/Forest-Wildfire/Home).

Urban Forestry

The CFA Forester works with the county on urban forestry projects such as Tree City USA, urban and community forestry grants, and Arbor Day presentations/programs. CFA Foresters also answer questions from individual homeowners concerning issues with the health and well-being of the trees in the urban forest.

As Hernando County continues to grow in population, more calls are for non-traditional forestry needs. This includes residential settings, school programs, aiding local towns and communities, workshops, etc.

Shade tree advice was given to 27 citizens by phone and e-mail, and field visits to the individual properties to inspect the trees in question. Tree disease, insect damage and general tree health are evaluated during visits.

Tree City USA

Since 1976, the Arbor Day Foundation (ADF) has sponsored the Tree City USA program throughout the United States. Tree City USA provides recognition to cities, counties, and military bases who conduct a continuously active tree management program. Participating communities regard their tree canopies as a source of pride and strive to continuously improve them. To date, there are over 3,500 Tree City USA's in the United States. Florida now has 160 Tree Cities, with over 54% of the state living in a Tree City USA Community.



The Tree City USA program recognizes urban communities throughout the United States who have taken on the responsibility of caring and actively maintaining the trees in their community by creating a tree board, tree care ordinances, a community forestry program with a budget, and an Arbor Day observance and proclamation. During this fiscal year, the City of Brooksville celebrated 30 years as a Tree City USA community. More information can be found at:

<https://www.arborday.org/PROGRAMS/treecityusa>.

Urban and Community Grants

As part of the U.S. Forest Service Urban and Community Forestry Matching Grant Program, funds will be available to organizations to develop or enhance their urban and community forestry programs.

Awards are made as 50-50 matching grants (50 percent federal and 50 percent applicant) to local governments, educational institutions, Native-American tribal governments, and legally organized nonprofit (volunteer) organizations. The program is intended to provide cost-share funding for the development of new or additional continuing education courses or degree track educational courses in urban forestry or arboriculture.

Champion Tree Program

The Champion Tree Program, which was created by the 2020 American Forests Champion Trees national register, has 676 national champions and co-champions. Florida has the most national champions of any state with 105

trees. The majority of these are found in the tropical region of the state. Florida began keeping a state register, (Florida Champion Tree Register), in 1975 to recognize the largest tree of each species within this state. It now contains hundreds of trees, including the national champions. All native and non-invasive naturalized tree species are eligible for nomination.

Educational Presentations

An important part of the CFA program is educating the public, young and old, about forestry and its impacts to society. For older students in high school, the CFA Forester teaches the many aspects of forestry including careers, management, and tools used in the profession. The CFA Forester also facilitates and participates in various landowner/homeowner workshops and expos in order to increase the knowledge local citizens need to make informed decisions about their property and their community.

Community and School Programs



Thirty-seven programs were conducted by FFS personnel during the 2023-2024 FY. Programs were Arbor Day celebrations, career days, tree giveaways, and educational workshops. Cumulatively, an estimated 6,528 people attended the programs and/or events held by the Hernando County Forester, forest rangers and partners.

Envirothon and FFA Field Day

The mission of the North American Envirothon is to develop knowledgeable skilled and dedicated citizens who have an understanding of natural resources and are willing and prepared to work towards achieving and maintaining a balance between the quality of life and the quality of the environment. The Envirothon mission is accomplished by developing in young people an understanding of the principles and practices of natural resource management and ecology, and also how to understand complex resource management decisions. . This competition focuses on different environmental topics including: forestry, water, soils, wildlife and a current topic.

On February 21, 2024, the Nature Coast Regional Envirothon was held in Pasco County at Crews Lake Wilderness Park. The event was attended by over 320 people, including students and teachers.

This same event will take place in February 2025.

The FFA Forestry Career Event is a competitive activity that tests students' skills and knowledge in the area of forest management. Event components include a general forestry knowledge exam, tree and equipment identification, a forest issues interview and forestry application practicums.



