

## Section 9

### Four-Wheel Drive Training Program

#### Purpose

Prior to approval of the HCP a large majority of the documented take of sea turtles due to public beach driving in St. Johns County occurred in Vilano Beach and South Ponte Vedra Beach. Instituting a four-wheel drive training program will reduce the number of documented takes of sea turtles as well as incidents of illegal driving in the CZ and/or dunes.

#### Relevant ITP Conditions - G.2.h. & G.2.o

- 2.h. Four-Wheel Drive Training Program.** The Permittee shall ensure members of the public seeking a County North Beach Vehicle Access Permit to drive north of the Vilano Road beach ramp complete training specified in Condition 11.G.2.o prior to the issuance of such permit.
- 2.o. HCP and Protected Species Training.** Within thirty (30) days of the effective date of this Permit, the Permittee shall develop and provide for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service review and approval a training program. Such program shall provide information regarding applicable HCP conditions and Permit terms and local ordinances necessary to assist individual members of the public in understanding beach driving restrictions provided pursuant to this Permit. The Permittee shall implement use of the HCP and Protected Species Training Program within two (2) months of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service approval. The Permittee may amend such program both prior to and after its implementation upon review and approval of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

#### HCP Performance During 2008

**Implementation:** In September, 2006 the Four-Wheel Drive Training Program was submitted and approved through the USFWS. Following approval USFWS requested the County submit the associated Power Point slide shows being used as the training tool for the workshops. Following approval, Beach Services launched a Media Advisory that was distributed to local newspapers, television stations, County Government and City of St. Augustine Beach Government television channels informing citizens of the new training and permit program. To obtain a North Beach Permit, individuals must complete HCP and Protected Species training, complete and sign an application and show a current annual pass affixed to windshield of vehicle. Upon completion of the training, permittees receive a yellow double sided permit (Appendix H) signed by the HCP coordinator that contains the permit number, tag number, expiration date and an information side regarding HCP rules and regulations. There is no fee for the permit. Permits expire after three months and the individual is required to renew the permit by completing an

application and showing a current annual pass affixed to the windshield of the permitted vehicle. In 2007, an online training program was offered through the HCP website and has proven to be the preferred method for obtaining permits. Workshops are now available upon request. Since the beginning of 2008, 63 permits were issued and 15 were renewed throughout the year.

There are three vehicular ramps where north beach drivers are authorized to access; Usina ramp, Surfside ramp and Vilano ramp. The north beach restricted driving area begins approximately 200 feet north of the Vilano ramp. New 3' x 5' black and white signs providing rules and regulations from Beach Code 2007-19 were installed at eye level prior to the 2008 nesting season. These signs were removed by the end of the season and replaced with bright orange signs (Object 7). The signs specifically read that beach drivers must obtain a permit and annual beach pass to drive on this section of beach. Certain portions of this beach are very sloped and there is concern that if vehicles drive seaward of a marked sea turtle nest they may crush the incubating eggs. To prevent this from happening permitted drivers are required to stay 15 feet seaward of a marked sea turtle nest.

#### Object 7.



**Assessment:** Minor adjustments were made to the HCP and Protected Species training Power Point presentations to better reflect rules and regulations as they pertained to the North Beach Drivers. On several occasions, as witnessed by County staff and sea turtle personnel, drivers with no North Beach 4x4 permit were present and multiple tire tracks were observed very close to and seaward of marked sea turtle nests. The Sheriff's department reported 21 citations issued to individuals that did not have the proper North Beach 4x4 permit. There are valid concerns based on observations and the documented 21 citations that many individuals regularly enter the beach with no North Beach 4x4 permit.

**Program Improvements:** Both permitted and non-permitted vehicles are tracked from reports by the Sheriff's department and other County staff. However, a more effective tracking system would be beneficial if enforcement staff was increased.