5. OVERVIEW OF REGIONAL GENERAL PERMIT AREA

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5.1 Description of Regional General Permit Area

The West Bay to East Walton Regional General Permit (RGP) project area, which includes the Devil's Swamp and Breakfast Point mitigation banks, is located in southern Bay and Walton Counties, north of U.S. Highway 98 and primarily south of the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW); the Devil's Swamp Mitigation Bank is north of the ICW, south of Steele Field Road. The RGP extends from the Breakfast Point peninsula west to Choctawhatchee Bay in Walton County (Figures 2-1 and 2-2). The approximately 47,905-acre RGP project area spans terrestrial, palustrine, lacustrine, riverine, and estuarine systems. It encompasses a wide variety and richness of ecologically significant wildlife habitats, natural communities, and surface waters and wetlands. Species diversity, including federally and state-listed species, is very high. Although most of the area within the RGP project is currently undeveloped and in silviculture, the cities of Panama City and Panama City Beach and most of the Gulf and Lake Powell coastlines have been and will continue to develop rapidly. The development from these cities and everywhere along the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, West Bay, Choctawhatchee Bay, and Lake Powell will continue to press inland into formerly undeveloped lands.

The RGP project area encompasses 16 local drainage basins, both north and south of the ICW (Figure 2-3). The RGP project area falls entirely within the Gulf Coast Flatwoods EPA Ecological Region (Florida Regionalization Project, Unpublished Report, 1994) and is classified within the 1969 Davis Land Cover as pine flatwoods, sand pine scrub forests, and forests of longleaf pine and xerophytic oaks.

The current land cover (NWFWMD 1995 in FDEP 2003) is dominated by silviculture. Other land uses that cover substantial acreages are wetland forested mixed, upland coniferous forest, and hardwood-conifer mixed. The National Wetlands Inventory (NWI, 1982-87) classifies approximately 47% of the land cover as uplands and 53% as wetlands dominated by palustrine emergent systems (45%; Figure 4-2).

Historically, north Florida flatwoods covered about 34% (16,458 acres) of the land area within the RGP boundary (Figure 4-1; NRCS 1989). Flatwoods span upland and wetland conditions. The uplands within the RGP area were dominated by flatwoods, longleaf pine-turkey oak hills, some sand pine scrub, and mixed hardwood/pine. The wetlands within this area were dominated by hardwood swamps, cypress swamps, and shrub bogs (34%). The remaining acreage in the project area was made up of mosaics of xeric/mesic and mesic/hydric communities (e.g., north Florida flatwoods/freshwater marsh;

NRCS 1989). Historical land cover may indicate restoration potential; through conservation and restoration efforts, most of the planted pine areas can be returned to their natural communities. Tables 2-1 and 2-2 present wildlife and listed species generally associated with these natural communities.

5.2 Regional Significance

The RGP project area spans terrestrial, palustrine, lacustrine, riverine, and estuarine systems. It encompasses a wide variety and richness of ecologically significant wildlife habitats, natural communities, and surface waters and wetlands; species diversity, including federally and state-listed species, is very high (Figures 2-1 and 4-1). Most of the area within the RGP project is currently undeveloped and in silviculture; however, this area is experiencing already severe and rapidly increasing pressures from development along the shorelines of the Gulf of Mexico, Lake Powell, Choctawhatchee Bay, and West Bay, as well as other areas throughout the project area. Therefore, to best manage growth and protect areas of regional ecological and cultural significance, it is essential that an area-wide management and conservation plan (i.e., the RGP and EMA) be developed as quickly as possible.

Numerous features of ecological significance occur within or overlap the boundaries of the RGP area such as: several recreational trails; five publicly managed lands: Camp Helen State Park, Choctawhatchee River Water Management Area. Deer Lake State Park, Eden Gardens State Park, and Point Washington State Forest; and the South Walton County Ecosystem Conservation and Recreation Land (CARL; FDEP 2003). Many additional regionally significant ecological features are discussed in the following subsections.

5.3 Biodiversity

Historically, north Florida flatwoods covered about 34% (16,458 acres) of the land area within the RGP boundary (Figure 4-1; NRCS 1989). Flatwoods span upland and wetland conditions. The uplands within this area were dominated by flatwoods, longleaf pine-turkey oak hills (about 8%, 4,034 acres[1]), sand pine scrub (about 4%, 1,708 acres), and mixed hardwood/pine (about 3%, 1,324 acres) (Figure 4-1). The wetlands within this area were dominated by hardwood swamps, cypress swamps, and shrub bogs (34%, 16,458 acres[2]), with only 6% (2,822 acres) in saltmarsh (Figure 4-1; NRCS 1989). The remaining acreage in the project area is made up of mosaics of xeric/mesic and mesic/hydric communities (e.g., north Florida flatwoods/freshwater marsh; NRCS 1989).