On October 19, 2023, at Hillsborough River State Park, 87 students from Pasco, Hillsborough, Hernando and Pinellas County Schools participated in the FFA Forestry Field Day contest. The Hernando County Forester also participated in a neighboring FFA district Forestry Field Day. The FFS Hernando County Forester judges a portion of these events:

1. General Knowledge Test
2. Tree Identification
3. Equipment Identification
4. Tree Measurement-Timber Cruising
5. Map Interpretation (odd years) or Compass and Pacing (even years)
6. Tree/Forest Disorders

The students participating in FFA and the FFA Forestry Field Day are some of the brightest and most highly motivated youth in our school system. They are the future agricultural leaders of our community. This event, and the preparation that takes place prior to the event, introduces the students to forestry and allows them to attain a level of understanding of the subject that is highly desirable when this generation starts making career choices and decisions affecting forestry and other aspects of agriculture.



FFA Forestry Camp

In July of each year since 1933 the Florida Forest Service has run a Forestry Training Camp for FFA high school and middle school students. The Florida Forest Service's commitment to this camp is so strong that not even the labor shortages caused by the Second World War or the memorable 1998 wildfire season prevented the camp from operating.

This six-day resident camp is held at O'Leno State Park in North Florida. At Forestry Camp, students learn about the many facets of forestry and FFA teachers learn different techniques for teaching the subject matter.

The FFA Forestry Career Event is a competitive activity that tests students' skills and knowledge in the area of forest management. Event components include a general forest knowledge exam, tree and equipment identification, a forest issues interview and forestry application practicum.

The CFA Forester participated in this week-long camp as an instructor.

Arbor Day and Earth Day

Arbor Day is a holiday in which individuals and groups are encouraged to plant and care for trees. Today, many countries observe this holiday. Arbor Day in Florida is observed on the third



Friday in January and nationally on the last Friday of April. Earth Day is an annual event celebrated worldwide on April 22 to demonstrate support for environmental protection.

This year the County Forester participated in two events celebrating Arbor Day in Hernando County. Activities for the estimated 125 participants included a tree planting, poem readings, and distribution of informational materials.

Operation Outdoor Freedom

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' Florida Forest Service hosted 441 injured veterans attending 73 events for the hunting of deer, hog and turkey and one fishing trip as part of Operation Outdoor Freedom 2023-2024 FY. Of those 73 events, 5 events took place on or near the Withlacoochee State Forest and were led by guides from the local Florida Forest Service and volunteers from the community for 33 injured veterans.



The hunts provided an opportunity for wounded veterans to experience outdoor recreation and rehabilitation in Florida's natural surroundings. Operation Outdoor Freedom is a chance to salute America's veterans and service members for their selfless service to our country.

Operation Outdoor Freedom is a program of the Florida Forest Service. This program builds on an existing partnership between the Florida Forest Service, the Wounded Warrior Project, and the Military Order of the Purple Heart.

[Operation Outdoor Freedom / State Forest Recreation / State Forests / Our Forests / Forest & Wildfire / Home - Florida Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services \(fdacs.gov\).](#)

State Forest Assistance

The Florida Forest Service manages the Withlacoochee State Forest (WSF), which is 165,767 acres of forested land. This includes seven distinct tracts located in five counties: Citrus, Pasco, Hernando, Sumter, and Lake. Withlacoochee State Forest is currently the third largest state forest in Florida and is divided into several distinct tracts of land. Using sound ecosystem management, the Florida Forest Service provides for multiple-use of the forest resources, which includes timber management, wildlife management, ecological restoration and outdoor recreation. Withlacoochee State Forest provides visitors with a variety of natural communities, wildlife and recreation activities to enjoy. Withlacoochee State Forest was acquired by the federal government from private landowners between 1936 and 1939 under the provisions of the U.S. Land Resettlement Administration. The U.S. Forest Service managed the property until a lease-purchase agreement transferred the property to the Florida Board of Forestry in 1958.

During the 2023-2024 FY a total of 43,125 acres were prescribed burned on the forest and a total of 40,998 tons of wood were harvested from the forest. 304,920 longleaf pine trees were planted on 420 acres of the

Withlacoochee State Forest. The road crew graded 106 miles of road and repaired 1 mile. An estimated 2,263,315 users visited the state forest, and 377,609 camping permits were issued.

