



2024

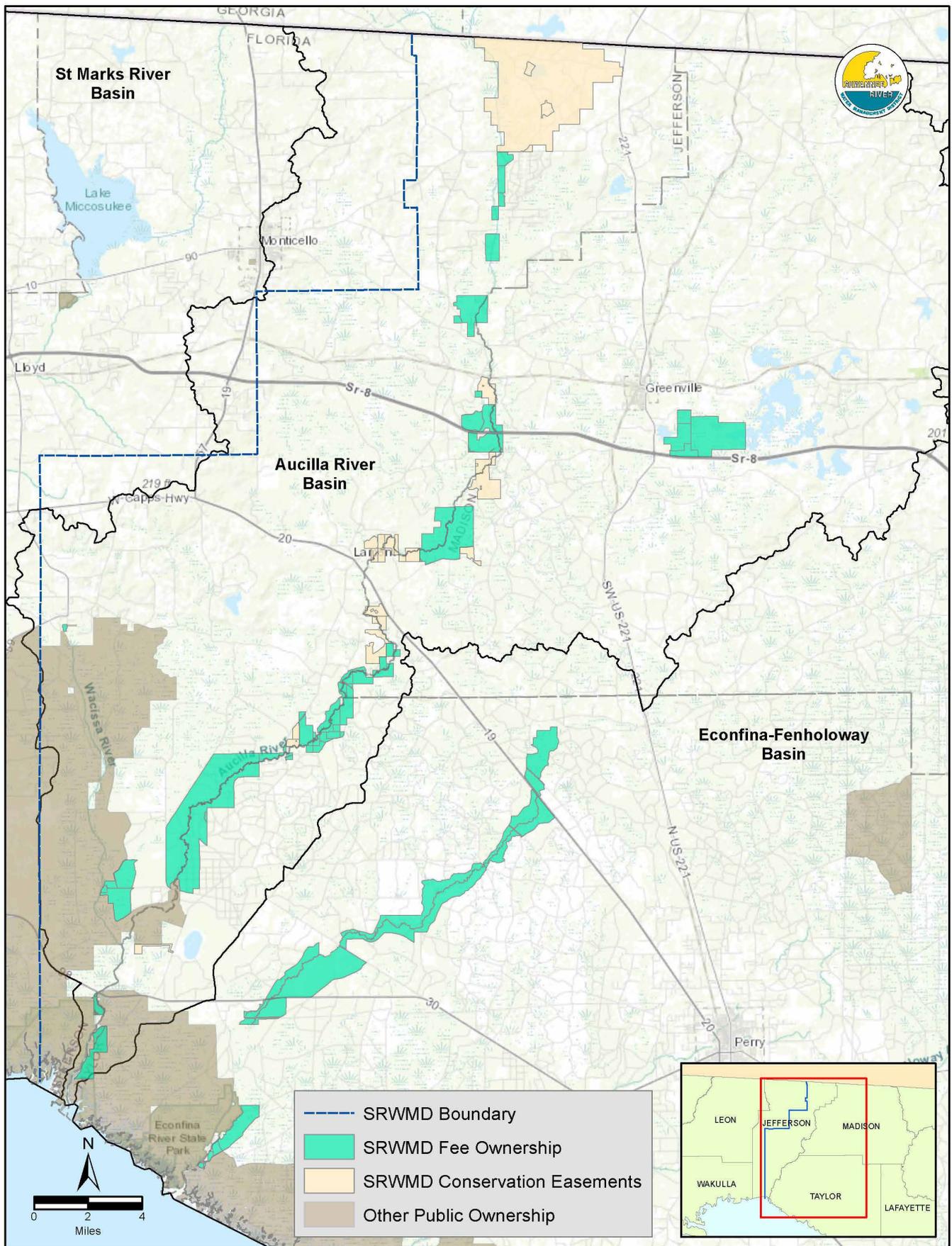
SRWMD

Land Management Annual Report

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Northwest Region

The Northwest Region encompasses 23,496-acres over 13 tracts, which are owned and managed by the District. The Northwest Region is in Jefferson, Madison, and Taylor Counties. The District lands in the Northwest are within the Aucilla or Econfina River Basins.

