

CHAPTER 13: VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION MEASURES

In addition to those formal minimization and mitigation measures identified elsewhere in this HCP, Walton County intends to implement the following voluntary measures to further the protection and conservation of its natural coastal resources to the extent permitted by available fiscal and personnel resources and legal constraints.

Coastal Dune Lakes

Issues associated with shoreline protection projects, including activities governed under this HCP, may affect the functioning of dune lakes. Policy L-1.6.2 of the Walton County Comprehensive Plan and Chapter 4.02.06.B.9 of the County's Land Development Regulations restrict construction or disturbance in the natural outlet from a coastal dune lake. A buffer of not less than 50 ft (15 m) of vegetated area must be left undisturbed along either side of the natural outlet from the lake. The County will ensure that shoreline protection measures initiated under this HCP conform to existing policies regarding coastal dune lake protection.

Walton County has created a Coastal Dune Lakes Advisory Board with members appointed by the Board of County Commissioners. The Advisory Board is represented by affected property owners, businesses and concerned citizens. One of the Board's main objectives is to ensure the long-term stability of these globally rare and economically valuable community assets. To achieve this objective, the Board solicited input from affected stakeholders and with their involvement developed a long-range management plan for the County's coastal dune lake system.

The HCP Coordinator will work with the Coastal Dune Lakes Advisory Board, and other organizations, as needed, to advance the goals of this HCP and preserve the integrity of the coastal dune lakes and the protected species that associate with them. In particular, the County will evaluate the feasibility of establishing conservation easements in areas surrounding coastal dune lake outfalls where high concentrations of shorebirds have been documented.

Nesting Shorebirds

The County will work with the USFWS and/or FWC to identify areas of potential shorebird nesting habitat to develop options for creating, restoring, and/or maintaining this habitat. The County will undertake such actions in this regard that are deemed practical, cost effective, and do not conflict with private property rights. At a minimum, the HCP Coordinator will develop a system for reporting and documenting known nesting locations. If possible, when reports are received of shorebirds nesting on the beach, the respective areas will be posted and/or cordoned off from the public and monitored by appropriate County staff. Nest protection efforts will be coordinated with the FWC.

Non-breeding Migratory Shorebirds

Monitoring

Walton County will implement a monitoring program to determine seasonal abundances and locations of shorebirds on beaches within the Plan Area. This will be achieved through periodic county-wide surveys conducted twice per month for one full year. The first survey is targeted for the second complete year following ITP issuance. Thereafter, surveys will be performed every five years. All data from the surveys will be entered into the County's GIS database and provided to the USFWS and FWC. If during the non-breeding shorebird surveys any nesting is documented, the location(s) will be reported to the HCP Coordinator and appropriate protective measures implemented, as noted above.

Posting of High Occurrence Areas

Resting and foraging shorebirds have shown a clear preference for sections of beach surrounding coastal dune lake outfalls, particularly those at Stallworth, Draper, Big Redfish, Western, and Camp Creek Lakes (Figure 2). Walton County will select one or two of these lake outfalls for establishing restricted access shorebird resting areas. A perimeter of 50 ft (15 m) or other appropriate distance from the edges of the outfall will be conspicuously posted with signs prohibiting public access and advising beach users to avoid disturbing the resting and foraging birds. A marked corridor will be established in a seaward portion of the restricted zone through which beach users can freely move up and down the beach.

The outfalls selected for this program will be based on documented bird utilization, an assessment of property boundaries and related property-rights issues, and extent of human beach usage in the general area. The restricted areas will be established on a trial basis for a period of 12 months beginning the second complete year following ITP issuance. Depending on the success of the program, the restricted areas may be discontinued, additional areas added, their location(s) changed, the width of the posted perimeter adjusted, and/or the time of year during which they are in effect altered (e.g., spring/summer only, fall/winter only, etc.). These changes will be based in large part on the results of the first county-wide surveys described above and consultations with the USFWS and/or FWC.

