



United States Department of the Interior



FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Deepwater Horizon Gulf Restoration Office
341 Greeno Road North, Suite A
Fairhope, Alabama 36532

In Reply Refer To:
FWS/R4/DH NRDAR

Memorandum

December 4, 2023

To: Memorandum to File

From: Michael Barron, Deepwater Horizon Gulf Restoration Office

Subject: Grand Bay Land Acquisition and Habitat Management Addendum

Under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) Section 7(a)(2), each Federal agency shall ensure that any action authorized, funded, or carried out by such agency is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any endangered or threatened species, or destroy/adversely modify designated critical habitat. If a Federal agency determines that a Federal action will have no effect on ESA-listed species or designated critical habitat, then the Federal agency is not required to consult with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for purposes of ESA. This memo does not include any information or effects determinations for protected species under the jurisdiction of the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Based on our review of the project materials provided (see attached), we have determined that the action to construct a staging area is within the purview of the existing Biological Evaluation (BE) which was approved by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service Mississippi Field Office on April 5, 2017 and that the survey of the area concluded that no threatened and/or endangered species are found within the project area. Therefore, the proponent may proceed with the proposed action and must adhere to all the conditions delineated in the BE.

Should any project be modified in a way that could adversely impact species or habitats, this determination will be reevaluated as appropriate.

If you have questions or concerns regarding this action, please contact Michael Barron, Fish and Wildlife Biologist, at 251-421-7030 or michael_barron@fws.gov.

Threatened and Endangered Species Survey Report

Date of Event: 11/1/2023

Staff Present: Jonathan L. Pitchford, Jay McIlwain, and Nathan McGregor – Grand Bay Naonal Estuarine Research Reserve

Event Type: Threatened and Endangered (T&E) Species Surveys of proposed staging area and firelane

Summary: On November 1, 2023, qualified biologists from the Grand Bay Naonal Estuarine Research Reserve conducted T&E species surveys of a proposed staging area on Pecan Rd. (Stork Staging Area) and of an area selected for construcon of a firelane (Firelane). The following T&E species list provided by USFWS was inially considered for the Stork Staging Area Area and Firelane.

- Eastern Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis* ssp. *jamaicensis*)
- Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*)
- Rufa Red Knot (*Calidris canutus rufa*)
- Alabama red bellied turtle (*Pseudemys alabamensis*)
- Alligator snapping turtle (*Macrochelys temminckii*)
- Black Pinesnake (*Pituophis melanoleucus lodingi*)
- Eastern Indigo Snake (*Drymarchon couperi*)
- Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*)
- Green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*)
- Hawksbill sea turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*)
- Kemp's ridley sea turtle (*Lepidochelys kempii*)
- Leatherback sea turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*)
- Loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*)
- Dusky Gopher Frog (*Rana sevosa*)

Previous reconnaissance at the Stork Staging Area and Firelane has shown that there is not suitable habitat for several of these species and they would therefore not occur within these areas. These included:

- Eastern Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis* ssp. *jamaicensis*)
- Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*)
- Red Knot (*Calidris canutus rufa*)
- Alabama red bellied turtle (*Pseudemys alabamensis*)
- Alligator snapping turtle (*Macrochelys temminckii*)
- Green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*)
- Hawksbill sea turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*)
- Kemp's ridley sea turtle (*Lepidochelys kempii*)

- Leatherback sea turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*)
- Loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*)

The remaining T&E species that were the focal point of surveys in the pine savanna and flatwoods habitats being considered included:

- Black Pinesnake (*Pituophis melanoleucus lodingi*)
- Eastern Indigo Snake (*Drymarchon couperi*)
- Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*)
- Dusky Gopher Frog (*Rana sevosa*)

Stork Staging Area

Surveys began at 10:22 (CDT) and continued until 10:42 (CDT) and consisted of three passes through the 150 x 300 area selected for construction of a staging area (Figure 1). For each pass, surveyors slowly walked along transects oriented east to west approximately 20 feet apart. Visual surveys and passive listening were used throughout the survey period. None of the T&E species were found.



Figure 1. Location of Stork Staging Area.

