

Florida National Scenic Trail Coalition Summary

Virtually Held January 23rd, 2025



Coalition Members in Attendance:

Shawn Thomas*	FNST Administrator, U.S. Forest Service
Jenna Taylor*	FNST Deputy Administrator, U.S. Forest Service
Abe Christian	Executive Director, Florida Trail Association
Taylor Stein	Associate Director and Professor, School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatic Sciences, University of Florida
Rachen Penrod	Director Public Access Services Office, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Damien Hardgrove	Roads and Trail Supervisor, Big Cypress National Preserve
Brent Reichard	Public Lands Specialist, Director of Parks and Public Lands, Osceola County
Bruce Leutscher	Chief of Science and Resource Stewardship, Gulf Islands National Seashore
Brian Holtzinger	Natural Resource Program Manager, Army Corps of Engineers
Roger Gill	Land Management Specialist, Suwannee Water Management District
Emily Padden	Next Gen Coordinator, Florida Trail Association
Beth Jackson	Environmental Program Administrator, Orange County

Guests:

Adam Fryska*	Trail Program Director, Florida Trail Association
Christina Mallica	GIS Specialist, Florida Trail Association
Jeff Glenn*	Senior Regional Trail Program and Field Project Manager, Florida Trail Association
Austin Burton*	Gateway Communities Coordinator, Florida Trail Association
Brandie Dziegiel	Panhandle Regional Trail Program Manager, Florida Trail Association
Alicia Baxter	Environmental Program Supervisor, Orange County
Eddie Bruce	Public Access Biologist, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Michelle Duncan	Chair of the Board, Florida Trail Association
Elwood McElhanev	Board Treasurer, Florida Trail Association
Tom Daniel	Board Member, Florida Trail Association
Bill Turman	Board Member, Florida Trail Association
Chris Stevens	Board Member, Florida Trail Association
Jack Shofield	Board Member, Florida Trail Association

*presenter

Next Meeting Information:

Summer coalition meeting planned for June or July, with in-person attendance and field visits. Poll will be sent out to Coalition members for date preferences.



Meeting Agenda:

- Welcome and Introduction of Members and Guests
- Infrastructure Progress Report
- Hurricane Response
- Gateway Community and Advocacy Updates
- Coalition Member Round Robin
- Next Coalition Meeting

Meeting Summary:

FT Coalition Meetings are a gathering of land managers and partners to discuss progress towards the four goals of the 5-Year Strategic Plan. This document is meant to act as a summary of presentation and discussion items. For additional meeting materials, including presentations and a copy of the Strategic Plan and other accompanying documents, please visit <https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/fnst/home>.

Coalition Role, Mission, & Vision Statements:

Role of the Coalition

The role of the coalition was briefly discussed, aligned with the 2024-2029 Strategic Plan document. The coalition sets goals, works as a cooperative body of partners, and aims to achieve the mission of the FT.

Mission Statement

“The Florida National Scenic Trail meets as a coalition body to inform better decisions and attract greater resources to advance, protect and connect people to the Florida Trail.”

Goal 1: Promote Connections

Major Performance Measure - Cultivate community and cultural relevance through engaging new and non-traditional trail users.

Gateway Community Program and Advocacy

- Thru hiker statistics: 100+ thru hikers preregistered this season, with 28 states and international hikers represented. 86% heading northbound. January the most popular months for hikers to begin their journeys, expected to finish in March.
- DeFuniak Springs to be designated as the newest Gateway Community. 16 total Gateway Communities now.
- Ongoing engagement with national and local advocacy efforts, including participation with Hike the Hill in Washington, D.C. and advocacy newsletter to highlight opportunities for chapter involvement.
- Passport Program continues to connect hikers with culturally and historically significant sites.
- Florida Trail Fest (February 7th – 9th 2025)
- Free event hosted in White Springs with guided hikes, bike rides, paddling, and community events.
- Schedule is complete and posted on FTA’s website.



Goal 2: Complete the Trail

Major Performance Measure - Remove 30 miles of trail connectors and add 50 designatable miles of trail to close critical gaps within the trail corridor.

Yellow River Bridge Project

- Aims to eliminate a 20-mile road walk in Okaloosa County by connecting Eglin Air Force Base to conservation lands.
- \$1 million from Okaloosa County helping to fund this project as a tourism initiative.
- Site visit completed by USFS, USFWS, FTA, and Okaloosa County in November and bridge design by Mott MacDonald engineering firm with expected products by March 2025.
- FTA's role in addition to planning is to complete trails incorporate bridge into FNST routing with scouting trips already completed.
- Partners: U.S. Forest Service, NWF Water Management District, Eglin AFB, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, FTA, Okaloosa County.

Spring Creek Project

- Focused on rerouting a trail section in St. Marks NWR, enhancing accessibility, and removing roadwalk sections.
- NEPA and tribal consultation is complete, permitting and design planning processes have started.
- Supported by natural resource damage assessment grant linked to BP oil spill funds.

Goal 3: Sustainable Management

Major Performance Measure - 100% of the Florida Trail is managed to standard annually to provide maximum potential for recreation, conservation, and enjoyment.

Robinson Bridge Project

- Adjacent to Suwannee River, completed in Big Shoals State Park to address aggressive flooding and provide safer trail access and prevent 5-mile reroute. Also gives emergency teams better access to trails in rescue operations.
- Permitting was a learning opportunity with this project – complicated in that this involved a zero-rise certification from the water management district.
- 85 ft stringer bridge built entirely by volunteers with local community support. A ribbon-cutting ceremony is planned in the Spring.

