

7. CYPRESS AND WET PINE FLATS CONSERVATION UNIT

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7.1 General Description of Conservation Unit

The 2,910-acre Cypress and Wet Pine Flats Conservation Unit, situated northeast of Lake Powell, has been identified as a primary wildlife habitat area, with the potential for supporting both uplands and wetlands important to wildlife diversity in the Florida panhandle (Figures 2-1 and 7-1). Because the Cypress and Wet Pine Flats Conservation Unit covers substantial acreage and links western conservation units with eastern ones, this unit is important to maintaining the continuity and goals of the proposed conservation units. Data sheets reporting the results of the GIS ERATools™ analyses for the Cypress and Wet Pine Flats Conservation Unit are included at the end of this section.

The current land cover (NFWFMD 1995) is divided between silviculture (coniferous plantations and forest regeneration areas) and forested wetlands, with a small area identified as scrub shrub wetlands. The National Wetlands Inventory (NWI, 1982-87) classifies approximately 44% of the land cover as uplands and 56% as wetlands dominated by palustrine forested wetlands (Figure 4-2).

Historically, the uplands component of this area was a blend of North Florida Pine Flatwoods with small areas of Longleaf Pine-Turkey Oak Hills and Mixed Hardwood Pine, and the wetlands component of this area was dominated by Cypress and Hardwood Swamps and Shrub Bogs (NRCS 1989) (Figure 4-1). Historical land cover may indicate restoration potential. Pine plantations have replaced most of the North Florida Pine Flatwoods and Longleaf Pine-Turkey Oak Hills communities and possibly some of the scrub shrub or forested wetlands. However, the current pine plantations not only support the state’s forestry resource, but when placed under conservation status, a large percentage of these lands potentially can be restored to the FNAI-identified priority/under-represented natural communities of Pine Flatwoods and Sandhills, as appropriate. Tables 2-1 and 2-2 present wildlife and listed species generally associated with these natural communities.

7.2 Regional Significance

The Cypress and Wet Pine Flats Conservation Unit encompasses a large area, is mostly wetlands, and is centrally positioned within the conservation network, connecting with four other conservation units to the north, east, south, and west. Limiting construction in this area and protecting and restoring

components of both the upland and wetland systems in this unit will serve to protect and maintain ecological integrity within the region (Figure 2-1).

Almost all (90%) of the Cypress and Wet Pine Flats Conservation Unit uplands and wetlands have been identified by FWC as priority habitat for 1-3 wetland-dependent species. Recreational Trails overlap the 2- and 5-mile buffers, and one managed land, Camp Helen State Park, overlaps the 5-mile buffer (FDEP 2003). Additional regionally significant ecological features, such as seagrass beds, are discussed in the following subsections.

7.3 Biodiversity

Historically, the Cypress and Wet Pine Flats Conservation Unit was cypress, mixed forested, and shrub wetlands, pine flatwoods; and some longleaf pine-turkey oak hills. The cypress and forested wetlands are primarily unaffected by silviculture or other land uses. The part of the landscape currently in silviculture retains the physical characteristics for restoring it to its historical natural state as the FNAI priority/under-represented natural communities of Pine Flatwoods and Sandhills.

Some of the lands within this conservation unit are currently identified as the FNAI priority/under-represented natural community of Pine Flatwoods. Priority natural and endemic communities identified within the 1-mile buffer include Pine Flatwoods; within the 3-mile buffer, they include Sandhills, Scrub, and Pine Flatwoods.

A large percentage (90%) of this conservation unit and 87% of the landscape within the 1-mile buffer around the unit is identified as priority habitats for key focal wetland-dependent species (Kautz et al. 1994). Of particular interest is that almost all of the uplands within the unit have been identified as important habitat for 1-3 wetland-dependent species. This unit's large size, the identification of almost all its area as priority habitat for wetland-dependent species, and its location relative to the other conservation units will contribute to the state's conservation strategy for both upland and wetland focal species (Kautz et al. 1994; Cox et al. 2000).

This conservation unit provides for wildlife habitat conservation and the preservation of wildlife corridors. The Cypress and Wet Pine Flats unit is a necessary part of the chain linking the natural systems in the west with those in the east, allowing for relatively unobstructed movement of species through the Project area.