Background

- The District's goals are set under Florida Statute 373 to restore natural communities, protect the water resources, and provide balanced public use.
- The District holds fee-title to ± 162,402 acres. The Northwest Region is about 19% of the District's total fee-title ownership.
- The District has another ± 128,479 acres of less-than-fee conservation easements.

Vegetation Management/Natural Community Restoration

Many natural communities on District lands were historically influenced and maintained by the periodic occurrence of fire and other disturbances on the landscape. The District continues to use prescribed fire and other vegetation management tools, such as mechanical and chemical treatments, to manage vegetation within these communities to help them meet their desired future condition (DFC) parameters. The District has developed disturbance intervals (DI) for the five main natural communities targeted for restoration/management work (Table 1). These intervals are derived from designated fire return intervals developed by the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) for these communities. These intervals indicate the rotation or the number of years that often occurred between disturbances such as prescribed fire. This Disturbance Interval is one of the main Desired Future Condition (DFC) parameters the District uses to plan, implement and track vegetation management work.

Table 1 Fire Return/Disturbance Intervals (DI)

Natural Community	Acres (approximate)	DI
Sandhill	10,097	1-3 yrs.
Upland Pine	6,722	1-3 yrs.
Scrubby Flatwoods	3,989	5-15 yrs.
Mesic Flatwoods	23,384	2-4 yrs.
Wet Flatwoods	12,685	1-10 yrs.

Within the five targeted natural communities listed above, the District allocates most of its resources to areas designated as land management core areas. These core areas contain one or more of the following attributes:

- Areas have a recent history of prescribed fire or other disturbance type,
- Vegetation within these areas can be effectively maintained using prescribed fire or other mechanical/chemical treatments, and/or
- Areas have received other land management activities (timber thinning, reforestation, etc.) requiring additional vegetation management practices to complete a restoration prescription or help meet a DFC goal.

The District's goal is to consistently increase the percentage of core areas that are within their designated disturbance interval (Table 2). This can be achieved by using prescribed fire or other disturbances to control targeted vegetation and help the District meet DFC objectives. Table 3 provides additional information on core areas and the status of their disturbance intervals.

Table 2. Land Management Core Areas - Disturbance Interval Status (SRWMD Lands)

	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020

% Core Acres within Disturbance Interval (DI) (All Disturbance Types)	68%	68%	63%	63%	64%
Acres Planned (All Disturbance Types)	15,550	10,280	12,133	13,169	15,002
Acres Treated (All Disturbance Types)	14,044	9,766	10,854	10,161	14,545
Acres Burned That Met Objective	10,180	5,183	9,651	6,790	10,768
Wildfire Acres	0.0	2.9	3.70	0.0	11.0

Table 3. Acres of Managed Natural Communities by Classification (FY 2024).

	<i>District</i>		<i>Aucilla and Econfina</i>	
	Acres	% of total	Acres	% of total
Land Management Core Areas - TOTAL	48,819		10,213	
Total Acres IN Disturbance Interval (end of 2024)	33,364	68.3	5,824	57.0
<i>Last Management Tool - Prescribed Fire</i>	20,252	41.4	4,965	48.6
<i>Last Management Tool - Mechanical/Chemical</i>	13,112	26.8	858	8.4
Total Acres OUT of Disturbance Interval (end of 2024)	15,455	31.7	4,389	42.9
Acres where pine density is too thick or stand age is too young to safely burn*	8,473	17.4	3,853	37.7
Acres within Mallory Swamp Wildlife Management Area	4,106	8.4	NA	NA
Remaining Acreage	2,876	5.9	536	5.2

*Stand age only applies to slash pine (*Pinus elliottii*)

The following types of vegetation management activities were completed in FY 2024 to help restore and maintain natural communities, reduce fuel loads, and help meet overall DFC objectives:

Prescribed Fire Management

In FY 2024, prescribed fire was implemented on approximately 10,180 acres of District lands. However, no acres were burned on the Mallory Swamp Tract in 2024. This was due mainly to weather/fuel conditions on this tract that inhibited this practice.

