

Section 17

Porpoise Point Vehicular Driving

Purpose

In 1940 the Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) created the present day St. Augustine Inlet by dredging an east-west cross-section of Vilano Beach commonly referred to as Porpoise Point. The dune system at Porpoise Point is constantly accreting and growing. Several species of nesting birds are found in the vegetated dunes and surrounding flat surfaces of the sand. Prior to the HCP multiple driving lanes had been created through the dunes by unregulated traffic which severely fragments vegetation and nesting bird habitats. These driving lanes were in violation of both State and County regulations. If a more natural dune system is developed at Porpoise Point, the area may provide more natural habitat to AIBM, gopher tortoise, and shorebirds.

New HCP Condition – 7.3.3

7.3.3 Redirecting Porpoise Point vehicular driving to allow re-establishment of natural dune features. “St. Johns County will barricade the interdunal driving lanes radiating from Porpoise Point Ramp and maintain a single traffic corridor from the ramp to the St. Augustine Inlet. Additionally, the County will place and maintain vehicular barricades and appropriate signage at the previous entrances to each interdunal driving lane. The barricades will be monitored and maintained by County staff until dune vegetation/windblown sand covers former driving lanes, and the barricades are deemed unnecessary. St. Johns County will mark the landward side of the driving area around Porpoise Point from the Vilano Ramp to the southwestern tip of Porpoise Point (with appropriate space for parking seaward of the 30-ft wide CZ). This traffic area will connect to the Porpoise Point Ramp. If a 30-ft wide CZ cannot be maintained around Porpoise Point due to high tides, storm surge, or other unusual event, public driving will be temporarily prohibited in this region. The Sheriff’s Department (in cooperation with Beach Rangers, if appropriate) will be responsible for enforcing these beach driving regulations.”

HCP Performance During 2008

Implementation: Prior to the start of 2007 sea turtle nesting season St. Johns County Beach Services placed 4x4 post affixed with CZ signage along the perimeter of Porpoise Point to establish a 30-ft CZ and to close out the existing interdunal driving lanes. Beach access at the Porpoise Point vehicular access ramp was established by following an existing driving lane that ran east to west towards the Tolomato River. Following the 2007 season the areas of Porpoise Point that were previously used as driving lanes were filled in with sand and vegetated with sea oats. In April 2008, County staff, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) staff and volunteers from the Audubon

Society staked off two areas where the state threatened least tern would annually return to nest. Unfortunately, no birds returned to nest at Porpoise Point in 2008. During this time the area staked off allowed for vegetation to fill in creating a permanent line of vegetation, thus forming a new CZ line.

Assessment: Over the course of the year maintaining a constant 30 foot CZ line has proven to be very challenging given the drastic change in tides and large storm events. During high tide events individuals driving on this stretch of beach are forced to drive high and coincidentally would enter the marked CZ damaging vegetation and even causing posts to loosen and fall. Lost posts were constantly being replaced and posts were reinstalled to address the shifting CZ line. After further review the County moved the CZ back to hug the vegetation line which prevented individuals from entering the newly established and pioneering vegetation and resulted in reducing the amount of staff effort to maintain the marked CZ. Moving the CZ line back prevents encroachment of vegetation due to the impact of vehicles, however, it does allow a wider more sandy barren area and could be considered as suitable habitat for the returning least tern colonies.

Program Improvements: Beach Services will work on improving the management of the 30 foot CZ.