

St. Johns County Rut Removal Plan

The purpose of the Rut Removal Plan is to minimize impacts to sea turtle nesting activities from vehicular activities on County beaches as set forth in the St. Johns County Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP), approved August 4, 2006.

1. Areas where driving is permitted on County beaches are established as greatest potential for rut removal;
2. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) Principal Permit Holders (PPHs) will be required through a condition as stated on their annual permit renewal to coordinate with the County HCP Coordinator;
3. The PPHs shall meet with HCP Coordinator prior to start of sea turtle season to ensure all areas of beaches are properly surveyed according to permit geographical boundaries;
4. PPHs shall report at least once per day nesting activities (date, location, species, etc.) to the County HCP Coordinator to ensure scheduled rut removal;
5. The HCP Coordinator shall ensure the placement of color coded distinctive markers near or adjacent to nest that have reached 47 days (Loggerhead or Green) or 60 days (Leatherback) of incubation;
6. The HCP Coordinator will provide rut removal personnel with list of nests and dates that rut removal is to begin;
7. The HCP Coordinator shall ensure the proper training of rut removal personnel on how to evaluate nests to determine if rut removal is needed;
8. Rut removal shall follow guidelines established herein;
 - a. Prior to rut removal a site inspection must be done to ensure that no hatchlings are present on the beach, if hatchlings are present they should be allowed to crawl to the ocean, if they appear to be weak or injured the PPH for that area and the HCP Coordinator must be notified immediately and rut removal operations will suspend until the HCP Coordinator resumes operations;
 - b. Rut removal will occur after 5:00 pm to minimize potential for new ruts being created and will be completed by 8:00 PM;
 - c. Rut removal personnel will remove ruts within a 30 foot wide path, 15 feet to the south and north of the marked nest to the water's edge;
 - d. Rut removal will not occur behind the nest or within the staked area;
 - e. Ruts located within the Conservation Zone (CZ) will be done so by hand raking;
 - f. Ruts located outside of the CZ will be done so by a vehicle dragging a rut removal device such as a wooden post with chain link fence attached or a ball field drag;
 - g. Rut removal will continue for a duration of three days post emergence or until the nest has been evaluated by the PPH per FWC guidelines;
 - h. In addition to ruts, rut removal personnel will also remove other potential obstacles seaward of nest, these include, but are not limited to holes, recreational beach equipment, logs, large flotsam and other large debris;

9. County personnel accessing the beach after hours and through emergency entrances must remove all ruts left from vehicle(s), leaving a 30 foot wide path, 15 feet to the south and north of the marked nest to the water's edge;
10. PPHs driving ATVs in non driving areas for sea turtle monitoring purposes are required to ride below the high tide line to avoid causing ruts in non-driving areas. Ruts left by the PPH and their volunteers are to be removed by the ATV operator following the guidelines established herein.