

Questions and Answers
Ecosystem Management Agreement
The St. Joe Company - Bay and Walton Counties
February 25, 2004

What is an Ecosystem Management Agreement?

An Ecosystem Management Agreement is an alternative to traditional permitting that provides a comprehensive, coordinated approach to regional development and provides greater environmental benefits. Use of a binding Ecosystem Management Agreement is voluntary and detailed in Section 403.0752, Florida Statutes.

To enter into an Ecosystem Management Agreement, the applicant must demonstrate that a net ecosystem benefit will result over and above the environmental standards required by traditional permitting.

Who is signing the Agreement?

The Agreement is between the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and The St. Joe Company. DEP sought input from other state and federal agencies including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service and Northwest Florida Water Management District.

Why is Florida using an Ecosystem Management Agreement?

The St. Joe Company has extensive landholdings in Northwest Florida, some of which are earmarked for development where dredge and fill and stormwater permits are required. Rather than have St. Joe pursue separate permits for each development, an Ecosystem Management Agreement allows an efficient and comprehensive evaluation of development impacts and results in a development plan that achieves greater sustainability for natural resources.

What does the Agreement do?

The Agreement provides stringent requirements for minimizing impacts to wetlands, wetland mitigation, habitat conservation and stormwater management during residential, commercial and recreational development. It authorizes dredge and fill activities and construction and maintenance of stormwater facilities associated with building roads, homes, shopping centers and communities.

Additionally, the Agreement coordinates the regulatory responsibilities of DEP and the Corps in partnership with public and private interests.

How wide an area does the Agreement cover?

The Agreement encompasses 31,369 acres of St. Joe Company property in Bay and Walton Counties, including the City of Panama City Beach and Westbay Township. The area is bordered by the Intracoastal Waterway to the north; U.S. Highway 98 to the south; St. Andrew Bay to the east and Peach Creek to the west.

The Agreement also includes two mitigation banks covering 7,686 acres. These large, regionally significant areas are set aside for environmental restoration and enhancement, which is conducted in advance of permitted projects.

Why is the Agreement beneficial?

The Agreement provides substantial net environmental benefits and higher standards for stormwater treatment and flood prevention than current regulatory requirements. The plan will result in greater regional conservation that maintains biological diversity, protects waterways and uplands, provides habitat for threatened wildlife, establishes conservation corridors and creates open space for recreation.

How much land is St. Joe setting aside for conservation?

St. Joe is conserving 10 areas of high quality habitat comprising more than 13,000 acres. The areas, known as “Conservation Units”, create a two-pronged “Bay to Bay” wildlife corridor and preserve the ecological integrity of two of Northwest Florida’s most rapidly developing watersheds.

The Conservation Units create greenways stretching from St. Andrew Bay to Point Washington State Forest and from the Devil’s Swamp mitigation bank to public lands that connect to the Choctawhatchee floodplain and Bay. The conservation areas also protect wetlands, waterways and wildlife near Lake Powell -- an Outstanding Florida Water.

How were the Conservation Units identified?

Areas were selected for conservation based on regional significance, biological diversity, water quality, essential fish habitat and marine resources. The conservation areas are reserved from development and may be used on a limited basis for recreation and to enhance and restore wetlands, and maintain roads.

How are impacts to wetlands minimized?

Together with wetlands preserved in the Conservation Units, impacts to low quality wetlands outside of the Conservation Units shall not exceed 20 percent of the total low quality wetlands. Additionally, high quality wetlands would be preserved and would be filled only when needed for road or bridge crossings. To further protect high quality wetlands and Lake Powell, natural land buffers will be maintained adjacent to developable areas.

How will St. Joe offset impacts to wetlands during development?

Impacts to wetlands will be offset with wetland restoration or enhancement within mitigation banks, Conservation Units or the project area. Together with the conservation areas, the mitigation banks create a 20,760 acre wildlife corridor linking public land from Choctawhatchee Bay to St. Andrew Bay.

The mitigation banks and conservation areas will be preserved through perpetual conservation easements, which allow property owners limited use of the land while protecting it from development.

Is there an opportunity for public input?

Yes. Over the last five months, DEP held two public meetings to answer questions and provide information about the Agreement. The public now has 14 days to review the Agreement before it becomes final. In addition, each individual development project requires approval and must meet the terms of the Agreement. All approvals will be noticed in a regional newspaper.

A copy of the Agreement is available at DEP's Panama City Branch Office, 2353 Jenks Avenue, Panama City or for more information, visit www.dep.state.fl.us/northwest.