Training

Another important duty of the County Forester is continuing education and training. The Hernando County Forester participated in training throughout the year to improve skills and knowledge within the field of forestry, emergency response and related fields. The Hernando County Forester completed the L-280 Leadership Training, which provides students with foundational leadership skills. The Hernando County Forester also enrolled in and started Basic Fire Control Training (BFCT) through the Florida Forest Service, which will certify her as a wildland firefighter in the state of Florida.

Hernando County Forester

Jessica Clark has been with the Florida Forest Service since October 1st, 2021. She became the Hernando County Forester April 7th, 2023, after working as a forester on the Withlacoochee State Forest. While working on the state forest she managed timber sales, reforestation, prescribed burning, invasive species control, forest inventory and other silviculture activities on the Citrus tract within the Withlacoochee State Forest. Jessica received her bachelor's degree in Forest Ecosystem Management from The Pennsylvania State University in 2020. Jessica's office is at the Withlacoochee Forestry Center; 15019 Broad Street, Brooksville, FL 34601. She can be reached by phone: (352) 797-4130, or by email: Jessica.Clark@fdacs.gov.

Hernando Forest Area Fire Control Program

This report covers fire control activities for the protection of 161,323 acres of land in Hernando County. The Florida Forest Service prorated fire control expenditure in Hernando County for fire protection for the past fiscal

year was \$9,777.53. Annual variances in acreage are due to improvements in mapping technology and changes in information provided from Florida Natural Areas Inventory and the United States Geological Survey. Any discrepancies in assessed acreages can be addressed locally or through the Fire Suppression Resources Management Section of the Forest Protection Bureau, Florida Forest Service.

Fire Resources

The mission of the Florida Forest Service's Forest Protection Bureau is to provide an adequate level of fire protection to meet threats to life, property, forest, wild land resources, and other related values-at-risk.

To accomplish these goals the Florida Forest Service (FFS) employs highly trained and professional wildland firefighters and continues to maintain, an outstanding working relationship with Hernando County Fire Rescue and utilizes a comprehensive communications network linking emergency services for a more efficient operation.

The Florida Forest Service employs one Forest Area Supervisor, Senior Forest Rangers, and Forest Rangers in Hernando County. Forest Rangers are assigned to fire control duties on a rotating schedule providing coverage 7 days a week. In addition, a minimum of one ranger is on call for fires that occur after normal business hours. Other duties that rangers provide in Hernando County include enforcing burn laws, prescribe burning on state lands, mitigation burning on private land, landowner assists, and fire prevention education.

In Hernando County, the FFS utilizes three transports carrying firefighting dozers with plows. Additionally, there are three 350-gallon Type VI engines and two 80-gallon brush patrols stationed throughout the County. Fire Suppression equipment is located at Weeki Wachee Tower, Withlacoochee Forestry Center Headquarters, and Tucker Hill Tower for prompt initial response to wildfires.

FFS uses a fixed wing aircraft for fire detection routinely throughout the year. Our fixed wing aircraft also provides aerial tactical assistance with wildfire suppression efforts by locating access routes and by identifying structures in need of protection. The FFS has four Type II fire suppression helicopters and two type III helicopters located throughout the state. The closest helicopter to Hernando County is stationed in Ocala and has a thirty-minute response time.



In addition, The Florida Forest Service has resources throughout the state that can be utilized on an as needed basis in Hernando County and the Florida Forest Service regularly utilizes Florida Forest Service resources from adjacent counties when needed in Hernando County.

Wildfire Activity

The Withlacoochee Forestry Center (WFC), which encompasses five counties in Central Florida: Citrus, Hernando, Lake, Pasco, and Sumter, takes pride in its efforts to prevent and suppress wildfires. Aggressive fire suppression, vigilant fire detection, effective fire prevention and an active control burn program along with favorable fire weather conditions greatly reduces the number and size of wildfires.