Vegetation Management (Mechanical)

Mechanical treatments such as timber thinning, whole tree chipping, roller chopping and woods mowing are used to help meet natural community DFC objectives, prepare sites for prescribed fire and reforestation, and protect District resources from the damaging effects of wildfires. Work completed in FY 2024 includes:

- Approximately 3,614 acres were mechanically treated to help facilitate the use of prescribed fire and to help meet natural community management objectives. From this acreage, approximately 579 acres were mowed on the Mallory Swamp Tract.

Vegetation Management (Chemical)

The application of chemical herbicides on District lands is periodically used to help control hardwood competition on sites that are being prepared for pine reforestation or to facilitate the use of prescribed fire and help meet natural community Desired Future Condition (DFC) objectives. Work completed in FY 2024 includes:

- Approximately 250 acres were treated for reforestation site-prep purposes.

Natural Community Restoration Grants

In FY 2024, the District applied to receive grant funding from the following sources to help reduce the cost of natural community management:

Florida Forest Service: Prescribed Fire Enhancement Program

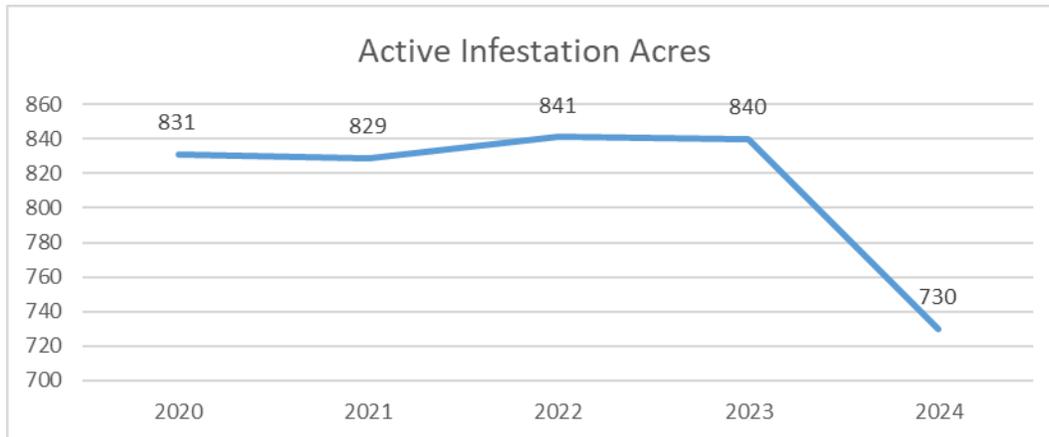
- The District was reimbursed \$270,427.50 for completing approximately 1,041 acres of heavy woods mowing on the Mallory Swamp Tract and Twin Rivers State Forest.

Invasive/Exotic Plants Management

The District has approximately 730 acres of known exotic plant infestations (Figure 1). As Figure 1 indicates, in FY 2024 the number of known infestations had a significant reduction. This is due to active infestations turning to inactive, polygons being revised to more accurate sizes, and duplicate polygons being combined into one polygon. District-wide, approximately 118 infestations were treated with herbicide (107 acres by contractors and 11 acres by staff) and 314 acres were monitored by staff, and of the 314 acres monitored approximately 26 acres turning from active infestations to inactive.

Additionally, and not calculated into the District-wide totals, another 11 acres of exotic plant infestations were treated by contractors at Edwards Bottomlands which is owned by the City of Starke. Through an agreement with the City and Florida Department of Transportation, the District has the responsibility of treating exotic plant infestations on the property until it fulfills permit requirements. It is expected the fulfillment of the requirements will be completed in FY 2025.

