

**ITEM 6:**

Consider a 10-year update to the Weedon Island Preserve Management Plan (Lease Nos. 3376 and 3985).

**LOCATION:**

Pinellas County

**APPLICANT:**

Pinellas County Department of Parks and Conservation Resources, Resource and Asset Management

**STAFF REMARKS:**

*Background*

Weedon Island Preserve (Preserve) is a 3,195-acre preserve that extends along Tampa Bay in central Pinellas County. It is the second largest preserve in Pinellas County and a dominant natural feature along the western shoreline of Tampa Bay. All of the Preserve is located within Pinellas County, the State's most densely populated county. The Preserve extends in a northerly direction approximately five miles to the north of the Howard Frankland Bridge. Its northern boundary is from Gandy Blvd. to just south of the Clearwater/St. Petersburg International Airport. The southern boundary is from Gandy Blvd. to Bayou Grande. The eastern shoreline of the Preserve is in Tampa Bay.

The island, adjacent shoreline and uplands that comprise the Preserve are dotted with an impressive array of cultural features, which illustrate the land's significant role in the historical cultures that define Florida's anthropological history. Some of these cultural features include a Native American burial mound and shell middens

The Preserve is managed by the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners through Pinellas County Department of Parks and Conservation Resources. Pinellas County entered into two lease agreements with the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund of the State of Florida. It is most efficient to manage all adjacent preserved lands comprehensively. Therefore, this management plan recognizes Weedon Island Preserve as lands leased by the State (Lease Nos. 3985 and 3376), parcels owned by Pinellas County, and parcels under agreement with Duke Energy to provide for the management of the natural and cultural resources.

*Management Plan Overview*

The Preserve is managed for the conservation and protection of natural and historical resources and for resource-based public outdoor recreation which is compatible with the conservation and protection of the Preserve. There are boardwalks, hiking trails, a canoe trail, an observation tower and a fishing pier which provide for hiking, nature viewing, and fishing opportunities. New directional trail signs, funded by Friends of Weedon Island, are being installed on the hiking trails. To protect the natural and cultural resources and for visitor safety, all off-trail activity is prohibited.

The natural communities that comprise the Preserve are predominantly estuarine, mangrove forest, and seagrass. The north part of the Preserve is entirely comprised of intertidal zones of seagrass and mangrove islands. The larger islands within the Preserve complex, Googe and Ross

islands, contain 19 and 30 acres of uplands, respectively. These upland areas are comprised of scrubby flatwoods and xeric hammock. The Preserve supports diverse wildlife species including 176 birds, 43 butterflies, 27 reptiles, 15 mammals, 8 amphibians, and 126 fishes. The Preserve also contains one listed plant species, one listed bird species, and three listed reptile species. Shell middens overlay most of two major relic sand dune ridges located at the southern part of the Preserve.

Weedon Island has a cluster of shell middens and sand mounds, including a burial mound. The geomorphology of these mound sites elevates in ranges from 6 to 26 ft. above mean sea level, and form two semi-circular radii on the island. Other midden sites are located on Googe and Ross islands. The aboriginal shell deposits are comprised mostly of shell, with some bone, lithic, and pottery sherd artifacts in a layered stratigraphy.

The Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and Natural History Center opened to the public in December 2002. The Center was built to educate visitors on the significance of the Preserve and the importance of preserving Florida's important natural and cultural resources. The interactive exhibit gallery opened in October 2007.

The Florida Legislature requires that all land management plans include long and short-term goals. These goals must be measurable objectives, and short-term goals must be achievable within a two-year planning period. Pursuant to section 253.034, Florida Statutes, the Division of State Lands began compiling the short-term goals from each land management plan approved since July 1, 2016. The Division has included short-term goals from this management plan as part of this item.

#### *Public Involvement*

Pinellas County emphasized involvement of numerous stakeholder groups when drafting the plan. A stakeholder meeting was held January 14, 2022, to introduce the draft plan to the public and gather comments from advisory group members and the public. All identified stakeholders were notified of the 30-day public review and the draft management plan was available on the County website.

#### *Surplus Lands*

The evaluation of this site has determined that no portion of the Weedon Island Preserve is to be declared surplus.

#### *State Land Management Review Team*

A Land Management Review (LMR) was conducted in November 2020. The review team found that the property is managed in accordance with the purposes for which it was acquired and the management practices, including public access, are in compliance with the management plan. Four consensus recommendations were offered:

- 1) The team recommended Pinellas County recruit a full-time ranger for the preserve to conduct trail maintenance, education, exotic species removal and site security.
- 2) The team recommended Pinellas County staff conduct more prescribed fire, as described in the management plan.
- 3) The team recommended Pinellas County establish a carrying capacity at the preserve.

The 2020 LMR notes were reviewed as part of developing this plan and the agreed upon changes and recommendations were made to this management plan.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:**

Approve the management plan.

**ARC RECOMMENDATION:**

- APPROVE**
- APPROVE WITH MODIFICATIONS:** \_\_\_\_\_
- DEFER**
- WITHDRAW**
- NOT APPROVE**
- OTHER:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Weedon Island Preserve

### Land Management Plan Short Term Goals

Goal (ST)	Details of Goal	Objective	Details of Objective
A	Habitat Restoration and Improvement: Provide resource management to restore and improve the natural communities of Weedon Island Preserve.	1	Monitor and evaluate effectiveness of the Salt Marsh Restoration Pilot Project by post-construction vegetation transects and photo points.
A	Habitat Restoration and Improvement: Provide resource management to restore and improve the natural communities of Weedon Island Preserve.	4	Increase the frequency of burning in the Preserve to restore the natural communities.
D	Forest Management: Utilize forest management techniques, specifically prescribed fire, to maintain natural communities at Weedon Island	1	PCR will increase the frequency of prescribed fire in the scrubby flatwoods communities and utilize mechanical reduction where necessary.

Source: Florida DEP, Office of Environmental Services

**Weedon Island Preserve Management Plan  
Executive Summary  
State of Florida Form**

**Lead Agency:** Pinellas County (Florida) Department of Parks and Conservation Resources, Resource and Asset Management

**Common Name of Property:** Weedon Island Preserve

**Location:** Pinellas County, Florida

**Acreage Breakdown:**

<i>Land Cover Classification</i>	<i>Acres (ac.)</i>
Mangrove Swamp	2193.2
Estuary	364.5
Seagrass	214.0
Scrubby Flatwoods	94.6
Xeric Hammock	93.5
Salt Marsh	69.5
Maritime Hammock	61.7
Developed	51.3
Impoundment	14.9
Coastal Berm	10.4
Saltern	9.8
Shell Mound	5.5
Marine Unconsolidated Substrate	4.9
Freshwater Pond	4.1
Mollusk Reef	1.9
Ruderal	1.5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3195.3</b>

**Leases:** No. 3985 Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust of Florida (1190.9 ac.), No. 3376 Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust of Florida (1425.6 ac.)

