



U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Service approves the Big Pine Key-No Name Key Habitat Conservation Plan

Background In 1998, Monroe County, the Florida Department of Transportation, and the Florida Department of Community Affairs developed a partnership to develop a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) to protect threatened and endangered species and obtain an incidental take permit (ITP) from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) pursuant to section 10(a)(1)(B) of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (87 Stat. 884; 16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*).

Covering an area of approximately 7,000 acres, the Big Pine Key-No Name Key HCP will implement an important conservation strategy that protects the habitat of federally listed species including the endangered Key deer (*Odocoileus virginianus clavium*), endangered Lower Keys marsh rabbit (*Sylvilagus palustris hefneri*), and threatened eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon corais couperi*). The HCP also allows limited residential, commercial, recreational, and municipal development, including approximately 200 homes. In total, no more than 168 acres (approximately 2.4 percent of the planning area) of development is anticipated over a 20-year period.

Issue The HCP does not specify which properties will be permitted or when. These decisions will be made pursuant to existing Monroe County regulations, the Monroe County Comprehensive Plan, and the Rate of Growth Ordinance which implements conservation policies of the Monroe County Comprehensive Plan.

The HCP will aid in the recovery of listed species on Big Pine and No Name Keys because it directs development toward areas that have been already impacted and away from listed species habitat. It includes conservation measures to protect Key deer movement corridors and provide habitat mitigation at a 3:1 ratio. The acquisition and restoration of 504 acres of high quality habitat will maintain the deer population and benefit the eastern indigo snake. In addition, development will be excluded from Lower Keys marsh rabbit habitat, and a public education program will be implemented to address threats posed by free-roaming pets.

Status The Service prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) for this ITP request. A Notice of Availability was published in the *Federal Register* from May 23, 2005, through July 22, 2005 notifying the public of the availability of the HCP and EA for review and comments. The Service received nine requests for documents and ten sets of comments on this ITP application during the comment period. On June 9, 2006, the Service approved the HCP and issued the ITP.

Questions? You can obtain additional information such as Frequently Asked Questions at our website at <http://www.fws.gov/verobeach>. If you have specific questions or need special assistance, please contact the USFWS South Florida Ecological Services Office at 772-562-3909 ext. 345.