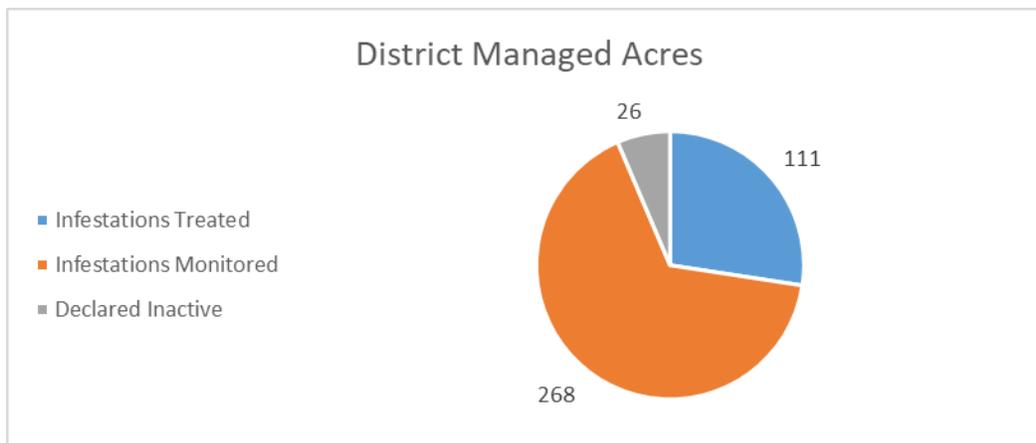
Figure 1: District-Wide Active Invasive Plant Infestation Acreage.



On District managed lands there are approximately 493 acres of exotic plant infestations.

In FY 2024, approximately 111 acres were treated with herbicide. Staff monitored 294 acres. Staff reclassified 26 of the monitored acres from active to inactive infestations. (Figure 2).

Figure 2: FY 2024 Invasive Plant Summary on District Managed Tracts



No exotic plant infestations have been documented on the Cabbage Grove Tract.

Rare Species Resources

The District conducts rare species monitoring and survey work on a regular basis to help document the location of new species and to monitor the status of existing occurrences. This information is documented and recorded in a rare species geodatabase that is made available to District staff. To help lower the potential for negative impacts on existing species occurrences, District staff can consult the rare species geodatabase before planning and conducting management activities. If potential impacts from management activities are identified, staff locate and delineate areas to prevent potential conflicts. Management activities are also adjusted if needed to prevent impacts to these resources.

In FY 2024, District staff and contractors conducted several types of rare species monitoring/surveying work including rare plant monitoring/surveying, gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) surveys and wading bird rookery monitoring. FY 2024 work accomplishments are listed below in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5 FY 2024 Rare Plant Monitoring/Survey Work.

Number of Tracts Monitored/Surveyed	Number of Known Rare Plant Locations Monitored	Number of Locations Where Rare Plants Were Observed	Number of New Rare Species Locations Documented
7	14	6	75

Table 6 FY 2024 Rare Animal Monitoring/Survey Work.

Number of Sites/Tracts Surveyed for Gopher Tortoise	Number of Gopher Tortoise Transects Surveyed	Number of Wading Bird Rookeries Monitored
23	330	5

The Cabbage Grove Tract has a total of seven rare plant species documented (six Southern Crabapple and one Pinewoods Dainties) and 15 rare animal species documented (15 gopher tortoises burrows).

Forest Resource Management

Natural community Desired Future Conditions (DFC) and forest health objectives drive the District’s timber harvest (Table 7) and reforestation program decisions.

Current Timber Harvest Focus Areas

- Pine thinnings to improve forest health and aid in prescribed fire.
- Final harvests of poor health pine stands for natural community restoration.
- Hardwood removal for natural community restoration.