**Use:** Single use for conservation and protection of natural resources and for resource-based public outdoor activities and education that are compatible with the conservation and protection of this public land

**Management Responsibilities:** Pinellas County Parks and Conservation Resources; law enforcement by Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, facility management of the Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and Natural History Center by Pinellas County Department of Administrative Services

**Designated Use:** Preserve

**Sublease(s):** None

**Contract(s):** Duke Energy

**Encumbrances:** None

**Type of Acquisition:** Fee Simple for County-owned properties

**Unique Features:** Weedon Island Preserve is a dominant natural feature covering five mi. along the western shoreline of Tampa Bay. This Preserve provides for over 3000 ac. of natural and cultural resources while also supporting compatible public use.

The three-story Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and Natural History Center built in 2002, was designed with the help of Native Americans and keeps with their traditions. For example, the orientation is along the cardinal points of the compass (north, south, east, and west) with the entrance facing east. The Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and Natural History Center supports educational programming and volunteerism. The University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences education program interprets the natural, cultural and archaeological history of the Preserve through interpretive tours and hikes, education programs, exhibits and public outreach activities, presentations and workshops, and other events.

**Archaeological/Historical:** The islands, adjacent shoreline and uplands that comprise the Preserve are dotted with an impressive array of cultural features, including artifacts, which illustrate the land's significant role in virtually all historical cultures that define Florida's anthropological history. Some of these cultural features include a Native American burial mound and shell middens. Historic sites on Weedon Island are prevalent with remains of buildings remains and imprints from past activities such as an airport runway and tower. Early settlers once occupied several of the islands, and pilings from buildings constructed during the 1920's, are intact.

**Management Needs:** Restoration needed to improve hydrology in mosquito ditched mangrove swamps. Continued control of exotic species and completion of prescribed burns needed to support resource management. Boundary posting in the northern Preserve needed to support enforcement of rules.

**Acquisition Needs/Acreage:** Pinellas County is interested in acquiring in-holdings that are in private ownership should they become available.

**Surplus Lands/Acreage:** Assessing the maps, communities and cultural resources, there is no opportunity to surplus any portion of the Preserve.

**Public Involvement:** Public comments were received in conjunction with the Weedon Island Preserve Advisory Group meeting, Pinellas County Department of Parks and Conservation Resources Advisory Board meeting, and Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners meeting.

**Noted Accomplishments:**

- Restoration of 94 ac. of mosquito ditches, exotic vegetation removal and installation of 11,000 native plants in the northern portion of the Preserve.
- Restored the prehistoric dugout canoe excavated in the northern portion of the Preserve.
- Completed the exhibit in the Weedon Island Preserve Cultural and Natural History Center featuring the prehistoric canoe.
- Staff additions – An Environmental Specialist I position was added to support land management of the Preserve and other PCR properties. Two Rangers were added to provide coverage of the Preserve seven days per week.



Figure 1. Location of Weedon Island Preserve, Pinellas County, Florida



Figure 2. Weedon Island Preserve Boundary Map



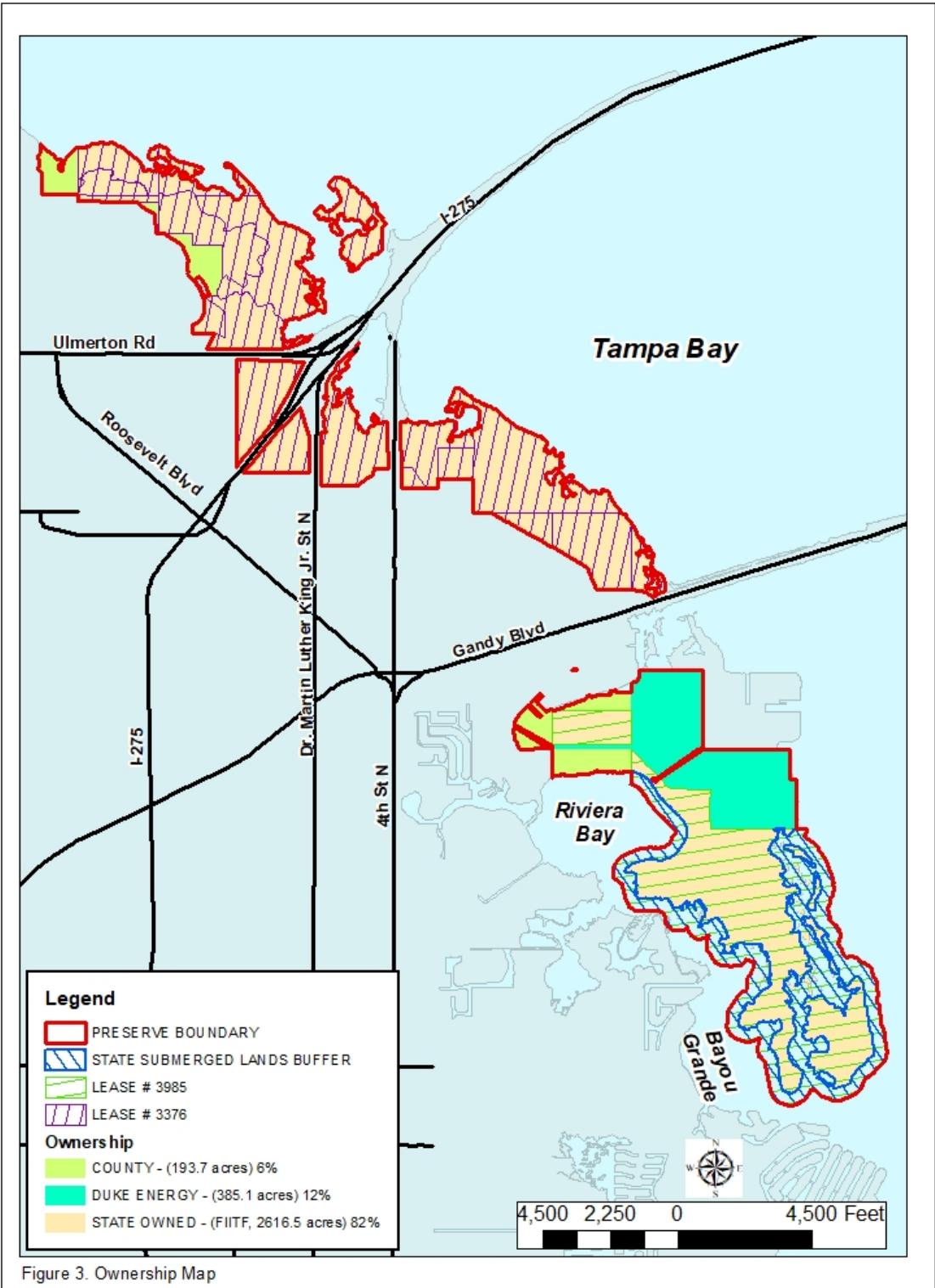
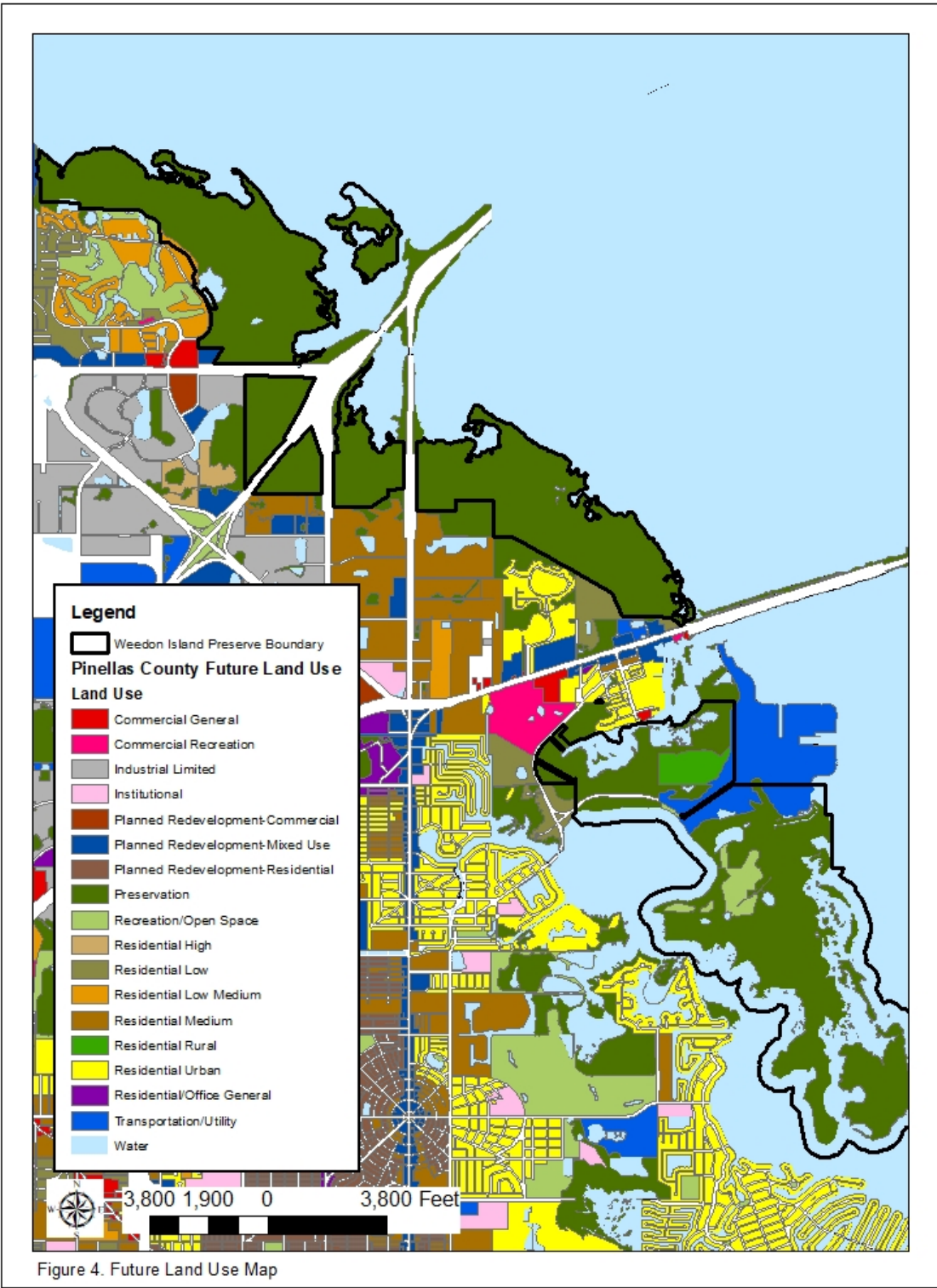