In Hernando County, 20 wildfires were suppressed in the County last fiscal year, burning a total of 534.64 acres. Of these wildfires, 1 was from campfires, 4 were from debris burning, 4 were from equipment, 5 were arson, 2 were lightning, and 3 were unknown or miscellaneous. These numbers indicate why the FFS places a high emphasis on fire prevention programs. Our on-going fire prevention efforts are crucial to limiting the number of carelessly caused wildfires. Statewide the Florida Forest Service responded to 2,245 wildfires totaling 41,797 acres burned in FY 2023-2024.

Table 1 Illustrates the number of wildfires in Hernando County (where FFS units responded) and acreage burned over the past two years as compared to the ten-year total.

TABLE 1. WILDFIRE CAUSES

	2023-2024		2022-2023 (Previous Year)		10 Year Total	
Cause	Number of Fires	Acres	Number of Fires	Acres	Number of Fires	Acres
Campfire	1	.1	1	0.5	12	17.2
Children	0	0	0	0	1	10
Debris Burn	4	6.68	3	6.1	54	167.38
Equipment	4	10.8	3	5.1	13	164.4
Incendiary	5	320.81	2	46	57	860.21
Lightning	2	17.5	4	65.5	36	4,017.3
Miscellaneous	1	.25	0	0	35	241.45
Railroad	0	0	0	0	0	0
Smoking	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unknown	3	178.5	2	88.2	39	616.5
Total	20	534.64	15	211.4	247	6,094.44

Open Burning

The Florida Forest Service oversees one of the most active and progressive prescribed fire programs in the country.

Prescribed fire is one of the most versatile and cost-effective tools land managers use. Prescribed fire is used to reduce hazardous fuel buildups, thus providing increased protection to people, their homes and the forest. Other uses include disease control in young pines, improving habitat for wildlife, range management, preservation of endangered plant and animal species and the maintenance of fire dependent ecosystems.

The Florida Forest Service provides fire line construction and prescribed burning assistance to the residents of Hernando County. This service reduces fuel build-up and minimizes the impacts of wildfire.

The Florida Forest Service is responsible for regulating and issuing burn authorizations for open burning. FFS is committed to the continued training of local broadcast and land clearing pile burners, and to continually ensure the integrity and professionalism of the outdoor burning program here and throughout the state. During the 2023-2024 fiscal year, 1,410 burning authorizations were issued in Hernando County, covering 15,025 acres and 2,635 piles.

FFS requires good smoke management on pile burns and prescribed burns. The Forest Area Supervisor monitors all open burning in smoke sensitive areas ensuring the smoke from these fires do not create problems. Burning can be restricted or stopped when atmospheric conditions are not conducive to good smoke dispersion. In instances where required distance setbacks are in question or smoke sensitivity is a concern, FFS personnel complete a pre-burn on-site inspection. Additionally, in any instance where an individual is found negligent with the application of an outdoor fire, a Notice of Violation (NOV) is issued to that person by Florida Forest Service personnel. A Notice to Appear can be issued by our Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services’ Office of Agricultural Law Enforcement officers.

Florida Forest Service performed on-site inspections and/or compliance checks for individuals wanting to perform agricultural, silvicultural and or/pile burns in Hernando County when needed. The Florida Forest Service also investigated smoke complaints received from individuals or organizations.

Table 2. Hernando County Burn Authorizations by Type for 2023-2024 FY.

Burn Type	Authorized Fires	Authorized Acres	Authorized Piles
Agricultural--Pasture	614	2,600	943

Agricultural--Range management	2	200	0
Agricultural--Stubble (post harvest)	150	0	155
Agricultural--Sugarcane	0	0	0
Agriculture--Citrus	0	0	0
Land clearing--Non-residential--With ACI	178	0	178
Land clearing--Non-residential-- Without ACI	196	0	669
Land clearing--Residential--With ACI	4	0	4
Land clearing--Residential--Without ACI	172	0	683
Silvicultural--Disease control	0	0	0
Silvicultural--Ecological	64	6,151	0
Silvicultural--Hazard removal	24	5,011	3
Silvicultural--Other	0	0	0
Silvicultural--Prior to seed	0	0	0
Silvicultural--Site preparation	0	0	0
Silvicultural--Wildlife	6	1,063	0
Total	1,410	15,025	2,635

Fire Prevention and Education

Wildfires can cause major environmental, social and economic damages. The loss of timber, wildlife habitat, homes and even lives may result from a devastating wildfire. The wildfire that does not start is the one that does not have to be fought. For this reason, Education and Prevention are primary goals of FFS in reducing the number

of human caused fires in the County and the State. Even though Florida is the lightning capital of the world, arson and escaped debris burning are still the two main causes of wildfires in Florida. Florida's fire dependent ecosystems, year-round fire season and influx of new residents pose a challenge to wildland fire fighters in their attempt to continually educate Floridians and visitors about wildfire danger in Florida.