FY 2025 Timber Harvest Outlook

- Complete 4 unfinished sales sold in previous years
- Harvest 3,800 acres of Hurricane salvage timber
- Continue to evaluate Hurricane damaged stands

Table 2 FY 2024 Timber Sales (1,223 acres)

Timber Sales	Acres	Activity
Woods ferry #7	155	Longleaf thinning with hardwood removal
Jerry Branch #2	191	Clearcut with hardwood removal and slash thinning
Steinhatchee Springs #24	192	Slash 2 nd thinning for forest health
Steinhatchee Springs #25	250	Slash 2 nd thinning for forest health & natural regen
Camp Blanding	128	Clearcut prior to mining
Holton Creek #5	140	Slash clearcut, longleaf thinning & hardwood removal
Ellaville #23	46	Longleaf 2 nd thinning
Ellaville #24	70	Slash clearcut for reforestation with longleaf

Cuba Bay #4	51	Slash thinning for forest health
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Forest Inventory

In FY 2024, District staff inventoried 126 forest plots throughout the District. The data from these plots are used to quantify the acres that have achieved their natural community goals and provide data for areas that could be improved by silvicultural activities. This timber cruise data also updates data in operational timber stands and identifies volumes and other species data in areas where a restoration project has been potentially identified.

Reforestation

In FY 2024, the District reforested approximately 315 acres with longleaf pine (*Pinus Palustris*). Approximately 112 acres of bare root longleaf pine was planted at the Nature Coast Wellfield with v-blade dozer planters. Approximately 109 acres was planted with containerized longleaf pine at the High Springs Wellfield with V-Blade dozer planters. Approximately 94 acres was planted with containerized longleaf pine at the High Springs Wellfield, Lake Butler Wellfield, and Cuba Bay Tract with hand planters.

Reforestation Grants

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation through an agreement with Alachua Conservation Trust, the District was awarded approximately \$44,590 which will pay for 181,900 containerized longleaf pine seedlings for FY 2025 reforestation activities.

In FY 2023, the District was also awarded \$50,600 through One Tree Planted for reforestation activities. The District utilized \$46,736 of the funds during FY 2024. The \$3,864 remaining funds will be used during FY 2025.

Public Use Management

The District’s Northwest Region is comprised of tracts along or near the Aucilla River and Econfina River Basins. The District provides nature-based recreation opportunities in the Northwest region including hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, horseback riding, paddling, photography, picnicking, and wildlife viewing.

Hunting, fishing, and camping are the most popular recreation opportunities in the Northwest Region. The Aucilla WMA and Middle Aucilla WMAs offer an archery, muzzleloading gun, general gun, small game, trapping, wild hog, racoon season, spring turkey, and migratory bird seasons. The Aucilla WMA allows hunting deer with dogs during general gun season by permit.

Other popular activities include frogging and coon hunting. Both of these activities require a night-use special use authorization (SUA) obtained from the District Online SUA website.

Birding is becoming more popular on District lands. Most District lands have a listing on E-Bird, an app where the birder can record the observations in a checklist.

Table 8 District Facilities in the Northwest Region

	District Wide	Northwest Region
Public Use Roads	179 miles	40 miles
Secondary Roads	154 miles	36 miles
Administrative Roads	445 miles	41 miles
Parking Areas	71	7
Trailheads	30	2
Picnic Areas	20	4
Boat Ramps	8	3
Canoe Launches	20	7
Water Access	123	47
Trails	257 miles	19 miles
Wildlife Management Areas	15	2

Cultural Resources Management

- Most District lands are located along waterways. Consequently, the District has an abundance of cultural resources located within our fee-titled lands (known and unknown).
- The District has an active management plan that involves both the inspection of known sites and the recording of newly found sites.
- The District works closely with FWC law enforcement when looting is discovered.

During tract inspections, staff monitors all known cultural resource sites on each tract and notes of any changes in condition.

When undertaking land management activities staff refers to the Florida Master Site File (FMSF) and other known archeological site information. By utilizing FMSF data staff can locate known sites and protect the resource.

Table 3 Status of Cultural and Historical Resource Sites.