Figure 3. Ownership Map



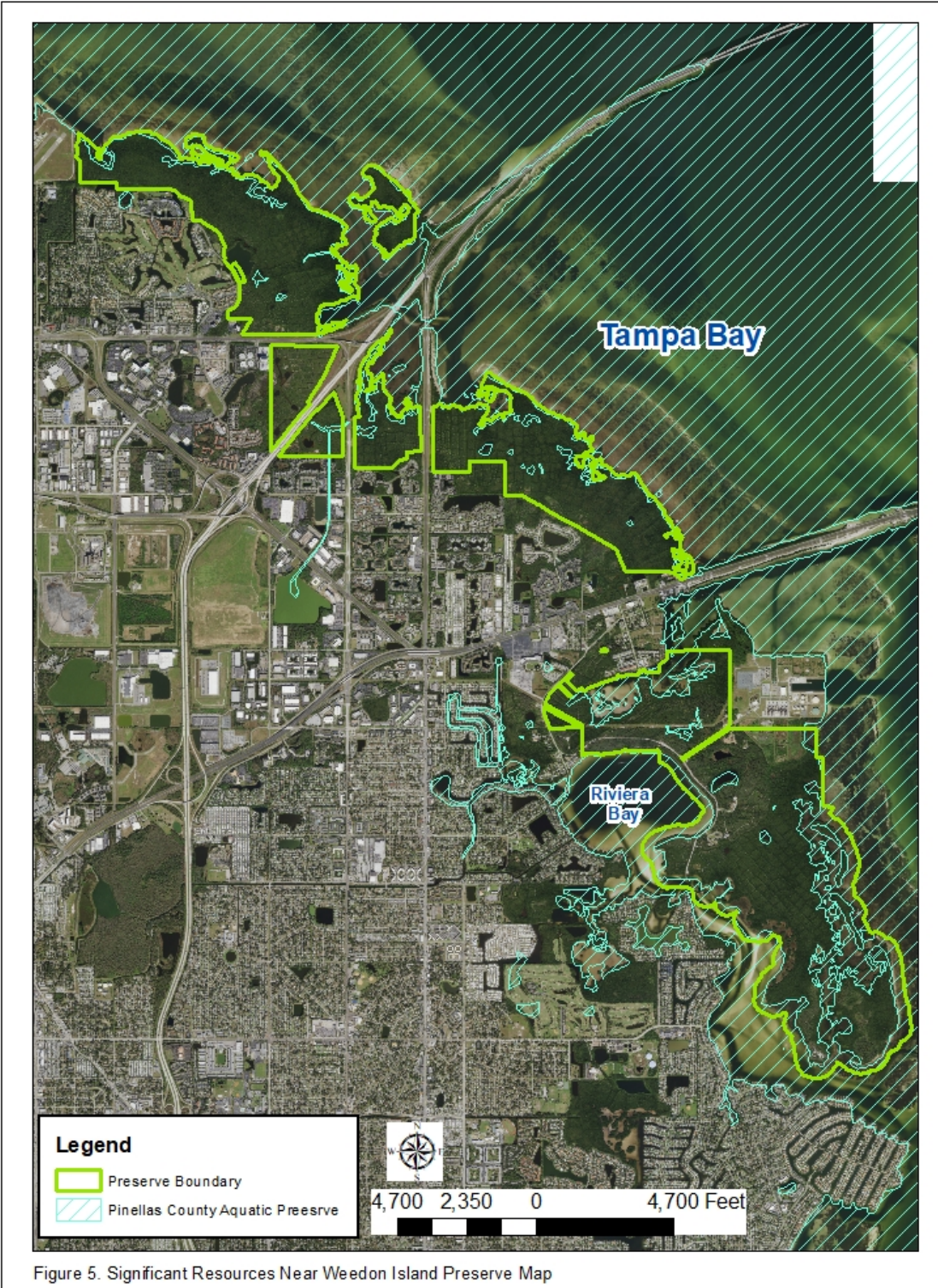


Figure 5. Significant Resources Near Weedon Island Preserve Map