Sick and Injured Shorebirds

Sick and injured shorebirds are periodically found on the beaches in the Plan Area. In the absence of human intervention, these birds are likely to die. Walton County will seek to establish a network for reporting sightings of birds in distress. The HCP Coordinator will identify licensed wildlife rehabilitators in or near the Plan Area and will maintain a library of volunteers who wish to assist in recovery efforts. The HCP Coordinator will refer to this library and/or direct callers to the appropriate response person when it

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receives reports of injured birds. When possible, Walton County Animal Control and other County staff will assist with the transport of sick and injured wildlife to pickup locations designated by the rehabilitators.

Predator and Animal Control

As discussed in Chapter 7 of this HCP, predators can have a substantial impact on the protected species covered under this HCP. Raccoons and foxes dig into turtle nests and consume the eggs, feral cats prey on fledging shorebirds, sea turtle hatchlings, and beach mice, and free roaming dogs flush resting shorebirds and may dig into sea turtle nests. In an effort to reduce these impacts, the County plans to continue or initiate the following measures.

Garbage Maintenance

One method for reducing predator pressure on turtle nests is to collect and remove trash from the beach that might otherwise attract them. The TDC services over 400 trash receptacles on the beach 365 days a year. The majority of receptacles are located at the end of boardwalks and dune crossovers. They are comprised of a single 4 X 4 inch (10 X 10 cm) wooden pole with a stainless bag holder attached to the top. The holder is fitted with a large, heavy-duty paper bag. The holders are set at an elevation that keeps the bags elevated approximately two feet (0.6 m) above the sand. The receptacles are frequently repositioned in response to the dynamic conditions of the beach.

The County will evaluate its trash collection methods and schedule to determine if there is a practical and cost effective alternative to current collection times that would reduce the amount of trash remaining on the beach overnight. The County will also assess the feasibility of changing out its existing trash receptacles with animal tamper-proof containers. If feasible these will be phased in as existing containers have to be replaced due to age, loss, or damage.

Feral Animals

Colonies of feral or free-roaming cats exist along portions of Walton County's beaches. In some cases these colonies are in close proximity to beach mouse habitat, particularly in and around the three State Parks. The County will incorporate information regarding the impacts of free-roaming animals on protected species in its general public awareness programs/materials. The County will also consider adoption of appropriate regulations governing the establishment of feeding stations that attract numerous feral and/or free-roaming cats. At a minimum, the County will prohibit and/or dismantle feeding stations that are set up on County-managed public crossovers. County staff will also work cooperatively with the Florida Park Service to assess methods for reducing the incidence of feral animals straying into Topsail Hill Preserve, Grayton Beach, and Deer Lake State Parks.

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Free Roaming Domesticated Animals

Walton County's Animal Control Ordinance (2008-24) makes it unlawful to allow pets (cats and dogs) to roam freely off a person's property within unincorporated areas of the County. Section 5.34 specifically regulates dogs on the beach. Only real property owners and permanent residents who obtain a County permit can take a dog on the beach, and the dogs must be leashed. Leashed dogs may only be on the beach between the hours of 4:00 PM and 8:00 AM during Daylight Savings Time (second Sunday in March to the first Sunday in November) and between 3:00 PM and 9:00 AM during Standard Time (first Sunday in November to the second Sunday in March). However, these restrictions do not apply to beachfront property owners whose property boundaries extend to the MHWL.

Walton County will make all reasonable efforts to enforce its free-roaming animal ordinance, particularly as it relates to unleashed dogs on the beach. If the HCP Coordinator determines that a substantial problem exists, the County will endeavor to enhance its enforcement efforts. The HCP Coordinator will also consult with enforcement personnel and appropriate County staff to determine if amendments to existing or adoption of new regulations are needed to further restrict the times and/or places dogs are allowed on the beach.

The County will take steps to eliminate cat feeding stations at public access points and will incorporate appropriate information into existing public education and awareness programs/materials to discourage beachfront property owners from allowing cats to roam freely.

Dune Restoration

Walton County has an on-going dune restoration program, under the stewardship of the TDC. Native plants have been installed at numerous locations within the Plan Area. The plants trap windborne sand and help build and stabilize the dune system. The County will continue with this effort and, to the extent practical, will incorporate a dune feature into its future beach restoration efforts.