In Florida and across much of the country, wildfires are a serious threat to many homes and businesses. This threat can be dealt with in two different ways: suppression and prevention. For suppression efforts, the Florida Forest Service works closely with the Hernando County Fire Rescue to ensure that we protect the citizens of Hernando County through a mutual aid agreement. It is imperative that we also direct attention to the *prevention* of wildfires and their resulting damage. The FFS will continue to lead these efforts through educational programs in our local schools and communities. The Florida Forest Service has several education and mitigation programs aimed at reducing all types of human caused fire.

Public Programs

Fire Prevention support to county citizens was provided in several joint public education and wildfire prevention outreach programs with the Hernando County Fire Rescue. During the FY2023-2024, FFS personnel participated in several parades and fire prevention education programs throughout the five-county district. These events included the Dade City Garden Club, Hernando County Hurricane Expo, Welcome to the Woods, Pasco County Disaster Expo, Youth Farm Safety, and many festivals and parades. It is estimated over 410,408 people, including adults and children, attended these programs.

The FFS will continue to offer classes to the public who burn piles frequently. These classes prepare citizens to become Certified Pile Burners. Educating pile burners about the hazards associated with open burning will continue to be a top priority for the Florida Forest Service.



Mitigation and Landowner

Fire is a natural part of all ecosystems. Wildfires are a natural part of the landscape, but they can become a reality. Because of periods of extended drought, the risk of wildfires is increasing.

the number of Floridians who now live in the wildland/urban interface, it doesn't take a severe fire year to put homes at risk. Almost every time a wildfire occurs, homes or structures of some type are threatened.

The goal is to manage our Florida forests and wildlands so that when wildfires do occur, they are not as intense and are easier to control. This means taking action to reduce accumulated vegetation (wildland fuel), before wildfires occur. The most economical and most effective way to reduce vegetative build-up is through prescribed burning. Prescribed fire mimics the natural role of fire and helps perpetuate the plant communities and wildlife species that keep our ecosystems healthy. Most importantly, prescribed fire helps reduce the chance of a disastrous wildfire.

Over the past fifty years, more and more Floridians have moved out of our cities to build homes and businesses in outlying fringe areas known as the wildland/urban interface (WUI). In fact, almost 1/3 of our population now lives in interface areas where structures intermingle with forests and wildlands. Hernando County is no exception. Many residents in Florida don't realize they may live too "close to nature"; they may, in fact, be, "Living on the Edge", of a wildfire disaster.

The Florida Forest Service has developed a comprehensive Wildfire Mitigation Program to help reduce the threat of wildfires to homes and businesses that are adjacent to wildlands.

Steps involved are:

- Determine which communities are at risk for wildfires.
- Determine which fuel treatment is most appropriate (Mowing, Establishing Fire lines, or Prescribed Burning).
- Treat the fuels.
- Verify effectiveness and follow up with future treatments if necessary.

These activities are carried out on both public and private land. In the five county district of Hernando, Pasco, Citrus, Lake, and Sumter counties, 17 mitigation projects were completed over a total of 500 acres. These mitigation projects protected 428 structures with a total value of \$8,199,718,130.00.

County Wildfire Protection Plan

A major milestone in long term fire prevention occurred when the Hernando County Local Mitigation Strategy (LMS) Committee and the Board of County Commissioners supported the Florida Forest Service proposal to plan and implement a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). This plan will include all wildlands in Hernando County and describes the current wildfire risks to homes and businesses in these risk areas. The Withlacoochee Forestry Center now has all five of its counties under a (CWPP), and is the first district in the State to do so.