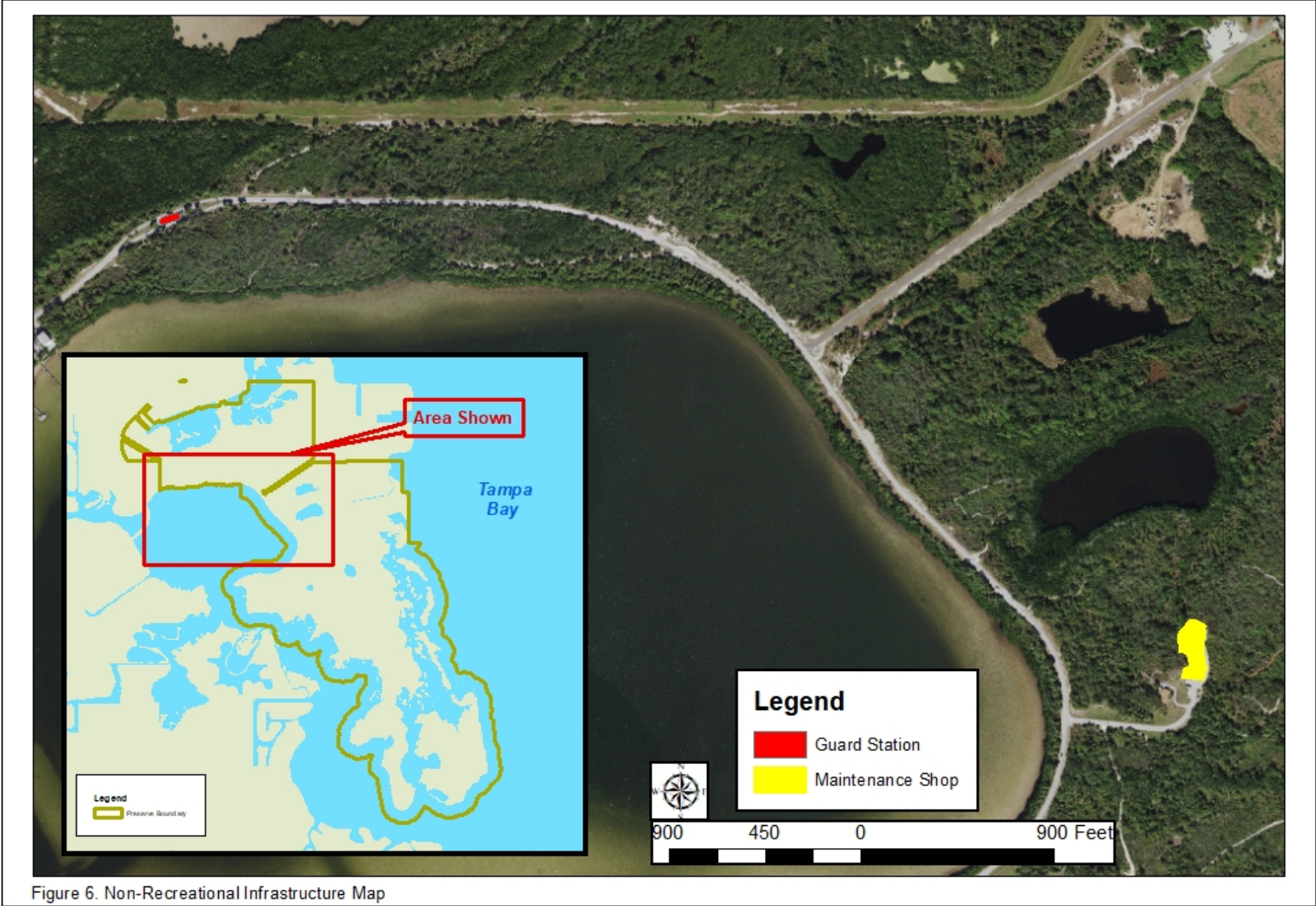
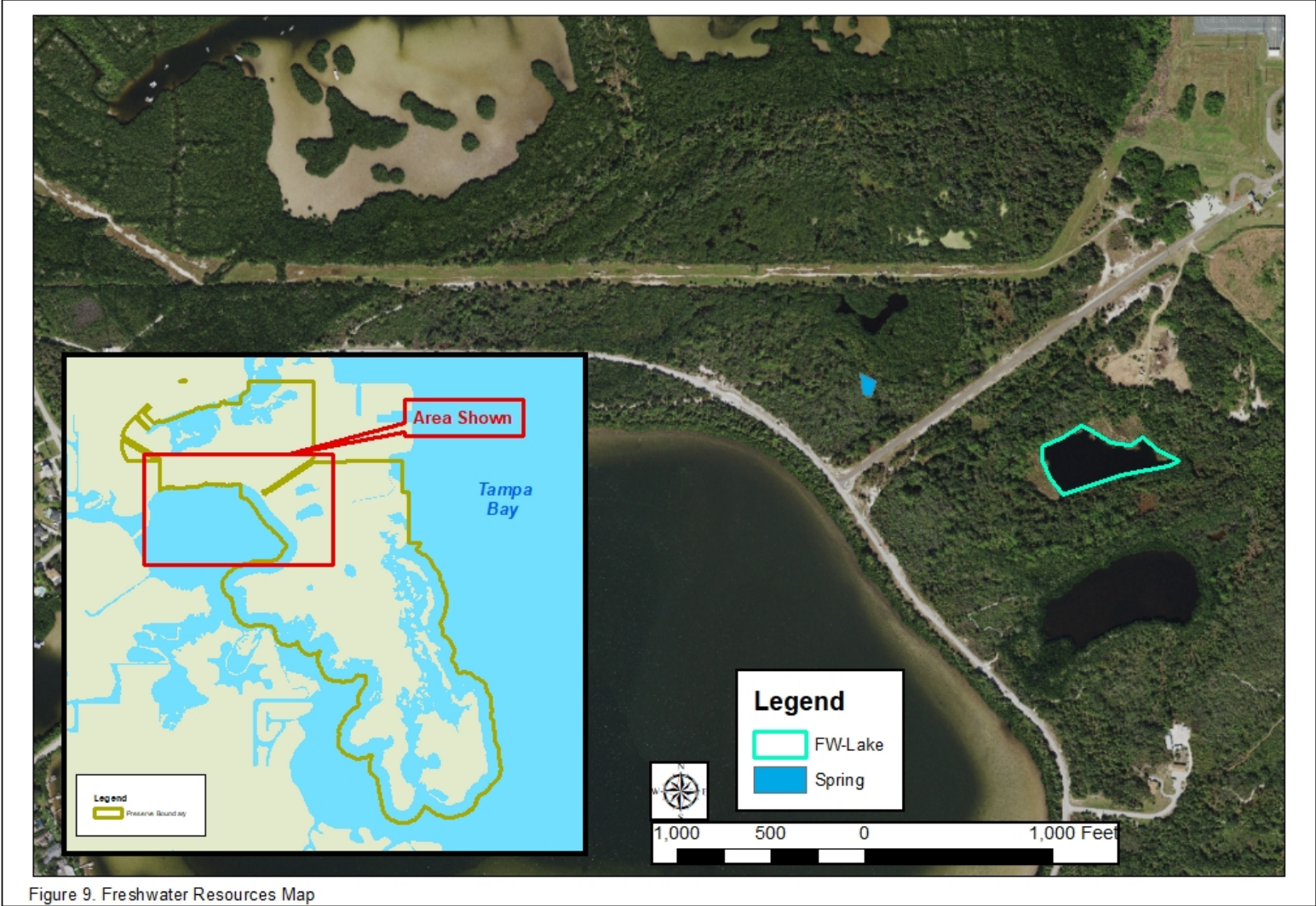
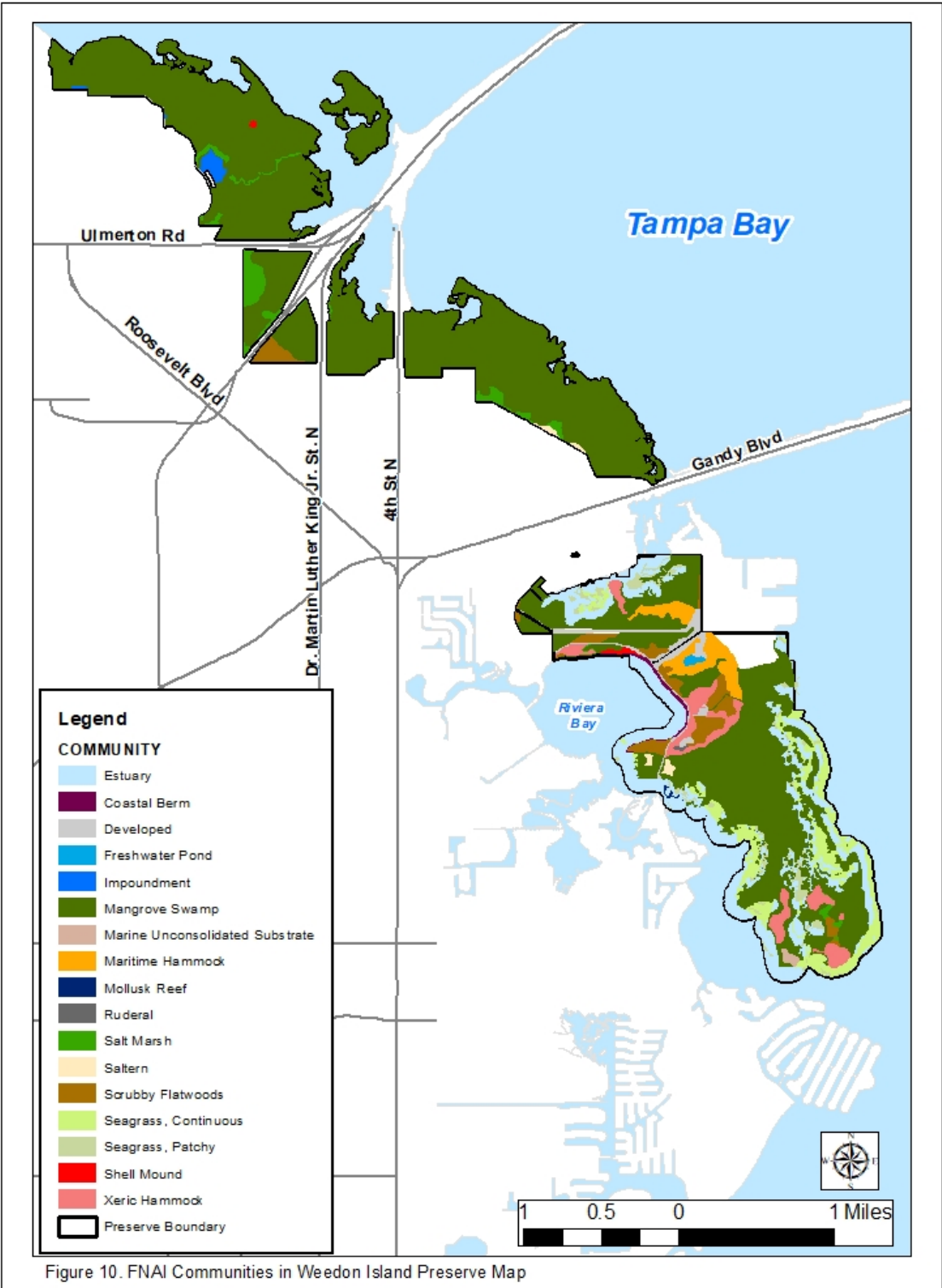