Threatened and Endangered Species

There are no previously recorded occurrences within the Cypress and Wet Pine Flats Conservation Unit of federally or state-listed threatened or endangered species¹, and there is no U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-designated critical habitat. WilsonMiller obtained records of several inactive red-cockaded woodpecker trees in the southeastern portion of this conservation unit (Moyers 2003). No other federally or state-listed species were observed by WilsonMiller or FNAI within the unit's boundary. Several species, animal and plant, both federally and state-listed as endangered or threatened, have been observed within the 1-mile and 3-mile buffers around the unit (please refer to the ERATools™ report for species). Sea turtle nesting beaches occur within the 3-mile buffer around this unit.

¹ Surveys completed by FNAI and FWC are not comprehensive or exhaustive and are opportunistically based on priorities and funding as well as access to land.

The proposed conservation plan for the Cypress and Wet Pine Flats unit should improve the quality of potentially suitable habitat for listed species within the unit as well as protecting and maintaining the suitability of the regional landscape for listed species (St. Joe Timberland Company 2003). Tables 2-1 and 2-2 present many of the common and federally and state-listed animal and plant species, respectively, that might benefit if this conservation unit's planted acreage were restored to its historical natural land cover of pine flatwoods, longleaf pine-turkey oak, and forested wetlands.

7.4 Water Quality

Virtually all of the Cypress and Wet Pine Flats Conservation Unit is within the West Laird Drain basin. Currently, West Laird Drain is listed but was not assigned a status on the water quality standards and trend in the 2000 Florida Water Quality Assessment: 305(b) reports (FDEP 2000). The 1998 305(b) report did not list the basin (FDEP 1998), and the 1996 305(b) report lists the water body but does not provide a status on the water quality standards and trends (FDEP 1996). West Laird Drain is not listed on the 1998 303(d) Impaired Waters list.

About 56% of the Cypress and Wet Pine Flats unit contributes to maintaining blackwater inflow to West Bay; all of the contribution comes from Rutlege Sand soils, a primary hydric depressional soil. The direct flow into the West Bay system and the blackwater inflow characteristics emphasize the importance of this conservation unit within the study area.

There are no known immediate point-source water quality threats to the system in the boundary. Silviculture accounts for non-point source water quality threats. No stormwater from any developed areas flow into surface water bodies within this unit.

About half the land cover is in natural communities, primarily wetlands, of various quality. The estimated percentage of wetlands within the Cypress and Wet Pine Flats Conservation Unit ranges from 39% to 56% (NFWFMD 1995 and NWI, respectively, in FDEP 2003), to a substantial 78% (2,259 acres) using the method for estimating Corps' jurisdiction. These wetlands currently filter surface water within the West Laird Drain and Direct Runoff to Bay drainage basins. Surface flow within the West Laird Drain basin eventually flows to West Bay.

The wetland systems within this conservation unit connect directly with wetland systems in the Side Camp Road, Ward Creek, Salamander Triangle, and Lake Powell Headwaters conservation units which extend to the northwest, east, south, and west, respectively. Field observations indicate surface water flows from the Cypress and Wet Pine Flats Conservation Unit into the Side Camp Road and Ward Creek conservation units. Flow from the northeast corner of the Lake Powell Headwaters unit and from the southern portion of the Salamander Triangle unit may flow into the Cypress and Wet Pine Flats unit.

There are a few natural upland areas described as moderate quality in the field notes. Lands currently in silviculture can be restored to their natural conditions. Then both uplands and wetlands will filter surface water within the West Laird Drain basin which eventually flows into West Bay.

7.5 Essential Fish Habitat and Living Marine Resources

Virtually all of the Cypress and Wet Pine Flats Conservation Unit is within the West Laird Drain basin; surface flow from this conservation unit eventually flows to West Bay. West Bay supports extensive saltwater and freshwater marshes and seagrass beds that provide Essential Fish Habitat (EFH). Seagrass beds occur within the 5-mile buffer around the Cypress and Wet Pine Flats Conservation Unit (FMRI 2002). In addition, small areas of two FNAI-identified coastal priority areas overlap the 2-mile buffer around this unit (FNAI 2001). Conserving and restoring this conservation unit will protect and improve the abundance and health of the existing EFH and other living marine resources in West Bay.