

Section 4

Tire Tracks/Rut Removal Plan

Purpose

Vehicle tire ruts can trap or impede post-emergent hatchlings during their crawl to the ocean. Anecdotal evidence indicates that sea turtle hatchlings have been trapped in tire ruts created by vehicles on the beaches of St. Johns County. An effective tire track and rut removal plan will minimize the potential impact to sea turtle hatchlings.

Relevant ITP Condition- G.2.j.

- j. Tire Tracks/Rut Removal Plan.** “Within thirty (30) days of the effective date of this Permit, the Permittee shall submit for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service review and approval a Tire Track/Rut Removal Plan as further described in Chapter 7 of the HCP. The Permittee shall implement such Plan during the first full nesting season following U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service approval (beginning on May 1). The approved Tire Track/Rut Removal Plan may be subsequently amended prior to and after its implementation upon review and approval of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.”

HCP Performance During 2008

Implementation: A Rut Removal Plan (Appendix C) was submitted to the USFWS on September 1, 2006. The HCP Coordinator works closely with all the PPHs to ensure that all nest requiring rut removal are reported as needed. The PPHs for both Vilano and South Ponte Vedra, north of the St. Augustine Inlet did not request rut removal for their nest. Rut removal on south beaches was conducted by interns serving as HCP Field Assistants that carried out approved rut removal procedures. Rut removal was achieved with the use of large light-weight aluminum rakes and the less often use of a drag mat made from baseball field drag mats. HCP Field Assistants were responsible for tending to all nests on Anastasia Island and completed their duties while clearing and closing beaches. They were instructed not to touch the staked nest and to contact the HCP Coordinator in the event of a hatch out or sea turtle related emergency.

Assessment: Rut removal was required on 9.9 miles of the 16.3 miles of drivable beach beginning at A Street extending south to Matanzas Inlet. Two PPHs on beaches south of the St. Augustine Inlet are responsible for sea turtle patrol and the related activities. The Permit Holder south of the Crescent Beach vehicular access ramp reported lack of rut removal procedures only on one evening. This was the result of staff not following through with their duties for the evening. In addition, this permit holder expressed concern regarding rut removal staff on the beach after dark.

The beaches on St. Augustine beach south to Fort Matanzas are very wide and during low high tide events allow for a larger area of dry sand that must be raked by personnel. During the highest density of nest requiring rut removal personnel were on the beach for extended hours and sometimes after dark.

HCP Field Assistants did not report any sea turtle related emergencies while conducting rut removal.

Program Improvements: HCP Field Assistants will continue to assist with gate closures. However, due to previously stated concerns they will be required to conduct rut removal prior to and immediately following gate closures so they are off the beach prior to nightfall.