Figure 6. Non-Recreational Infrastructure Map





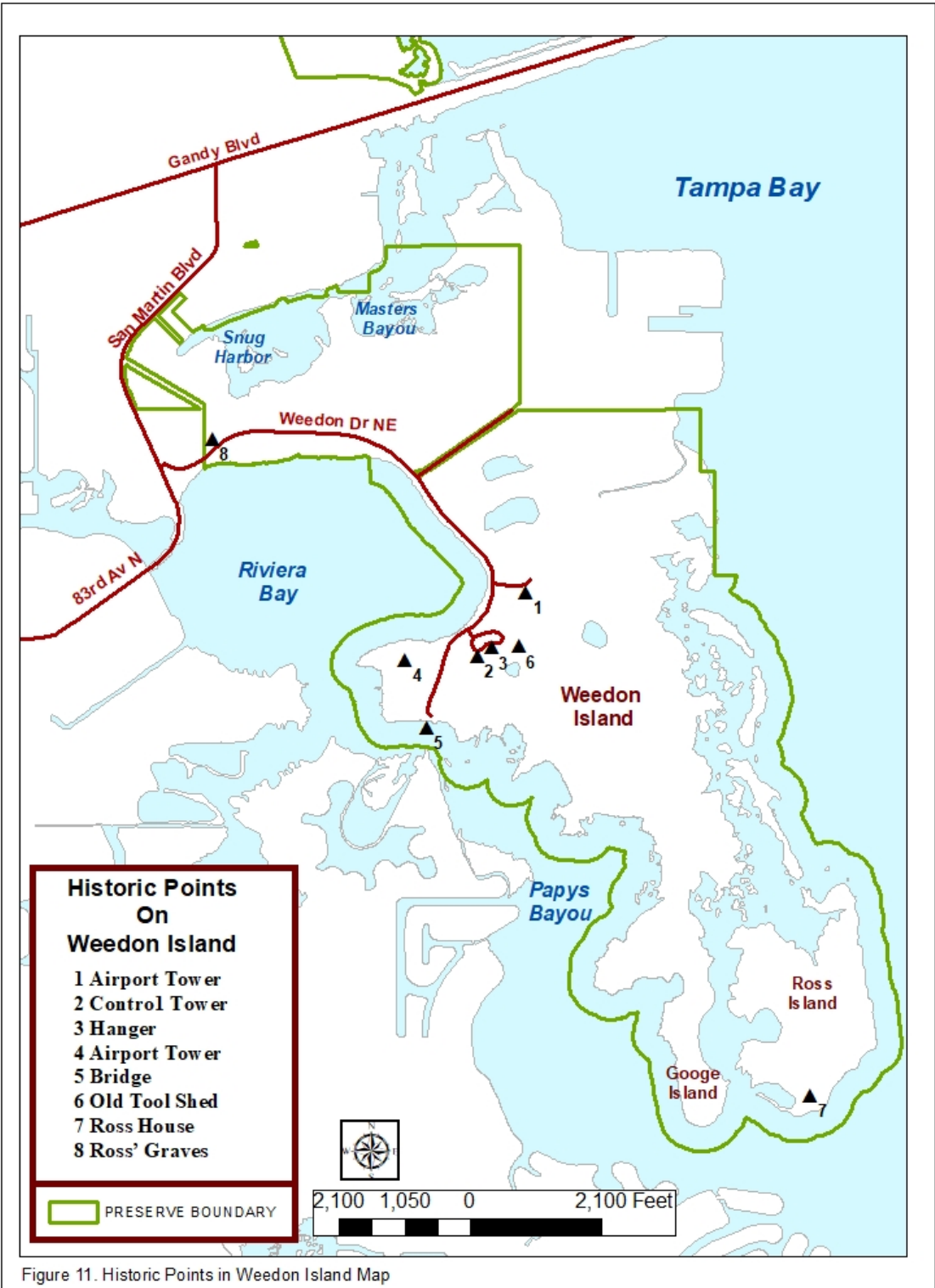
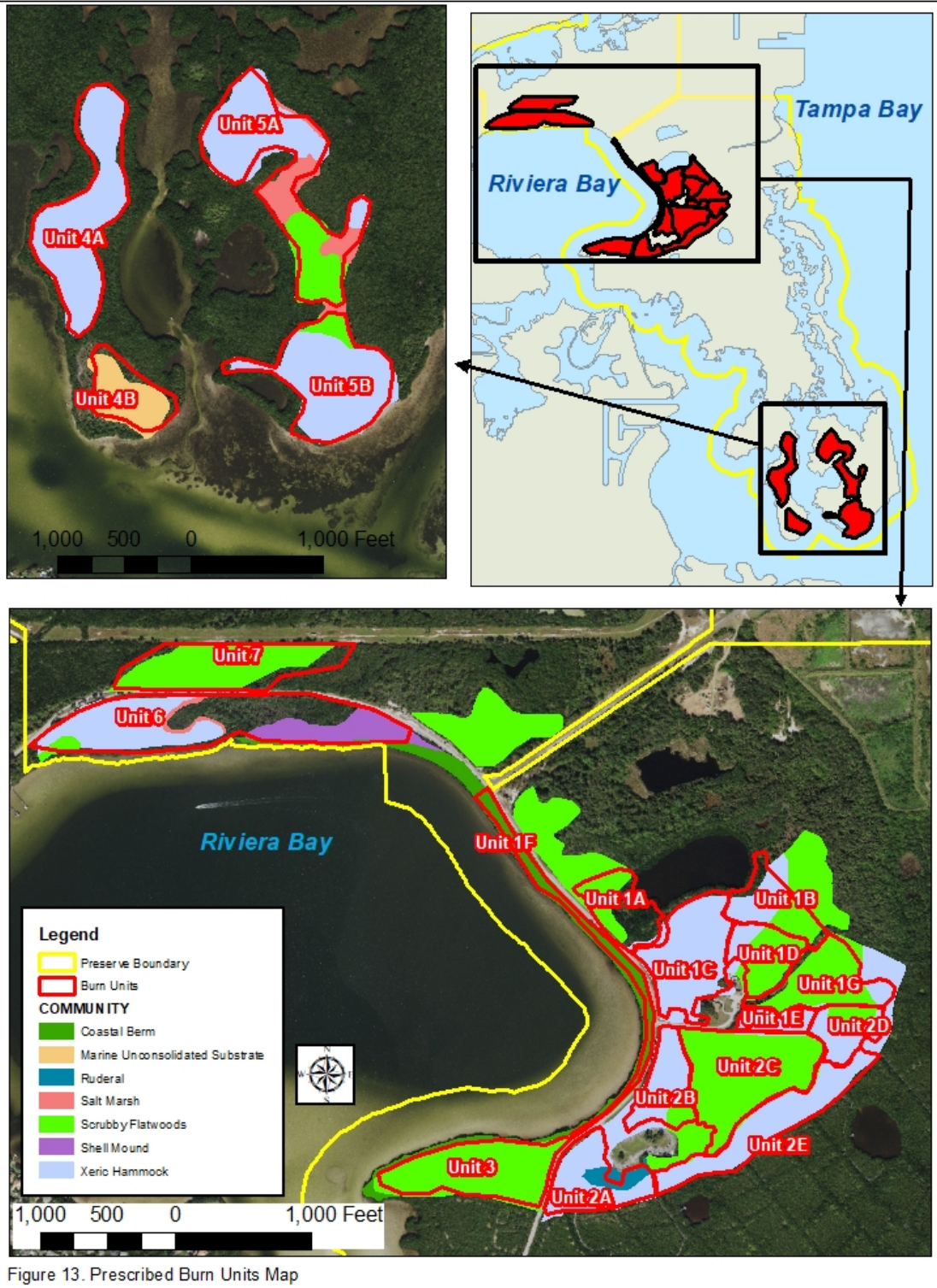