Future Infrastructure Projects

- Includes Schuler Bay in Apalachicola NF with demolition and rebuild currently underway, Boy Scout Bridge in Osceola NF with demolition completed, Wiley Walkway in Little Big Econ SF, puncheon/bridge repairs in Mills Creek Woodlands, and shade shelters going in along Lake Okeechobee.
- FTA building lumber storage facility for infrastructure and maintenance needs outside of Gainesville with the Alachua Conservation Trust.
- Process for submitting projects: Present projects to FTA Regional Trail Managers to complete projects within your land units. Form is linked in meeting notes.



Hurricane Recovery and Trail Maintenance

- Two major hurricanes and tornadoes significantly impacted approximately 85 miles of trail.
- Areas with largest impact: Aucilla WMA, Suwannee River SP, Seminole SF, Green Swamp, and Ocala NF.
- FTA volunteer efforts: 6,500 volunteer hours logged for hurricane response, with 3,000 hours of that from volunteer work parties.
- Another 1,000 volunteer hours logged in Juniper Prairie Wilderness work party with 25 miles of trail cleared in 4 days.
- Work planned in Aucilla WMA, Twin Rivers SF, and Suwannee River SP. All hurricane work is scheduled to be completed by mid-February.
- Still on schedule with regular trail maintenance as well.

Goal 4: Strategic Partnerships

Major Performance Measure - The Florida Trail Partnerships Program maintains high performing relationships that proactively contribute to Trail development, maintenance or promotion of the Florida Trail.

- Fostering coordination among partnerships and continuing the bi-annual FNST Coalition meetings. The next will be held June/July, 2025. Location is to be determined.
- Please see Coalition powerpoint for current agreement and funds list.

Coalition Member Updates - Round Robin

Associate Director and Professor, School of Forest Fisheries and Geomatic Science, University of Florida – Taylor Stein
Efforts with placing counters ongoing. Visitor Assessments at the thru hiker kick off in Big Cypress National Preserve: counting visitors and completing questionnaire with thru-hikers including demographics, experience, intentions, and knowledge of permitting and LNT procedures.

Environmental Programs Administrator, Orange County – Beth Jackson
Working on resolving easement issues with Duke Energy to allow access to trail segments in Holopaw Conservation Area. Installing interpretive signage in the works in that area as well.

Public Lands Specialist, Director of Parks and Public Lands, Osceola County – Brent Reichard
Design permitting in works for new bridges in Aucilla WMA. Standard plans needed from FS for new bridges. Should be starting design permitting in July or August of this year. There is a possible dilemma with who's going to permit them (WMD or otherwise) so that is to be determined. Shawn would like to talk through this since the FS has had permitting issues with Robinson Branch and the WMD.

Acting Executive Director, Florida Trail Associate – Abe Christian
Memorial page for David Walcott, a long-time volunteer and former board member, posted on the FTA website.



Director Public Access Services Office, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission – Rachel Penrod

Updated on the new permitting process for special events according to special event document sent out at June 2024 Coalition meeting. New questions included in these new special use opportunity questionnaires. Design and permitting work ongoing for bridges on the Aucilla portion of the trail.

Roads and Trail Supervisor, Big Cypress National Preserve – Damien Hardgrove

Cleared first $\frac{3}{4}$ mile portions of the trail for hiking season kickoff. Continuing to support local volunteer chapters with their work parties, including providing ATV transports if necessary. Installed an elevated sleeping platform at Ivy Camp and working on a second platform location that is more easily accessible. Cleaned up Stephen's Camp with additional upgrades to make campsite more inviting. Designs finalized for freestanding backpack hangers. Once design is complete, they can be moved through since locations have already been decided.

Natural Resource Program Manager, Army Corps of Engineers – Brian Holtzinger

Working on real estate applications to clarify and enhance FTA and Forest Service management of campsites and shade shelters.

Next Gen Coordinator, Florida Trail Association – Emily Padden

18 current members of the Next Gen cohort. Focus on reducing leadership roles and time commitments in volunteer positions to increase recruitment. Increasing youth outreach events.

Board Chair, Florida Trail Association – Michelle Duncan

FTA board meeting scheduled for Saturday, with an open invitation to coalition members. Introduced Abe as acting Executive Director for FTA.

Chief of Science and Resource Stewardship, Gulf Islands National Seashore – Bruce Leutscher

Working with Adam to install more trail counters in the Fort Pickens region. Working with local chapters on educational materials.

Land Management Specialist, Suwannee Water Management District – Roger Gill

Acknowledged FTA's work clearing hurricane damage on district lands. Identifying backcountry campsites for future improvements. Bridge in this region has been fixed.

GIS Specialist, Florida Trail Association/U.S. Forest Service – Christina Mallica

New FS-hosted ArcGIS Online group available to Coalition members for data and app sharing purposes.





Important Links

[1983 Florida National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan](#)

[Florida National Scenic Trail 5-Year Strategic Plan \(2023\)](#)

[Florida National Scenic Trail Project Proposal Form](#)

[Building the Robinson Branch Bridge – FTA](#)

[Gateway Community Spotlight: Florida Coalition for Peace and Justice - FTA](#)