Mechanical Beach Cleaning

Seaweed washed ashore (wrack) contains a variety of small invertebrates (e.g., amphipods, crabs, etc.) that constitute an important component of shorebird diets. Walton County does not currently use mechanical equipment to clean this material from the beach. That policy will remain in effect except in those cases where the accumulation of wrack poses a significant human health or safety risk (e.g., large accumulation of dead fish). To the extent practical, the County will use hand raking to remove large accumulations of seaweed and other debris from the beach.

Although Walton County is not directly involved in mechanical beach cleaning, private firms are often contracted by beachfront resorts to clean their beaches. A FDEP CCCL permit is required for this activity. The County will work with the FDEP to ensure that

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standard conditions attached to CCCL permits for mechanical beach cleaning are consistent with HCP guidelines. Specifically, the County will request the following conditions be included in the FDEP permits:

1. During the nesting season (May 1 through either August 31 or after the last marked nest in the affected area has hatched, whichever is later) no mechanical beach cleaning can be performed until after the daily nesting survey is completed.
2. Beach cleaning will not take place within 200 ft of a posted shorebird nesting site.
3. Beach cleaning will avoid removing freshly deposited seaweed from the wetted portion of the beach except in those cases where the accumulation of wrack poses a significant human health or safety risk (e.g., large accumulation of man-made debris, dead fish, etc.).
4. Vehicular access to the site must be from the upland portion of the property, when possible, or else the nearest approved access point.
5. Beach cleaning equipment moving between non-contiguous project sites must travel on upland roadways and may not traverse the beach unless:
 - The new site is between the previous site and the approved access location; or
 - The approved access location is the same for both sites.

In the event that the above conditions cannot be incorporated into the FDEP CCCL permit by inclusion or reference, the County will consider requiring local approvals for mechanical beach cleaning and incorporate these conditions into such authorizations.

Management of Recreational Furniture

Walton County has implemented a Leave No Trace campaign to reduce impacts associated with the abandonment or extended storage of beach furniture and recreational equipment on the beach. During the sea turtle nesting season, these items create obstacles for nesting turtles and hatchlings crawling from their nest sites to the Gulf. The program involves tagging any item left on the beach overnight. After a period of 24 hours the tagged property is considered abandoned and may be removed from the beach.

Human Beach Usage

Human activities on the beach have the potential to impact sea turtles, piping plovers, and migratory birds, as discussed elsewhere in this HCP. Walton County will address these impacts primarily through its public education/awareness programs. Information on the following topics, many of which are addressed in this chapter, will be included on the County's website and incorporated into public awareness literature developed in support of the HCP:

- Avoidance of marked sea turtle nests;
- Avoidance of posted shorebird nesting sites;
- Removal of beach furniture and recreational equipment from the beach each day;
- Importance of dunes and advantages of dune vegetation (e.g., stay off the dunes);
- Disturbances to migratory shorebirds and avoidance of posted areas;

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- Limitations on the use of legal fireworks;
- Maintaining control of free roaming dogs and cats on the beach; and
- Minimizing the use of flashlights and other lights on the beach at night.

With respect to fireworks, the County will consider creating new, or amending existing, regulations regarding the permitting of organized pyrotechnic displays on or adjacent to its beaches. At a minimum, the following guidelines will be considered:

- An organized pyrotechnic display will be defined as one conducted by a professional person/firm that has the potential for attracting large crowds;
- Such displays must be conducted from areas landward of the primary dune;
- No more than three events will be allowed at any one facility during any calendar week; and
- These nighttime displays must be concluded by 10:00 PM each night they take place.

Additionally, the County will review its permitting program for special events (Ordinance 2003-07) and will establish special conditions, as appropriate, to minimize disturbances to protected species. The HCP Coordinator will ensure that special events are conducted in such a manner as not to impact nesting or hatchling sea turtles, interfere with the ability of sea turtle monitoring personnel to effectively conduct their daily nesting surveys, and/or encroach on shorebird nesting sites.