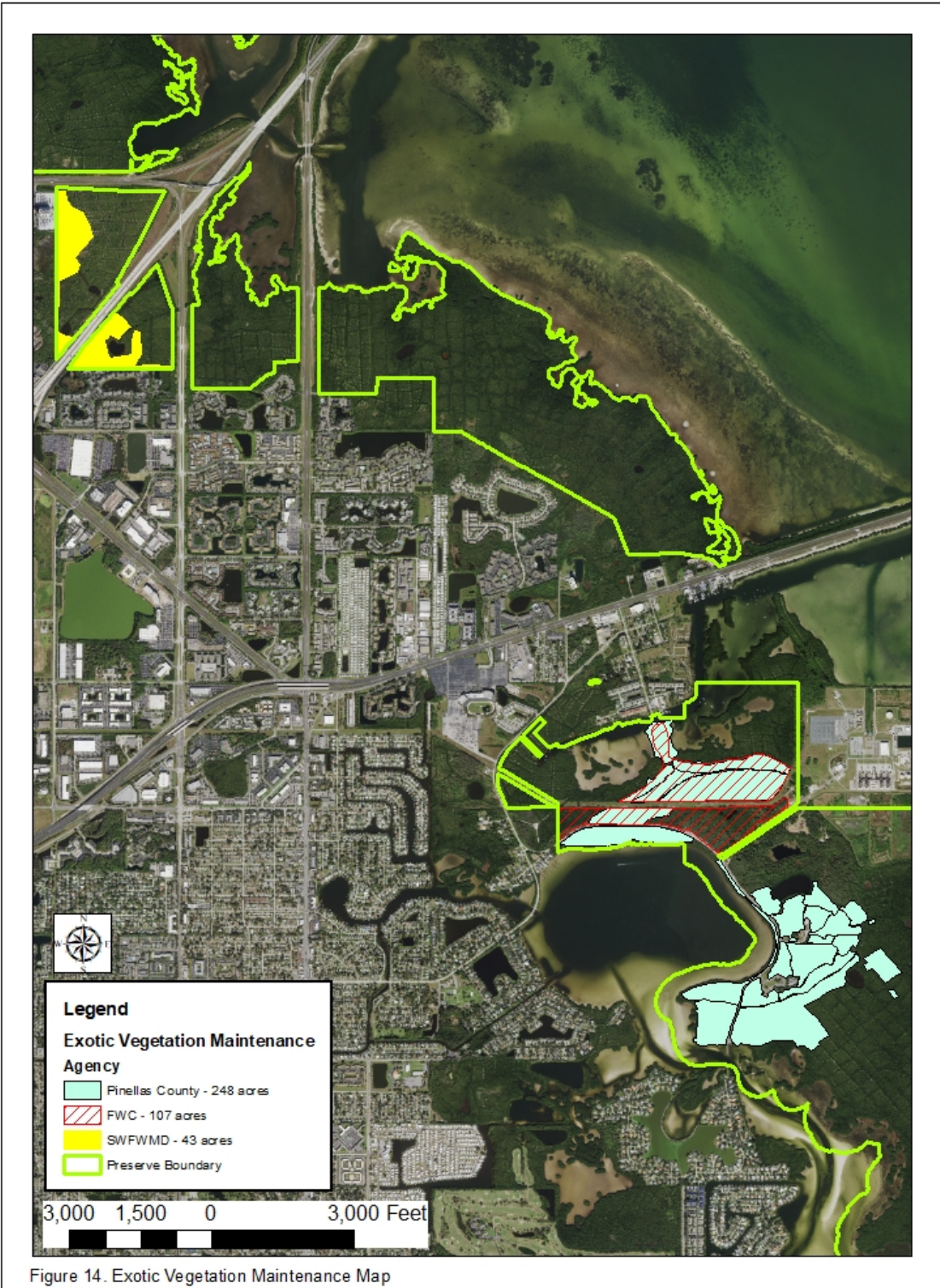
Figure 11. Historic Points in Weedon Island Map