Historical land cover may indicate restoration potential; through conservation and restoration efforts, most of the planted pine areas can be returned to their natural communities. Tables 2-1 and 2-2 present wildlife and listed species generally associated with these natural communities.

All four of FNAI's under-represented natural communities, seepage slopes, sandhill, scrub, and pine flatwoods, occur within the RGP area, occupying about 6,747 acres.

Seventy-five (70%) of the RGP project area (33,774 acres) has been identified as priority habitats for key focal wetland-dependent species (Kautz et al. 1994). Of particular interest is that about 52% (25,052 acres) of the uplands within the project area have been identified as important upland habitat for 1-3 wetland-dependent species (Kautz et al. 1994; Cox et al. 2000).

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[1] This acreage obtained by summing category 4 with half of 4,5 (longleaf pine-turkey oak hills + ½ x longleaf pine-turkey oak hills, mixed hardwood/pine).

[2] This acreage obtained by summing the following categories: 17,21,22 + 21 + 21,22 + 22 (hardwood swamps, cypress, and shrub bogs + cypress + cypress, shrub bogs + shrub bogs, respectively).

Threatened and Endangered Species

Critical habitat designated for the Gulf Sturgeon (*Acipenser oxyrhinchus desotoi*) occurs northwest of the RGP project in Choctawhatchee Bay. In addition, the RGP boundaries overlap with about 1,488 acres of FWC SHCAs for the Gulf salt marsh snake (*Nerodia clarkii clarkii*), snowy plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*), and black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus;* Cox et al. 1994).

The one federally listed (and state listed) species observed is the federally endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*). According to FNAI, seven state-listed species observed within the RGP area include two endangered and five threatened plant species and one animal species of special concern (see ERATools report™ at the end of this section).

The proposed conservation units and mitigation banks should improve the quality of suitable habitat for listed species as well as protecting and maintaining the suitability of the regional landscape for listed species. 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 the planted acreage within these areas were restored to historical natural land covers (NRCS 1989).

5.4 Water Quality

The 13 drainage basins within the RGP area filter and contribute surface waters directly to Choctawhatchee Bay, West Bay, Lake Powell, and the Gulf of Mexico. The extensive wetland systems within the RGP area are essential to this function. In addition, the Lake Powell, Phillips Inlet, and Eden State Park Gardens OFWs occur within the RGP boundary (about 3,759 acres).

The 2000 Florida Water Quality Assessment: 305(b) Report (FDEP 2000) provides water quality status for 15 water bodies or basins, including West Bay and Lake Powell, within the Choctawhatchee/St. Andrews watersheds. Of the statuses provided, all except one, are good; one is fair (for Botheration Bayou). The 2000 305(b) report for the Choctawhatchee/St. Andrews watersheds as a whole indicates that within the RGP project area, the chemistry conditions are good, the biology conditions are fair, and trends have not changed.

About 35% (16,677 acres) within the RGP area are sources for blackwater inflow to riverine systems. Soils contributing to the maintenance of blackwater inflow are the mucky (4,935 acres) and depressional soils (11,742 acres).

There are no known immediate point-source water quality threats within the RGP boundary (FDEP 2003). Silvicultural activities account for non-point source water quality threats. The remainder of the land cover is in natural communities, primarily wetlands, of various quality.

The estimated percentage of land use within the RGP project that is wetland ranges from 25% to 53% (NWFWMD 1995 and NWI, respectively, in FDEP 2003) to about 61% (29,145 acres) using the method for estimating Corps' jurisdiction. These wetlands filter surface water throughout the RGP project area drainage basins and therefore help to filter adverse runoff from silviculture activities and existing and potential future development into Choctawhatchee Bay, West Bay, Lake Powell, and the Gulf of Mexico, as well as freshwater riverine systems.

5.5 Essential Fish Habitat and Living Marine Resources

Surface water from the RGP project area flows directly to Choctawhatchee Bay, West Bay, Lake Powell, and the Gulf of Mexico. All of these water bodies support extensive saltwater and freshwater marshes that provide EFH. Seagrass beds and two FNAI-identified coastal priority areas also occur

within the RGP boundary (FDEP 2003; FNAI 2001; FMRI 2002). The wetlands within the RGP project area buffer and filter the surface water flow into these water bodies.