15. WILDLIFE CORRIDOR CONSERVATION UNIT

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15.1 General Description of Conservation Unit

The 1,246-acre Wildlife Corridor Conservation Unit, located south of the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) and north of Side Camp Road, stretches westward from the Side Camp Road and Lake Powell Headwaters conservation units up to US 98 northwest of Lake Powell (Figures 2-1 and 15-1). This unit 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. Because the Wildlife Corridor Conservation Unit links publicly managed lands west of US 98 with the conservation network stretching eastward across the project area, this unit is important to maintaining wildlife corridors and connecting natural systems. Data sheets reporting the results of the GIS ERATools™ analyses for the Wildlife Corridor Conservation Unit are included at the end of this section.

The current land cover (NWFWMD 1995) is divided between silviculture (coniferous plantations) and a wetland complex consisting primarily of forested wetlands. The National Wetlands Inventory (NWI, 1982-87) classifies approximately 39% of the land cover as uplands and 61% as wetlands dominated by scrub shrub wetlands (Figure 4-2).

Historically, the uplands component of this area was primarily North Florida Pine Flatwoods, with a very small acreage in longleaf pine-turkey oak hills, and the wetlands component of this area was dominated by cypress and hardwood swamps and shrub bogs, with some freshwater marsh (NRCS 1989) (Figure 4-1). Historical land cover indicates restoration potential.

Pine plantations have replaced most of the north florida pine flatwoods and longleaf pine-turkey oak hills communities. 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 communities of Pine Flatwoods or Sandhills, respectively. Tables 2-1 and 2-2 present wildlife and listed species generally associated with these natural communities.

15.2 Regional Significance

The Wildlife Corridor Conservation Unit lies at the far west end of the connected conservation unit network and connects with managed lands west of the RGP/EMA area. The Wildlife Corridor unit also traverses 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).

A large portion (78%) of this conservation unit's uplands and wetlands have been identified by FWC as priority habitat for 1-3 or 4-6 wetland-dependent species, and about 17 acres of Seepage Slope, an FNAI-identified priority/under-represented natural community, occurs within the Wildlife Corridor Conservation Unit (FNAI 2001).

Several features of ecological significance occur within the 2- or 5-mile buffers around the Wildlife Corridor Conservation Unit. Several Recreational Trails and scenic roads occur within the 2- and more within the 5-mile buffers. Several managed lands, Camp Helen State Park, Deer Lake State Park, and Point Washington State Forest, and the South Walton County Ecosystem CARL occur within the 2-mile buffer around the unit. The Choctawhatchee River Water Management Area and Lake Tresca, a coastal dune lake and FNAI-identified priority habitat conservation land, occur within the 5-mile buffer (FNAI 2000, 2001; FDEP 2003). Other features of ecological significance that occur within the unit or within 2- or 5-mile buffers around the conservation unit are discussed in the following subsections.

15.3 Biodiversity

Historically, the Wildlife Corridor Conservation Unit was predominantly pine flatwoods, a small area of longleaf pine-turkey oak hills, and cypress, mixed forested, and shrub wetlands. 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. In addition, both pine flatwoods and longleaf pine-turkey oak hills have been identified by FNAI as priority/under-represented natural communities (Pine Flatwoods and Sandhills, respectively). Natural and endemic communities identified within both the 1-mile and 3-mile buffers include Seepage Slopes, Sandhills, Scrub, and Pine Flatwoods.

The Wildlife Corridor Conservation Unit spans areas identified as primary wildlife habitat area with a high density of focal species (Cox et al. 1994). A large percentage (78%) of this conservation unit and about 81% of the landscape within the 1-mile buffer around the unit have been identified as priority habitats for 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. Sea turtle nesting beaches occur within the 3-mile buffer around this unit.

This unit's location relative to public lands managed for conservation, lands identified as priority habitats for wetland-dependent species, and 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 Wildlife Corridor 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 have been no previously recorded occurrences within the Wildlife Corridor Conservation Unit of federally listed threatened or endangered species[1], and there is no U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-designated critical habitat. During 2003 field surveys, WilsonMiller identified a high quality potential breeding pond and surrounding upland habitat for the flatwoods salamander (*Ambystoma cingulatum*) within this conservation unit. The flatwoods salamander is federally listed as threatened and state-listed as a species of special concern.

Several state listed endangered or threatened plant species were observed within the Wildlife Corridor Conservation Unit (FNAI 2003; WilsonMiller 2003 field surveys).

The federally listed as endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) was observed within the 1-mile buffer; and the federally listed as threatened piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*) was observed within the 3-mile buffer (WilsonMiller 2003 field surveys; FNAI 2003). Several plant species state-listed as threatened or endangered have been observed within the 1-mile buffer, and several plant and animal species state-listed as endangered, threatened, or species of special concern have been observed within the 3-mile buffer around the unit.

The proposed conservation plan for the Wildlife Corridor unit should improve the quality of potentially suitable habitat for listed species, notably the flatwoods salamander, 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 cover.

15.4 Water Quality

All of the Wildlife Corridor Conservation Unit is within the Direct Runoff to Bay Basin. Surface water within the Wildlife Corridor unit flows to the Direct Runoff to Bay Basin, which drains to West Bay through the ICW. The water quality status for The Direct Runoff to the Bay Basin has been fair for the 1998 Florida Water Quality Assessment: 305(b) Report and 2000 305(b) report (FDEP 1998, 2002). No status is given for this basin in the 1996 305(b) report (FDEP 1996).

The wetland systems within this conservation unit connect directly with wetland systems in the Lake Powell Headwaters and Side Camp Road conservation units which extend to the northeast and southeast. About 55% of the Wildlife Corridor unit contributes to maintaining blackwater inflow to West Bay, primarily from Rutlege Fine Sand and Rutlege Sand soils, primary hydric depressional soils, and Pamlico muck soils, a primary hydric muck 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. 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 Wildlife Corridor Conservation Unit that is wetland ranges from 42% to 61% (NWFWMD and NWI, respectively, in FDEP 2003) to about 78% (970 acres) using the method for estimating Corps' jurisdiction. These wetlands currently filter surface water in the Direct Runoff to Bay

[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.

drainage basin. This unit currently provides necessary buffering of any adverse runoff into West Bay from silviculture practices and any pending development in areas around the unit. There is no stormwater flow from developed areas into surface water bodies within this unit.

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

15.5 Essential Fish Habitat and Living Marine Resources

The Wildlife Corridor Conservation Unit buffers and filters surface water flow into the ICW, which drains to West Bay. West Bay supports extensive saltwater and freshwater marshes and seagrass beds that provide Essential Fish Habitat (EFH). In addition, two FNAI-identified coastal priority areas overlap within the 2-mile buffer around this unit. 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.