

# After two decades of talks, deal is sealed



John Ferrell tells a story about the Blue Sink, one of at least nine sinkholes on his 720-acre property. The property bought by the state holds 100 acres of pastures, 300 acres of long leaf pines. TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT FILE

## State pays \$4.2M for land that protects springs, connects with national forest

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USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

Florida will spend \$4.2 million to buy 717 acres in the Wakulla Springs Protection Zone, preserving a wildlife and recreation corridor that connects the Apalachicola National Forest to Wakulla Springs State Park.

Gov. Ron DeSantis and the Florida Cabinet approved a deal worked out between John Ferrell and Conservation Florida to purchase the land Ferrell's family started to farm in the 1870s. The parcel has been targeted by the state's land-buying conservation program since 1999.

Ferrell, now in his 60s, grew up on the farm but has since moved to Atlanta. He dropped his asking price for the land by



Noah Valenstein, secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, speaks Thursday about the acquisition of 717 acres of land.

TORI SCHNEIDER/TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

about \$1.3 million in exchange for it becoming part of the effort to protect Wakulla Springs.

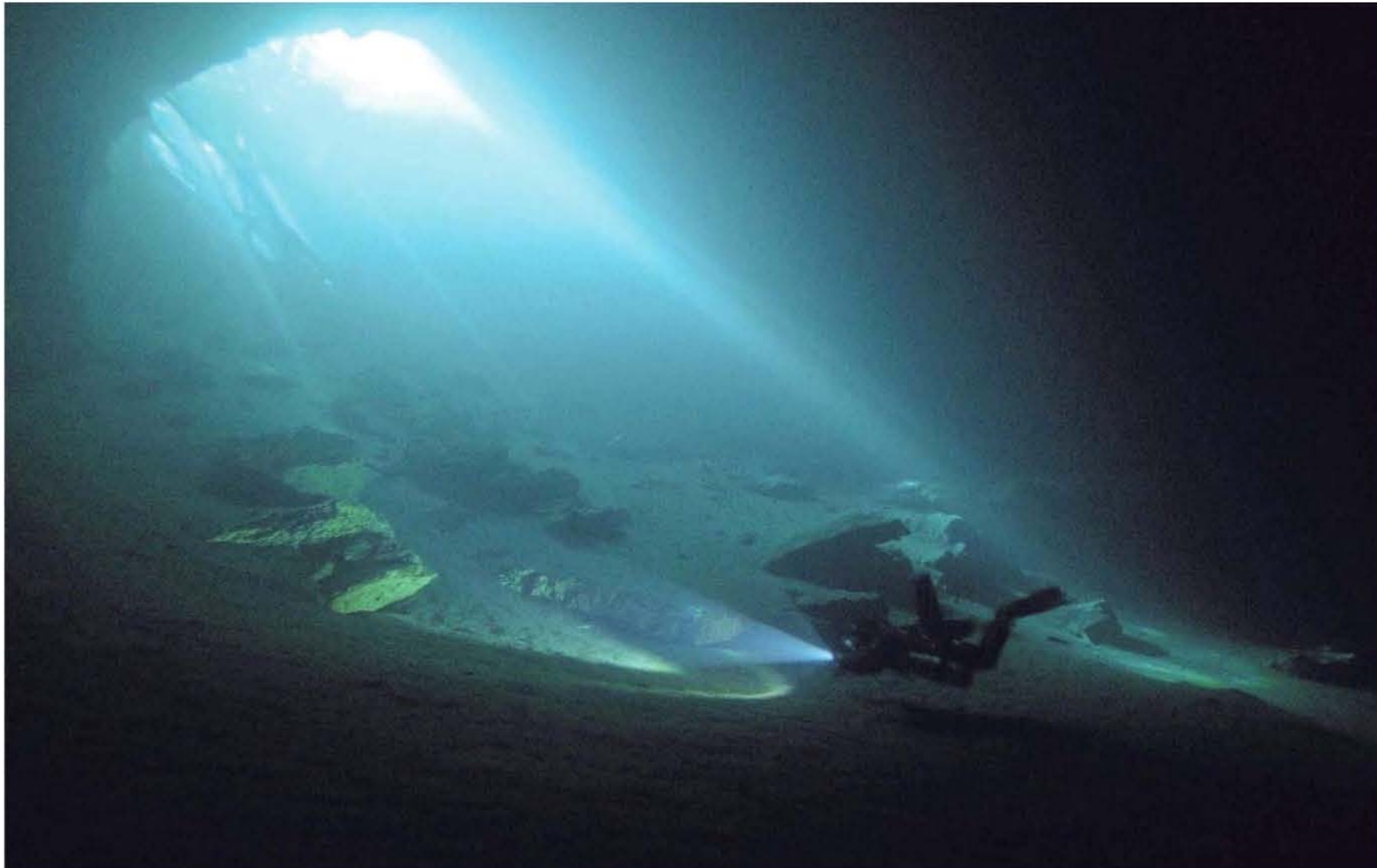
"Conservation Florida brought a renewed sense of optimism and understanding to negotiations that finally resulted in a deal," said Ferrell. "I couldn't be happier for the legacy of my family than to have the amazing water resources of this property in public ownership."

The property is two miles north of Wakulla Springs along County Road 61. It holds 100 acres of pastures, 300 acres of long leaf pines and is dotted with pristine sinkholes including Meeting House, Bird Pond, Blue Sink and at least four others.

The sinks are gateways to an underground cave system that is a conduit for stormwater runoff to the spring and connects to the aquifer as well. When it rains, water seeps through sandy soil into a karst bedrock. Through the cen-

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# Local News



A diver at the bottom of Meeting House Sink explores the underground cave network that links the Apalachicola National Forest to Wakulla Springs. COURTESY OF ANDREAS HAGBERG



When temperatures rise, visitors flock to Wakulla Springs State Park to cool off. TORI SCHNEIDER/TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT



One of at least nine sink holes on the 720-acre Ferrell property off Wakulla Springs Road. TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT FILE

## Wakulla

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turies, water has eroded crevices and canyons in the karst as if it was a spongy rock before it percolates up into Wakulla Springs, the world's largest and deepest freshwater spring.

The spring's ecosystem has been choked by algae and hydrilla fed by nitrates carried by stormwater runoff from lawns where fertilizers are used. The state's purchase of the Ferrell property under the Florida Forever Program will prevent development of the land.

More than 12 miles of the underground cave system, that includes the Ferrell property, has been mapped. The caves and the spring they open into are premier attractions for visitors from around the world. The state park at the spring generates more than \$2 million in annual economic activity, according to a study by Florida State University.

"It is an important economic engine for Wakulla County," Chuck Hess, the chair of the Wakulla County Commission, told DeSantis and the Cabinet. "This acquisition provides more recreational accessibility for our spring and our cave system. It is an important ac-



John Ferrell stands near the old hay barn on his family's property. Ferrell decided to put the land up for sale at \$5.5 million. TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT FILE

quisition."

There are other karst systems around the world but just four have created swimming holes (sinks) like the one under Wakulla and Leon counties. Tracie Deen of Conservation Florida described

them as "windows" into the aquifer as the water flows to the spring.

The unique geologic features of the land, the economic boost and the wildlife created an iron triangle of support that united government, business and

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environmentalists in the effort to include the property in the plan to protect Wakulla Springs.

Deen was on hand for the meeting when DeSantis and the Cabinet were presented with the Department of Environmental Protection recommendation to purchase it.

DeSantis and Attorney General Ashley Moody, CFO Jimmy Patronis and Agriculture Commissioner Nikki Fried spent less than two minutes discussing the deal that took more than two decades to forge.

"Sometimes things like this just takes the right time," said Deen. "It's a complex process that can take many years. But we are really really proud to have negotiated an agreement that both the landowner and the state accepted."