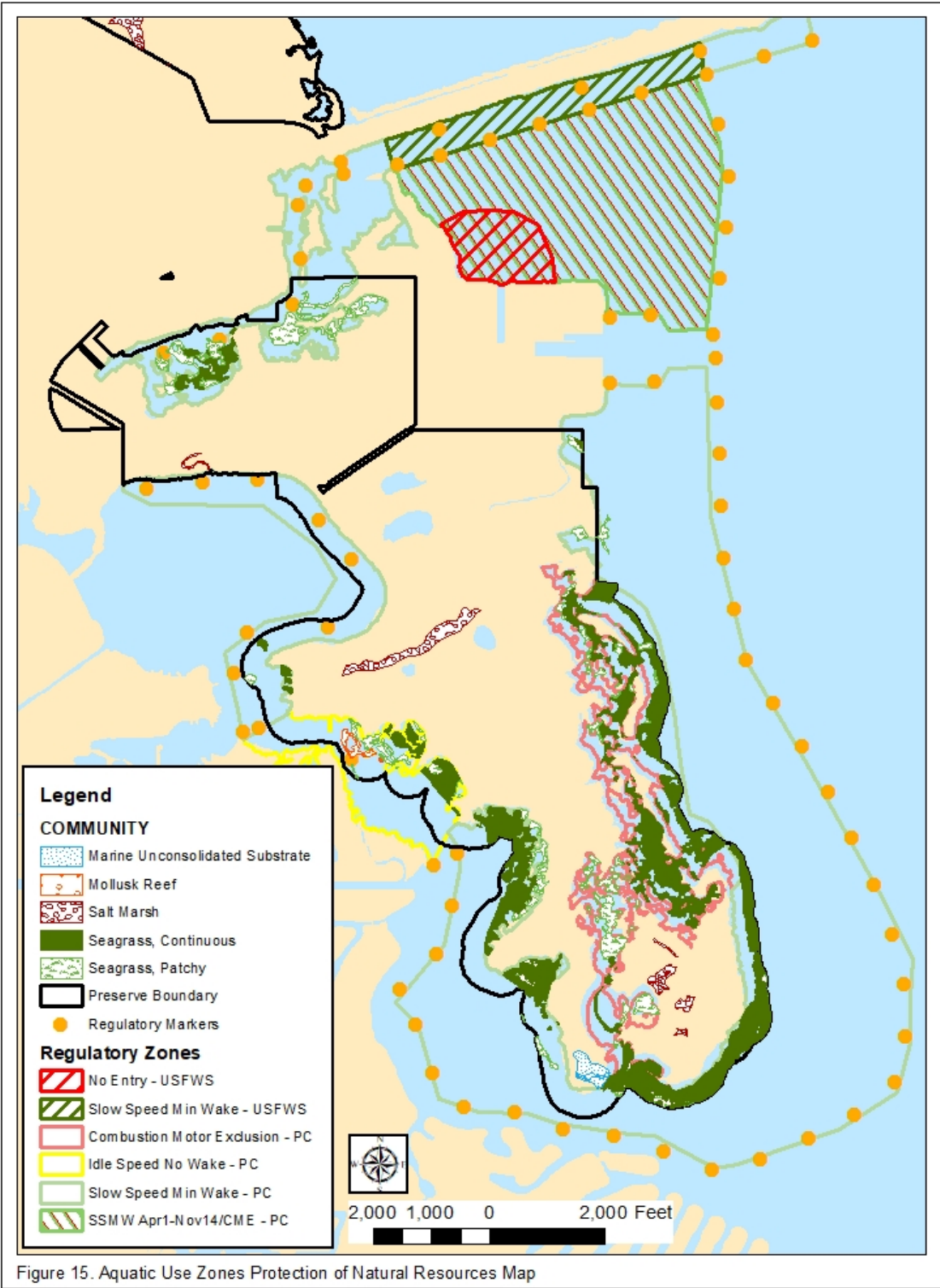


Figure 12. Restoration Projects Map









# Weedon Island Preserve Sites 2012-2020

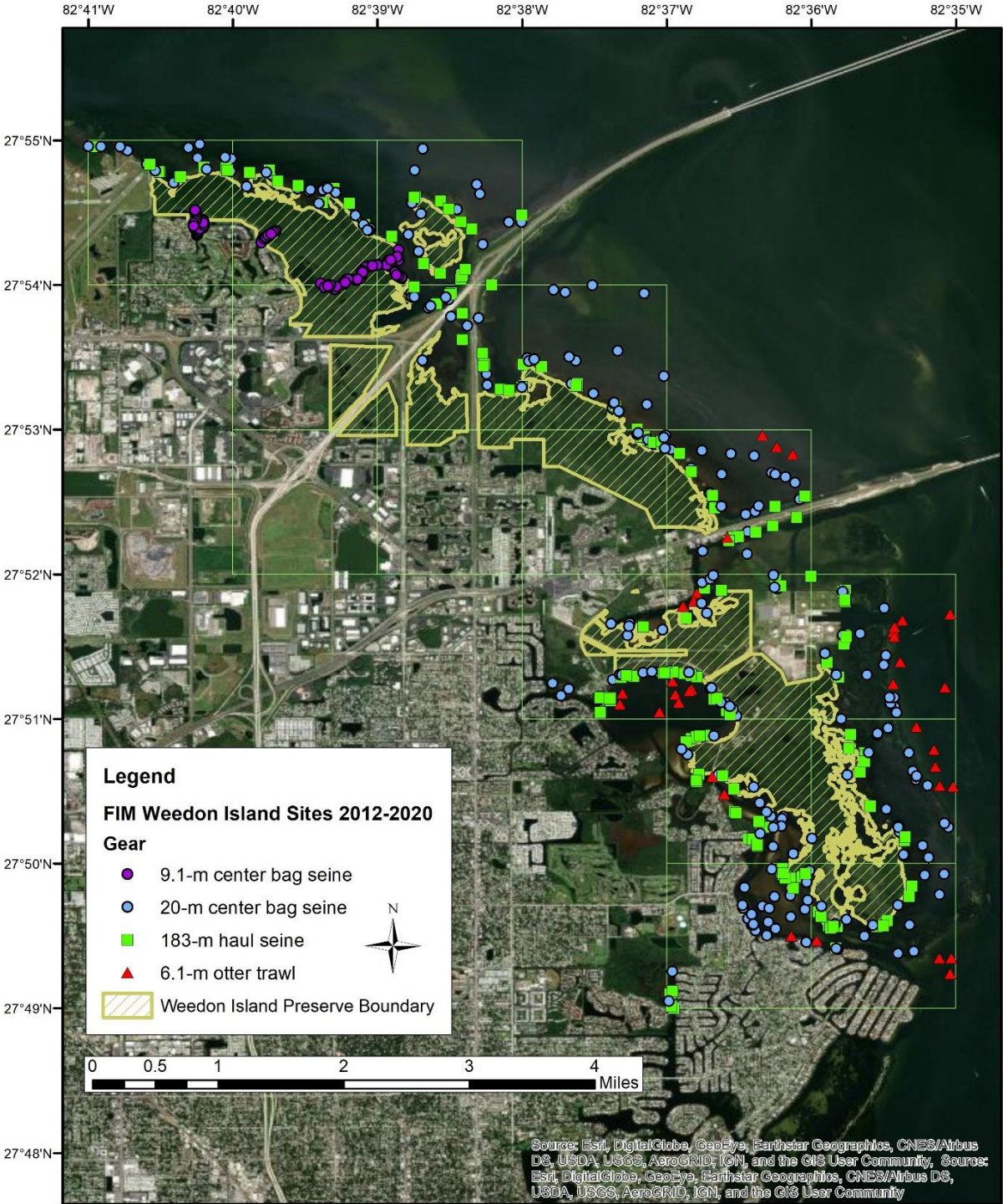