Measures	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
Significant sites inspected	27	24	19	26	26
Looted sites discovered	0	0	6	27	23
Sites managed by other agencies	5	5	5	5	5
Number recently damaged sites	0	14	3	1	7

Tract Improvement Projects

The District strives to make improvements to District lands by completing various projects throughout the year. These projects can range from the installation of new facilities, upgrade/improve existing facilities, or even cleaning up old dump sites. Some of the improvements made in FY 2024 are listed below.

- The design and permitting of the planned rehabilitation at Steinhatchee Falls Park boat ramp is near completion. The plan includes restoration of the existing seawall segment to provide protection from further deterioration. Lastly, the plan extends the seawall toward the boat ramp to stabilize the riverbank and protect against erosion.

- In July 2024, the District opened Telford Spring to the public. Maintenance services were initiated 3x weekly. Staff contracted with EUTAW, Inc to develop a conceptual plan to improve parking and public access. The plan is to clear the improved parking location.
- Tract improvements were completed in August 2024 at the Country Club Road Tract including fencing the dam perimeter, repairing road erosion, capping all of SE Fritz Court, and field mowing.
- EUTAW, Inc. developed a design for an updated and fortified boat ramp for Mount Gilead Tract.
- A project to improve Owens Springs public accessibility and reduce impacts to the natural system was initiated in FY24 and continues this year. It includes heavy daylighting of main roads, reconfiguration of parking to reduce erosion, and improved access to the spring.
- Repairs were contracted to fix the Pinehatchee Boardwalk. The repairs were completed in FY24 and continued work is planned to provide public access.
- Rock Bluff Springs Tract underwent upgrades to the electrical system, well, and the old septic tank near the spring was properly abandoned and a wastewater treatment system was installed that complies with DEP onsite sewage program. This new sewer system meets high water quality goals (capable of reducing nitrogen by at least 50% before discharge to the drainfield).

Hydrological Facility Improvement Projects

The District strives to improve hydrological facilities along its road network each year. Hydrological facilities include any facility that may convey, disrupt, or hold back water (culverts, ditch blocks, low water crossings, wells, etc.). There are three main activities conducted on the District's road network relating to hydrological facility management:

- *Inventories*: Record existing and unknown hydrological facilities (currently there are over 900 known hydrological facilities District-wide).
- *Inspections*: Inspect the service and functionality of existing hydrological facilities and determine if new facilities are needed where none have been located before.
- *Improvements*: Replace or repair non-functioning or inadequate hydrological facilities or install new facilities to improve water resources.

In FY 2024 hydrological facility improvement projects were completed on three District tracts (Mt. Gilead, Steinhatchee Springs, and Christian tract) for a total of three culverts and two low water culverts repair or replacements.

Road Management

District lands contain approximately 1,300 miles of road. Each road is classified into one of four categories: public, secondary, administrative, and abandoned. Public and secondary roads are open to the public. Administrative roads are only utilized by District staff, District contractors and members of the public who have been issued an SUA. Abandoned roads are either not used or minimally used by the District (usually for a specific project).

Typically, the category of the road determines the amount of maintenance the road receives. Roads open to the public generally receive the highest level of maintenance while administrative roads receive maintenance only as required by their use and abandoned roads receive little to no maintenance. However, this may not be always the case. In some situations, road repairs

are based on land management operations such as preparing for or repairing after timber harvests.

Approximately 96.44 miles of roads were maintained in FY 2024. Tracts include Christian, Cypress Creek, Devils Hammock, Goose Pasture, Holton Creek, Jennings Bluff, Little River, Mallory Swamp, Mattair Springs, Mossy Hammock, Steinhatchee Falls, Steinhatchee Springs, Swift Creek, Walker, Withlacoochee (Pot Springs), Withlacoochee Quail Farm, and Woods Ferry.

Of the 96.44 miles of road maintenance conducted in FY 2024, approximately 3.76 miles were project roads which consisted of complete road rebuilds within the Pinehatchee addition of the Steinhatchee Springs Tract and the Pot Springs access road within the Withlacoochee Tract. 5.5 miles of road were maintained in the Northwest region.

NOTES:
