

FOLLETS ISLAND CONSERVATION PROJECT

WEST BAY, BRAZORIA COUNTY, TEXAS



Final Report May 2014

GLO Contract No. 12-355-000-6076

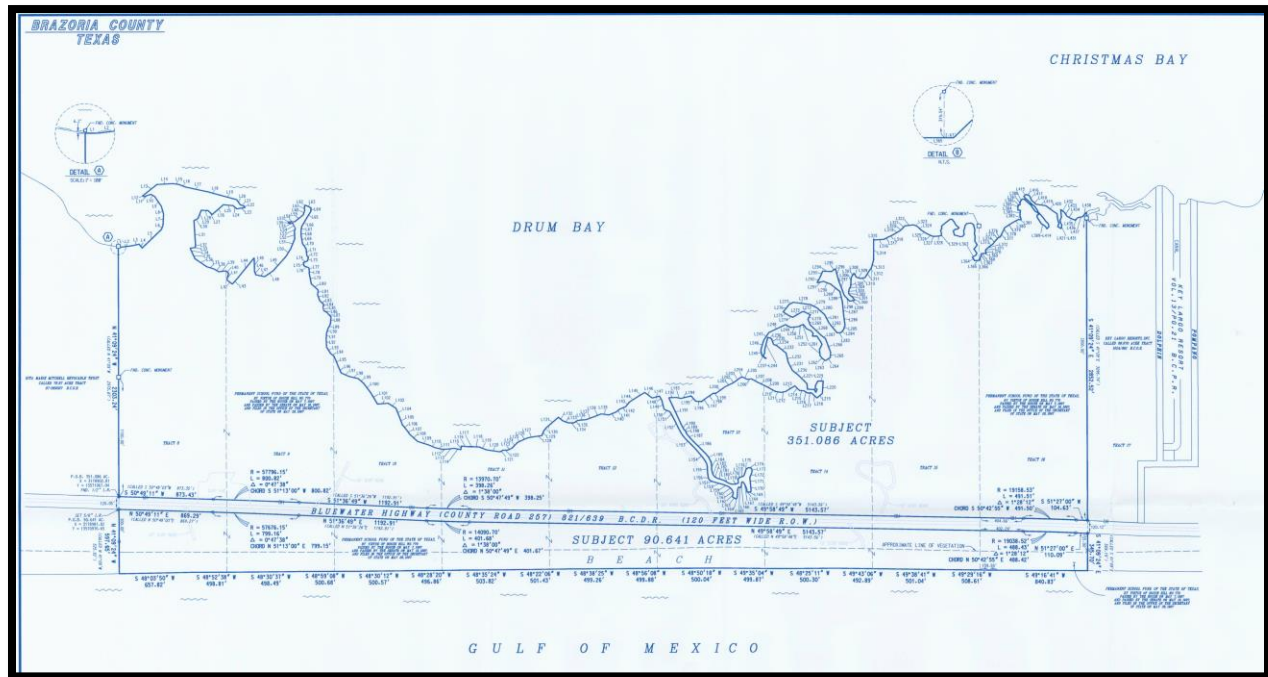
TCEQ Contract No. 582-11-13418



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The health and productivity of West Bay watershed is threatened by continued rapid population growth. Since the 1950s, the Galveston Bay estuarine ecosystem has lost a net of 35,000 acres of wetlands, at least half of which was concentrated in the West Bay watershed (White et al, 1993). During that time, West Bay lost nearly all of its seagrasses to shoreline development, and water quality deterioration (Pulich and White, 1991). Continued wetland loss and increased pollutant loadings are likely within the West Bay area, as Galveston County and Brazoria Counties are growing rapidly, with populations expected to increase about 40% by 2025 (H-GAC, 2003). Much of this growth will likely be concentrated along bay and bayou shorelines, impacting fringing marshes vital to water quality protection and wildlife.

The Follets Island Conservation Project was completed in 2014. Funding was sought after through a partnership between the Galveston Bay Estuary Program (GBEP), a program of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), Texas General Land Office (GLO), Brazoria County Parks Department (Brazoria County), and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD). Funding was successfully obtained from TCEQ through the Natural Resources Uses Subcommittee (NRU) of the Galveston Bay Council and the 2008 funding cycle of the Coastal Impact Assistance Program (CIAP).

At the conclusion of the project, 441.727 acres of coastal barrier habitat were permanently protected through fee-simple acquisition.



INTRODUCTION

West Galveston Bay (West Bay) is a highly biologically productive area, featuring extensive tidal and brackish marshes, coastal prairies pockmarked with freshwater depressional wetlands created by ancient stream meanders, and forested wetland areas associated with its numerous small bayous and streams. Because of its rich natural features and relatively high water quality, West Bay and its watershed support an abundance and diversity of fish and wildlife, including recreationally and commercially important fish and shellfish, resident and overwintering birds and waterfowl, and neo-tropical migratory birds. Its extensive wetlands and grassland prairies help to protect water quality in the bay and its tributaries. Accordingly, the area is used extensively for recreation, and contributes greatly to the overall productivity of the Galveston Bay system, and to vital nature-based sectors of the Houston economy.

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This project is a component of a larger ongoing effort to protect wetlands and natural areas in the West Bay region in order to protect water quality, provide habitat for fish and wildlife, and preserve the biological integrity of the ecosystem. It enhances the ecological and recreational significance of the growing mosaic of conservation efforts on Follets Island, which already includes the Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge and Christmas Bay Coastal Preserve; a Gulf Ecological Management Site (GEMS).



The project goal was the permanent conservation of an approximately 484 acre tract on Follets Island. Follets Island is a peninsula located across San Luis Pass to the southwest of Galveston Island in southern Brazoria County (at 29°03' N, 95°10' W). The peninsula is bordered by the Gulf of Mexico to the east and Christmas Bay to the west. The Follets Island tract being conserved features important Gulf Coast barrier island habitat, including algal flat, inter-tidal marsh, brackish marsh, and coastal prairie, which provides important water quality functions and are critical for residential and migrant wading birds, shore birds, waterfowl, and grassland birds.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

The GLO executed the sub-contract with Brazoria County. A willing seller letter was obtained. The land survey was conducted, approved by the GLO, and submitted to USFWS. The appraisal was conducted. GLO and USFWS staff approved the appraisal as compliant with yellow book standards. The draft purchase and donations deeds were drafted and submitted to USFWS. A land title search was conducted. On February 6, 2014, Brazoria County purchased 441.727 acres on Follets Island from the School Land Board and donated the tract to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for long-term management. The executed deed, settlement

statement, and summary of land costs were submitted to USFWS. Brazoria County installed CIAP signage at the site along the property line on County Road 257.

Funding

Funding was sought after through a partnership between GBEP, GLO, Brazoria County, and TPWD. Funding was successfully obtained from TCEQ through the Natural Resources Uses Subcommittee (NRU) of the Galveston Bay Council and the 2008 funding cycle of CIAP. Additional funding was secured by GLO through CIAP in 2013 to account for a higher than expected appraisal cost.

Survey

The Land Title Survey was completed by Doyle and Wachtstetter, Inc. in November 2012. The report was submitted to USFWS and no issues were encountered.

Appraisal

An appraisal was conducted in March 2013, and GLO and USFWS staff approved the appraisal as compliant with yellow book standards. The appraisal, performed by Kokel-Oberrender-Wood Appraisal, Ltd. valued the property at \$1,400,000, which exceeds the funding amount allocated to the project. GLO staff submitted a request to reallocate unused CIAP funds to the project. Approval and reallocation of additional funds delayed closing significantly.

Phase One Environmental Site Assessment

The Phase One Environmental Site Assessment was completed by Berg-Oliver Associates, Inc. in May 2013. The report was submitted to USFWS and no issues were encountered.

Conduct Land Title Search and Draft Deeds for Property

TPWD requested the School Land Board (SLB) not reserve the rights to the commercial development of groundwater. The SLB considered the action at the August 6, 2013 meeting. The draft deeds could not be finalized until the SLB approved the request.

Purchase Land

The land was purchased by Brazoria County and then donated to TPWD September 9, 2013. The project officially closed out February 6, 2014.

PROJECT RESULTS

At the conclusion of the project, 441.727 acres of coastal barrier habitat were permanently protected through fee-simple acquisition. The property was purchased by Brazoria County and donated to TPWD to be managed as part of the Christmas Bay Coastal Preserve Gulf Ecological Management Site (GEMS). The Christmas Bay Coastal Preserve, in Brazoria County, is a shallow 4,173 acre embayment in the southwestern portion of the Galveston Bay system. The Bay is a unique high quality subsystem of estuary that has not yet been greatly altered by human activity. The waters of Christmas Bay to the mean high tide line constitute the preserve. It is approximately 5,700 acres in area. The preserve is one of the most ecologically productive bays of the Galveston complex.

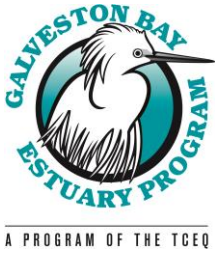
PROJECT CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Initially, GLO staff proposed to acquire fee title to additional tracts of land on Follets Island. Due to the higher than anticipated appraised value of the identified tract, the purchase of additional properties is not possible. GLO staff submitted revised project and budget narratives to USFWS to remove the tasks for the acquisition of additional properties. USFWS approved the amendment.

In the State plan, the project goal is to acquire approximately 485 acres of coastal barrier habitat on Follets Island with the tract identified for acquisition specifically mentioned. In the project narrative, the project goal was revised to acquire and conserve at least 485 acres of coastal barrier habitat on Follets Island. The revised language was intended to allow GLO staff to utilize remaining project funds (after the acquisition of the identified tract) to purchase additional properties. However, the appraised value of the identified tract was higher than anticipated and the tract's acreage was determined to be 441.727 acres, which is less than the project goal of at least 485 acres. Since the project goal was set based on the anticipated acreage of the identified tract and the State plan provides for an approximate acreage, partners feel that the overall project goal was met.

