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CHAPTER 4: GOALS AND BENEFITS

Goals of HCP

The primary goal of this HCP is to develop a comprehensive plan to protect State and federally listed species within the Plan Area from impacts associated with County regulated and/or managed activities over the life of the ITP. To achieve this goal, the HCP has established the following objectives:

- Develop and implement a comprehensive program for the conservation of protected species on the beaches and coastal dunes of Walton County consistent with Federal, State, and County laws and regulations;
- Establish a process for effectively and efficiently coordinating activities initiated under the County’s emergency permitting authority, including cleanup of storm debris, among various County departments, contractors, private citizens, and State permitting agencies; and
- Develop the policies, programs, and other measures that will allow the County to continue its traditional beach management activities in a manner that minimizes impacts to protected species while sustaining the social, recreational, cultural, and economic values of the County’s beaches.

This HCP is designed as a dynamic document. It is structured to permit adaptive changes in response to new information derived from monitoring programs. Mechanisms are established to facilitate dialogue between the USFWS and Walton County in response to changing conditions and to allow for the timely revision of procedures and policies to better achieve program objectives and/or respond to changed or unforeseen circumstances.

Biological Goals

The beaches and coastal dunes of Walton County provide nesting habitat for four species of sea turtles, resting and foraging habitat for migrating and over-wintering piping plovers, and year-round habitat for the Choctawhatchee beach mouse. It is the intent of this HCP to support State and Federal recovery efforts for these species by: a) reducing impacts to nesting sea turtles; b) improving the production of sea turtle hatchlings on County beaches; c) minimizing disturbances to resting and feeding piping plovers during their migrations and overwintering period; and e) preserving suitable coastal dune habitat for beach mice. This will be accomplished through the following programs, as described below and elsewhere within this HCP:

- Providing an orderly process for the permitting and implementation of measures initiated under the County’s emergency authorization that minimizes disturbances to protected species and their habitats;
- Developing and implementing guidelines to minimize disturbances to nesting, hatchling, and live stranded sea turtles; sea turtle nests; and shorebirds caused by

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the operation of official vehicles involved in public safety, beach maintenance, law enforcement, HCP implementation, and other official business on County beaches;

- Implementing new requirements to minimize impacts to nesting, hatchling, and live stranded sea turtles and sea turtle nests caused by the operation of private vehicles on County beaches;
- Developing and implementing guidelines for beach vendors regarding the transport, placement, and storage of merchandise, equipment, and supplies to reduce interference with sea turtle nest protection activities;
- Developing and implementing a multi-faceted public awareness program to educate residents and visitors of the importance of the County’s beaches to the conservation and recovery of protected species;
- Adopting and enforcing a beachfront lighting ordinance to reduce nighttime disturbances to nesting and hatchling sea turtles, resting piping plovers, and foraging beach mice; and
- Implementing an effective monitoring program of all species covered under the ITP to identify and ameliorate factors impeding their recovery.

Guidance for Future Permitting Activities

In addition to these biological goals, the HCP specifies administrative procedures for the effective and efficient implementation of future emergency permitting activities undertaken in Walton County. The roles and responsibilities of affected stakeholders are clearly identified. As long as the programs and policies prescribed in this HCP and the ITP are met, any take of federally listed species resulting from covered activities is authorized by the Federal government over the life of the ITP.

Benefits of HCP

Benefits to Protected Species

The programs and policies contained in this HCP will improve protected species conservation along the County’s shoreline relative to current beach management practices. Previous emergency permitting efforts in the County had the unintended effect of promoting shoreline armoring, which diminishes the quality of sea turtle nesting habitat and further degrades the coastal dune habitat of the Choctawhatchee beach mouse. The Plan contains measures that will be implemented to minimize the potential for impacts to protected species causally related to future emergency actions and other beach activities regulated and/or managed by the County.

In addition to the minimization measures described herein, the County has mitigated unavoidable take through the acquisition of coastal property that contains sea turtle nesting, beach mouse, and migratory and wintering piping plover habitats and has adopted a light management program to abate light pollution, an action that will benefit all covered species. These measures will provide quantifiable benefits to protected species in excess of the amount of take likely to occur as the result of activities

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authorized under the ITP. The County has also committed to a monitoring program that will help collect the data needed to better quantify current natural and human-related impacts to protected species utilizing the County's coastline. This information will be used to better direct the County's limited resources toward those programs that are likely to have the greatest conservation value. Finally, voluntary measures will be implemented to improve the quality of the County's beaches as shorebird nesting, foraging, and resting habitat.

