

11. SIDE CAMP ROAD CONSERVATION UNIT

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11.1 General Description of Conservation Unit

The 2,330-acre Side Camp Road Conservation Unit, situated east of the Wildlife Corridor Conservation Unit, north of the Lake Powell Headwaters and Cypress and Wet Pine Flats conservation units, and south of the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) (Figures 2-1 and 11-1). This unit has also 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 Side Camp Road Conservation Unit covers so much area and links western conservation units with eastern ones, this unit is important to maintaining the continuity and ecological integrity of the proposed conservation units. Data sheets reporting the results of the GIS ERATools™ analyses for the Side Camp Road Conservation Unit are included at the end of this section.

The current land cover (NFWFMD 1995) is primarily silviculture (coniferous plantations and forest regeneration areas) with a lesser, but significant, area in wetlands, primarily forested and scrub shrub wetlands. The National Wetlands Inventory (NWI, 1982-87) classifies approximately 53% of the land cover as uplands and 47% as wetlands dominated by forested wetlands (Figure 4-2).

Historically, the uplands component of this area was primarily North Florida Pine Flatwoods with a smaller area of Longleaf Pine-Turkey Oak Hills, 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 or all of the North Florida Pine Flatwoods and Longleaf Pine-Turkey Oak Hills 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 communities of Pine Flatwoods and Sandhill, as appropriate. Tables 2-1 and 2-2 present wildlife and listed species generally associated with these natural communities.

11.2 Regional Significance

The Side Camp Road Conservation Unit encompasses substantial acreage, buffers surface flow into West Bay, and is centrally positioned within the conservation network, connecting with three other

conservation units to the southeast, 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).

FWC-identified priority habitats for 1-3 and 4-6 wetland-dependent species (Kautz et al. 1994), and substantial acreage in natural Pine Flatwoods occur within this conservation unit. Several canoe/kayak recreational trails overlap the 2- and 5-mile buffers; and several managed lands overlap the 5-mile buffer: Camp Helen State Park, Choctawhatchee River Water Management Area, Deer Lake State Park, and Point Washington State Forest. The South Walton County Ecosystem CARL also overlaps the 5-mile buffer (FDEP 2003). Additional regionally significant ecological features, such as listed species observations, are discussed in the following subsections.

11.3 Biodiversity

Historically, the Side Camp Road Conservation Unit uplands were dominated by pine flatwoods with some longleaf pine-turkey oak hills, and the wetlands were cypress, mixed hardwood swamp, and scrub shrub swamp. Some of the wetlands also have been affected by silviculture. The parts of the landscape currently in silviculture retain the physical characteristics for restoring them to their historical natural states. Pine flatwoods and longleaf pine-turkey oak hills have been identified by FNAI as priority/under-represented natural communities (Pine Flatwoods and Sandhill, respectively; FNAI 2000, 2001). In addition, FNAI identified substantial acreage (724 acres) currently in natural Pine Flatwoods. Natural and endemic communities overlapping the 1-mile buffer include the FNAI priority/under-represented communities of Sandhills and Pine Flatwoods; all four (Seepage Slopes, Sandhills, Scrub, and Pine Flatwoods) priority natural communities overlap the 3-mile buffer.

Almost all (92%) of this conservation unit and approximately 84% 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 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 Side Camp Road 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 Side Camp Road Conservation Unit of federally or state-listed threatened or endangered species¹, and there is no U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-designated critical habitat. In addition, no federally listed species have been observed within the 1-mile buffer around this unit. Two federally listed species, the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) and the threatened Piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*) have been observed within the 3-mile buffer (FNAI 2003; Moyers 2003; WilsonMiller 2003 field surveys).

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.

Three plant and one animal species state-listed as endangered or threatened have been observed within the 1-mile buffer around the unit. Several more species state-listed as endangered, threatened, or species of special concern have been observed within the 3-mile buffer (FNAI 2003; WilsonMiller 2003 field surveys).

The proposed conservation plan for the Side Camp Road 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, cypress and mixed hardwood swamps, and shrub bogs.

11.4 Water Quality

The Side Camp Road unit is within the West Laird Drain and Direct Runoff to Bay drainage basins. Field observations indicate surface water flows from the Side Camp Road Conservation Unit into adjacent conservation units as well as into the ICW, which flows to West Bay.

The 2000 Florida Water Quality Assessment: 305(b) Report and the 1996 305(b) report (FDEP 2000, 1996) list West Laird Drain, but do not provide a status on the water quality standards or trends. The 1998 305(b) report does not list West Laird Drain. This basin is not included on the 1998 303(d) Impaired Waters list. The water quality status for The Direct Runoff to the Bay Basin has been fair for the 1998 and 2000 305(b) reports (FDEP 1998, 2000). 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 Cypress and Wet Pine Flats, Lake Powell Headwaters, and Wildlife Corridor conservation units, which extend to the southeast, south, and west respectively. About 40% of the Side Camp Road unit contributes to maintaining blackwater inflow to West Bay; almost all of this contribution comes from Rutledge Sand soils, a hydric depressional soil.

There are no known immediate point-source water quality threats to the system in the boundary or within 1 mile of 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 Side Camp Road Conservation Unit that is wetland ranges from 25% to 47% (NFWFMD and NWI, respectively, in FDEP 2003) to 69% (1,597 acres) using the method for estimating Corps' jurisdiction.

These wetlands currently filter surface water in the West Laird Drain and Direct Runoff to Bay drainage basins. This unit currently provides necessary buffering of potential adverse runoff into West Bay from silviculture. 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 their current silviculture and are restored to their natural land cover, the entire unit will serve to buffer surface water flow into West Bay. The direct surface flow from this unit into the West Bay system and the blackwater inflow characteristics emphasize the importance of this conservation unit within the study area.

11.5 Essential Fish Habitat and Living Marine Resources

The Side Camp Road 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). Approximately 33 acres of seagrass beds occur within a 5-mile buffer around the unit (FMRI 2002), and two FNAI coastal priority areas fall within the 2-mile buffer (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.