The biggest hurdle initially was that the bulk of the funding (awarded in 2008) was not released until 2011. This postponement led to a long delay in the implementation of the project, and created additional problems down the road with regard to the other funding sources.

FOR INFORMATION REGARDING THIS PROJECT PLEASE CONTACT:



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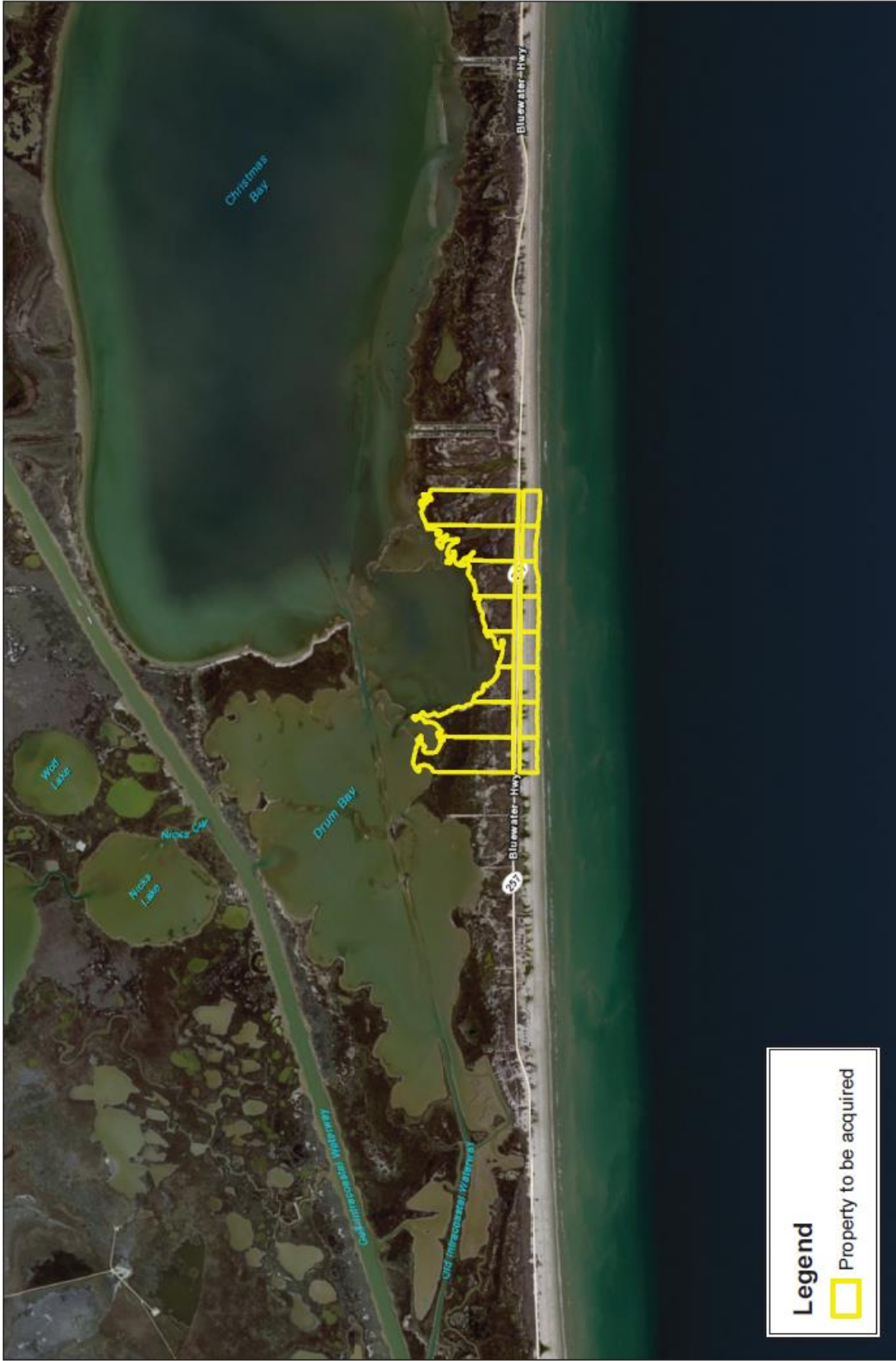


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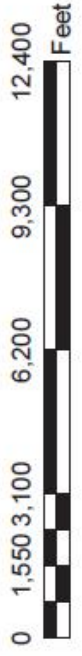
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Legend

Property to be acquired



Follets Island Conservation Initiative



The Texas General Land Office makes no representations or warranties regarding the accuracy or completeness of the information depicted on this map or the date from which it was produced. This map IS NOT suitable for navigational purposes and does not purport to depict or establish boundaries between private and public land.