

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. Several species of nesting birds have been documented 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 fragmented vegetation and nesting bird habitat. These driving lanes were in violation of both State and County regulations. A more natural flowing dune system has been created through additional sand placement and sea oat planting at Porpoise Point allowing for a healthy dune system that has provided additional nesting habitat for shorebirds, including the state listed Least Tern, Piping Plover, gopher tortoise and other species such as snakes.

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 2012

Implementation: In 2006 when the County received the Incidental Take Permit the multiple driving lanes that ran in numerous areas between and in the dunes at Porpoise Point were closed off and vehicles were confined to a driving lane seaward of the most seaward dune (Object 21). This allowed the vegetation to reestablish and provided habitat expansion that provides protection for animals that may inhabit the area (Object 22). The County replanted this broad area, including the relict driving areas, with sea oats to restore the beach habitat. This activity has resulted in a greatly increased dune area with flourishing sea oats thereby increasing available AIBM habitat and although no AIBM have been located in this area there is a large area of protected habitat for use. In other areas of the County where AIBM are documented to exist a 15 foot CZ is present and this has been effective to protect the dune habitat.

However, in the summer of 2012 the ACOE removed a portion of the Porpoise Point beach (Object 23) to use as borrow material to renourish the beach at the City of St. Augustine Beach. That removal caused a reduction in beach area which diminished the available space for beach activities. During certain times, such as high tide or weather events, it is difficult for the County to maintain a 30 foot Conservation Zone (CZ) without risk of public safety, losing CZ signs to the ocean or having unintentional activity occur in the 30 foot CZ area. Porpoise Point is the only area in St. Johns County that has a 30 foot CZ as all the other areas the County maintains a 15 foot CZ. The Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for St. Johns County set a 30 foot CZ for the Porpoise Point area to address, “a potential AIBM [Anastasia Island beach mouse] and bird nesting habitat” (see HCP, Chapter 7, Section 7.2.8, attached).

Porpoise Point is recognized by both FWC and USFWS as an important nesting site for the state listed least tern (*Sternula antillarum*) and Wilson’s plover (*Charadrius wilsonia*) as well as an important resting site for winter shorebirds. Least terns nest in colonies on barren sand while the Wilson’s plover nest in the vegetation and guide their young to the waters edge to hunt for fish. The County responds annually to the possibility of bird nesting by monitoring Porpoise Point each season for any indications that the area is being selected for the season’s nesting activity. If there are indications that the birds are selecting Porpoise Point for the nesting season the nesting habitat area is closed to both vehicular and pedestrian traffic. As the season progresses, the County staff evaluates the location and modifies the protected area as needed. This protection of the area includes prohibiting vehicles and pedestrians not only in any CZ area but for a larger portion of the beach including a portion of the beach going from the waters edge to the dunes. The CZ is immaterial in this issue as the birds require a larger area than a 30 foot zone next to the dune so a 15 foot CZ, as present in the remainder of the County, is effective to protect the dune habitat as the birds are protected using a more comprehensive and expansive approach. Solitary and colony nesting shorebirds were not documented during the 2012 season.

Object 21. Aerial view of Porpoise Point in 2007



Object 22. Aerial view of Porpoise Point (photo taken February 2012)**Object 23. Dredging of the St. Augustine Inlet off Porpoise Point****Other Seasonal Observations**

July 19th: Loggerhead nest discovered by morning sea turtle patrol on porpoise point just south of Jetties. No impacts recorded to nests.

Assessment: Over the course of the year maintaining the required 30 foot CZ line has proven to be very challenging. The County continues to monitor the area and moving the CZ line multiple times throughout the year to accommodate the constantly changing line of vegetation and curving shore line.

Program Improvements: The County will continue to work closely with representatives from FWC and USFWS to improve management of protected species in this area. Potential change to the CZ will be needed in this area (see Section 21: Unforeseen Circumstances).