Firewise Program

Firewise Program

Firewise Communities/USA is a program which recognizes communities or neighborhoods that demonstrate the spirit, resolve and willingness to take responsibility as a partner in wildfire protection. Firewise Communities/USA is a way to help prevent and reduce losses to wildland/urban interface fire and foster community participation in applying Firewise principles. The program is administered in Florida by the Florida Forest Service. This program requires a strong desire for a community or subdivision to become Firewise and the willingness to partner with the FFS to help reduce wildfire risk.

Arson Awareness

Arson fires can be dealt with in a number of ways. In instances where a pattern is established in a specific geographic area, a door-to-door campaign might be used to increase community awareness of the situation. In other instances, media assistance might be required to bring attention to a more general situation. "Arson Alert" posters like the one at right might also be posted by Florida Forest Service officials in high visibility areas. Without exception, all incendiary wildfires are reported to the Office of Agricultural Law Enforcement for investigation.



All Hazard Emergency Response

Many employees of the Florida Forest Service are formally trained and qualified in the National Incident Command System (ICS). This system works nationally to provide for all risk management and has proven very valuable during emergency situations. Our employees will continue to play a major role in the future activities and needs of emergency services. The FFS works closely with all emergency services of Hernando County to ensure that efficient safe emergency operations are provided. Each of our trained personnel can participate in relief efforts during major emergencies in the state and throughout the nation. It is common for personnel to aid in other states when needed. FFS sent personnel to several western states during the 2023-2024 FY.

Hernando County Forest Area Supervisors

Wildland fire control in Hernando County is split by Forest Area Supervisors Brian Prill and Jason Packard. Jason has been with the Florida Forest Service since March of 2008. He started his career as a Forest Ranger in Okeechobee County, then in March of 2009 he was able to transfer back to the Withlacoochee Forestry Center. He was promoted to Forest Area Supervisor of Sumter County in November 2017 and transferred to the Citrus / East Hernando County FAS November of 2018. He currently serves as an Operations Section Chief on the Florida Incident Management Gold Team and the Federal Blue Incident Management Team.

Jason Packard contact information: Office (352) 797-4131 or Withlacoochee Forestry Center, State Cell (352) 442-2896, and his email Jason.Packard@FDACS.gov.

Brian Prill became the Forest Area Supervisor on August 8, 2013. Brian began his career with the Florida Forest Service in October of 1995. He has 29 years in firefighting experience and is a member of the state's Blue

Incident Management Team. Brian has participated in fire suppression activities in eight different states. He is also a cadre member in the state's wildland firefighter academy, where he has helped instruct since the year 2000.

Brian Prill can be reached at his office phone: (352) 523-5102 or Dade City Forestry Station, 36339 State Road 52, Dade City, Florida 33525 or email: Brian.Prill@FDACS.gov

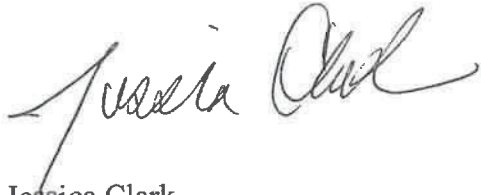
Conclusion

The primary goal of the CFA project in Hernando County for the new fiscal year remains unchanged. Through the office of the CFA Forester, the Florida Forest Service will continue to increase the visibility of forestry related services provided to the citizens of Hernando County. Through this exposure, more people will be made aware of the value and importance of timber production and natural resource management.

The Florida Forest Service is proud of the investment it has made in the natural resources of Hernando County and its ability to assist the residents of the county. Fire prevention and suppression will continue to be a major focus of this agency due to an ever-increasing population. Through the Cooperative Forestry Agreement, the Florida Forest Service will continue to provide sound forest management advice to both the citizens and local governments of Hernando County.

It is our policy to maintain an effective level of service and make any necessary improvements as needs are identified to serve the citizens of Hernando County. For that reason, the Board of County Commissioners of Hernando County is requested to provide comments or suggestions to assist the Florida Forest Service in providing the best service possible.

Respectfully Submitted,



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