

9. POINT WASHINGTON STATE FOREST CONSERVATION UNIT

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9.1 General Description of Conservation Unit

The 470-acre Point Washington State Forest Conservation Unit is located northwest of the Wildlife Corridor Conservation Unit and south of the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW; Figures 2-1 and 9-1). This unit encompasses areas identified as a primary wildlife habitat area, with a high density of focal species (Cox et al. 1994), and the potential for supporting both uplands and wetlands important to wildlife diversity in the Florida panhandle. Because the Point Washington State Forest Conservation Unit connects with the Point Washington State Forest, this unit serves to maintain the goals of the proposed conservation units. Data sheets reporting the results of the GIS ERATools™ analyses for the Point Washington State Forest Conservation Unit are included at the end of this section.

The current land cover (NFWFMD 1995) is divided between silviculture (coniferous plantations) and wetlands consisting primarily of mixed forested wetlands. The National Wetlands Inventory (NWI, 1982-87) classifies approximately 56% of the land cover as uplands and 44% as palustrine scrub shrub wetlands (Figure 4-2). Historically, the uplands component of this area was dominated by North Florida Pine Flatwoods with smaller areas in Sand Pine Scrub and Longleaf Pine-Turkey Oak Hills, and the wetlands component of this area was dominated by Cypress and Hardwood Swamps, Shrub Bogs, and Freshwater Marsh (NRCS 1989) (Figure 4-1). Historical land cover may indicate restoration potential.

Pine plantations have replaced most of the North Florida Pine Flatwoods communities and some of the wetlands. However, the current pine plantations not only support the state's forestry resource, but when placed under conservation status, these lands potentially can be restored to the FNAI-identified priority/under-represented natural community of Pine Flatwoods. Tables 2-1 and 2-2 present wildlife and listed species generally associated with this natural community.

9.2 Regional Significance

As the westernmost conservation unit, the Point Washington State Forest unit is uniquely positioned within the conservation network and connects with managed lands west of the RGP/EMA area. This unit protects and filters surface water flow to West Bay and to the Gulf of Mexico. This unit also encompasses areas identified as a primary wildlife habitat area with a high density of focal species (Cox

et al. 1994). Limiting construction in this area and protecting and restoring components of both the upland and wetland systems will maintain ecological integrity within the region (Figure 2-1).

About 7 acres of Seepage Slope, an FNAI-identified priority/under-represented natural community, occurs within the Point Washington Conservation Unit (FNAI 2001). Most (97%) of the Point Washington State Forest Conservation Unit uplands and wetlands have been identified by FWC as priority habitat for 1-3 or 4-6 wetland-dependent species. The Point Washington OFW also overlaps slightly with this conservation unit.

Several features of ecological significance occur within the 2- or 5-mile buffers around the conservation unit. Several Recreational Trails overlap the 2- and more overlap the 5-mile buffers. Several managed lands, Choctawhatchee River Water Management Area, Deer Lake State Park, and Point Washington State Forest, and the South Walton County Ecosystem CARL overlap the 2-mile buffer. Additional managed lands and an FNAI priority habitat conservation land, Lake Tresca, a coastal dune lake, overlap the 5-mile buffer (FNAI 2000, 2001; FDEP 2003). Additional regionally significant ecological features, such as seagrass beds, are discussed in the following subsections.

9.3 Biodiversity

Historically, the Point Washington State Forest Conservation Unit was dominated by pine flatwoods and swamp hardwoods, with some cypress, shrub wetlands, and freshwater marshes (NRCS 1989). The forested wetlands are currently 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 - Pine Flatwoods have been identified by FNAI as a priority/under-represented natural community. About 7 acres of natural Seepage Slope, another FNAI priority/under-represented natural community, occurs within this unit. Natural and endemic communities identified within the 1-mile buffer include Seepage Slopes and Pine Flatwoods; Sandhill and Scrub also occur within the 3-mile buffer.

Almost the entire conservation unit (97%) and 69% of the landscape within the 1-mile buffer around the unit are identified as priority habitats for 1-3 or 4-6 key focal wetland-dependent species (Kautz et al. 1994). Of particular interest is that all of the uplands within the unit have been identified as important habitat for 1-3 wetland-dependent species. The Point Washington State Forest Conservation Unit includes areas and connects with areas identified as primary wildlife habitat area with a high density of focal species (Cox et al. 1994). Within the 3-mile buffer around this unit, about 3,674 acres of FWC-designated strategic habitat conservation area (SHCA) for the Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*) occurs. Sea turtle nesting beaches also occur within the 3-mile buffer around this unit.