Figure 16. FWRI Fisheries Sampling Sites From 2012-2020.

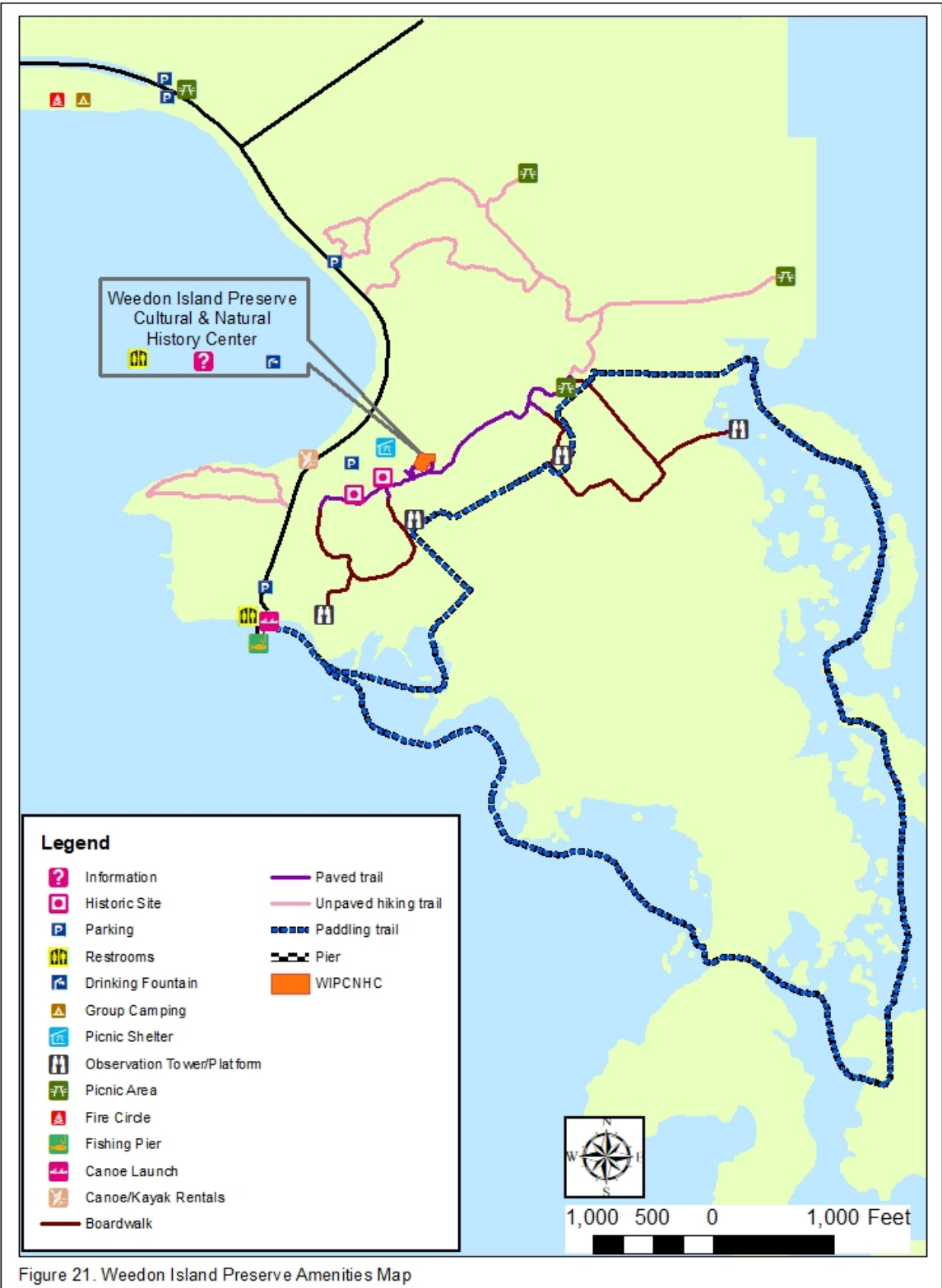


Figure 21. Weedon Island Preserve Amenities Map