Benefits to Property Owners Affected by Future Emergency Permitting Activities

Coastal property owners will have advance notice of the procedures to be followed whenever hurricanes and other destructive weather events occur, and thus can be assured of a timely authorization to implement effective emergency protection measures. This will serve to minimize property damage. Furthermore, under the County's ITP, property owners can take immediate action to protect their property without risk of take of federally listed species. Property owners seeking emergency protection will be provided with clear guidelines to ensure their actions are conducted in conformance with State rules. Finally, property owners that are eligible for, and wish to pursue, installation of permanent shoreline protection structures to replace their temporary emergency measures will be afforded a streamlined permitting process. Any long-term impacts to protected species and/or their habitats potentially resulting from the long-term presence of these permanent structures will be covered over the life of the ITP.

Benefits to Property Owners Affected by Past Emergency Permitting Activities

Upon issuance of the County's ITP, property owners who previously installed temporary shoreline protection structures under the County's emergency authorization, in conformance with State rules and regulations, will be eligible for incidental take coverage either through participation in the County's HCP or by applying to the USFWS for an individual ITP (see Chapter 1, Distinctions Among Past, Present and Future Shoreline Protection Activities). Upon demonstration of an ITP, the FDEP can then finalize processing of the respective CCCL permit application. Once issued, the CCCL permit will allow affected property owners to retain their temporary structures as permanent structures or to implement alternative protection measures. Any take resulting from those structures will be covered over the life of the County's ITP or individual Federal ITP, as applicable. This relieves property owners from the time and expense of preparing individual HCPs for their ITP applications and covers any resulting take, thus shielding them from prosecution under the ESA.

Benefits to Property Owners Who Seek Future CCCL Permits

In the future, property owners seeking permits from FDEP for permanent armoring structures through the standard (non-emergency) CCCL permitting process will have a mechanism for obtaining incidental take coverage, should it be needed. This will relieve

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those property owners from the considerable expense and potential time delays typically associated with obtaining individual ITPs from the USFWS and will thereby facilitate processing of the CCCL permit application.

Benefits to IGA Signatories

When Walton County issued permits for emergency armoring following the passage of Hurricane Dennis, it did not possess Federal authorization for take associated with the installation of those structures. Consequently, FDEP was generally unable to issue CCCL permits for their permanent retention. This proved frustrating not only for property owners, but also to the FDEP. Upon issuance of the ITP, the formal agreement (IGA) entered into by the County, FDEP, FWC, and USFWS will allow the FDEP to take final action on CCCL applications submitted for the retention of temporary structures installed under the County's emergency authorization between July 15, 2005 and April 30, 2006, provided such applications are deemed consistent with State rules and regulations and applicants can show evidence of incidental take coverage either through participation in the County's HCP or with an individual ITP issued by the USFWS (see Chapter 1, Distinctions Among Past, Present, and Future Shoreline Protection Actions). This will relieve the backlog of pending applications and the ancillary demands of the FDEP staff in responding to inquiries related to those applications.

Both the State and USFWS will be ensured that any take of federally listed species resulting from future emergency protection activities will be covered under ESA Section 10 authorizations and that those activities will be conducted in a manner that minimizes take. The mitigation offered by the County through this HCP will result in a net positive conservation benefit to covered species, thus supporting agency goals of conserving and recovering those species. Improved monitoring and data management will help identify natural and anthropogenic impacts to protected species and their habitat in this part of the State and thus further assist the agencies in their conservation efforts.

Following issuance of a Federal ITP, Walton County will be afforded protection under the ESA for any impacts to covered species causally related to activities it regulates or manages within the Plan Area. Furthermore, its citizens will have a streamlined process for the permitting of measures to protect their properties following declared emergencies. The HCP will also benefit the County by establishing a comprehensive framework for beach management that balances the social, recreational, cultural, economic, and environmental values of the beach and coastal dune system.

Residents and Visitors

The HCP ensures that future emergency actions to protect public infrastructure and habitable beachfront properties are conducted in a responsible manner that does not detract from the aesthetic values of the coastline and provides residents and visitors alike an opportunity to recreate and enjoy the County's unique natural resources.