This unit's location relative to public lands managed for conservation, particularly its link with the Point Washington State Forest; and the amount of land identified as priority habitats for wetland-dependent species 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 Point Washington State Forest unit is a necessary part of the chain linking the natural systems in the west with those in the east, allowing for movement of species through the Project area.

Threatened and Endangered Species

There have been no known recorded occurrences within the Point Washington State Forest Conservation Unit of federally listed threatened or endangered species¹, and there is no U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-designated critical habitat. Two state-listed plant species, the endangered white-top pitcherplant (*Sarracenia leucophylla*) and the threatened parrot pitcher plant (*Sarracenia psitticina*), were observed within the unit by FNAI (2003) and by WilsonMiller.

No federally listed species were observed within the 1-mile buffer; two federally listed species, the flatwoods salamander (*Ambystoma cingulatum*) and the red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) have been observed within the 3-mile buffer by FNAI (2003) or WilsonMiller (Moyers 2003).

Four plant species and one animal species state-listed as threatened, endangered, or species of special concern have been observed within the 1-mile buffer, and several more in all three state classifications have been observed within the 3-mile buffer around the unit.

The proposed conservation plan for the Point Washington State Forest unit should protect and 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 may benefit if this conservation unit's planted acreage were restored to its historical natural land covers.

9.4 Water Quality

Seventy-three percent (344 acres) of the Point Washington State Forest Conservation Unit is within the Direct Runoff to Bay basin, which drains to West Bay through the ICW. The area of the Point Washington State Forest unit within the Camp Creek basin (27%, 125 acres) filters and contributes surface waters to Camp Creek and ultimately the Gulf of Mexico. The wetland systems within this conservation unit do not connect directly with any wetland systems in the other conservation units, which lie southeast of the Point Washington State Forest Conservation Unit. Field observations indicate surface water does not flow from the Point Washington State Forest Conservation Unit into the other conservation units.

About 45% of the Point Washington State Forest unit contributes to maintaining blackwater inflow to West Bay, primarily from Pamlico Muck, a primary hydric muck soil, and some from Rutlege Fine Sand, a primary hydric depressional soil. The direct flow into the West Bay system and Camp Creek and the blackwater inflow characteristics emphasize the importance of this conservation unit to water quality within the study area.

The 2000 Florida Water Quality Assessment: 305(b) Report (FDEP 2000) lists the water quality trend for the Camp Creek basin to be good, and the 1998 305(b) report lists the water quality as good and excellent (FDEP 1998). The 1996 305(b) report lists the water body, but does not give a status on water quality standards or trends (FDEP 1996). No water bodies within the conservation unit are on the 1998 303(d) Impaired Waters list. The water quality status for The Direct Runoff to the Bay Basin is listed as fair in the 1998 and 2000 305(b) reports (FDEP 1998, 2002). No status is given for this basin in the 1996 305(b) report (FDEP 1996).

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.

There are no known immediate point-source water quality threats to the system in the boundary of the conservation unit. Silvicultural activities account for non-point source water quality threats. There is no stormwater flow from developed areas into surface water bodies within this unit. Non-silviculture land cover is in natural communities, primarily wetlands, of various quality. The estimated percentage of land use within the Point Washington State Forest Conservation Unit that is wetland ranges from 44% (NFWMD 1995) and 44% (NWI, in FDEP 2003) to 82% (386 acres) using the method for estimating Corps' jurisdiction.

Upland areas in this unit are described in the field notes as moderate quality. When these lands become inactive from their current silviculture and are restored to their natural land cover, the entire unit will serve to buffer surface waters flowing to West Bay and Camp Creek from silvicultural or development activities outside the unit.

9.5 Essential Fish Habitat and Living Marine Resources

The Point Washington State Forest Conservation Unit buffers and filters surface water flow into the Direct Runoff to Bay basin, which drains to West Bay, and into Camp Creek, which flows to the Gulf of Mexico. West Bay and the Gulf of Mexico support extensive saltwater and freshwater marshes and seagrass beds that provide Essential Fish Habitat (EFH). In addition, two FNAI-identified coastal priority lands occur along the Gulf coast within the 2- and 5-mile buffers (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.