Firelane

Surveys began at 10:57 (CDT) and continued until 11:45 (CDT) and consisted of a single pass through a 3,429 long x 30 wide area slated for construction of a firelane (Figure 2). The surveyors slowly walked side by side for the entire length of the proposed firelane area approximately 10 feet apart. Visual surveys and passive listening were used throughout the survey period. None of the T&E species were found.

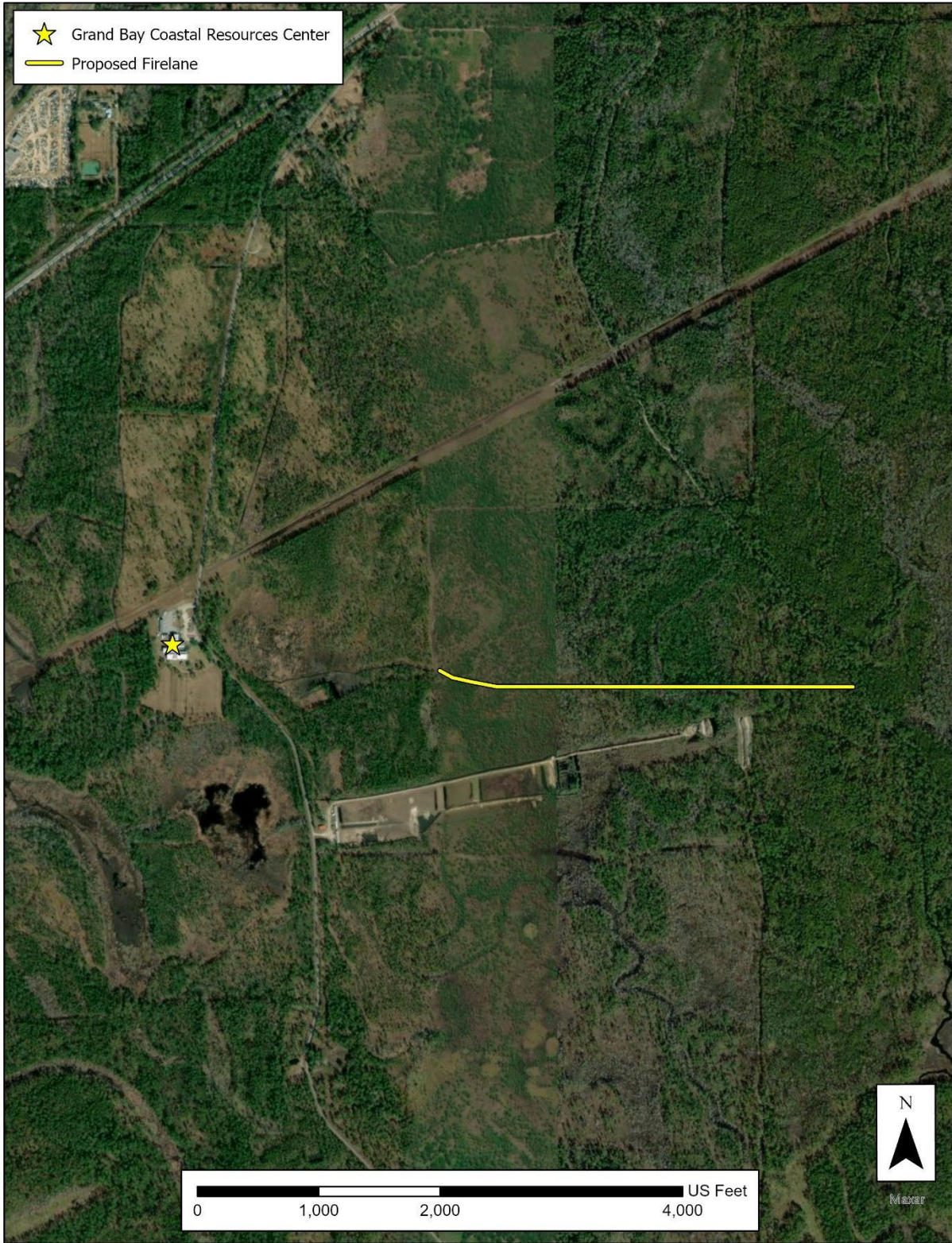


Figure 2. Location of proposed firebreak area.

Grand Bay NERR/NWR NDRA TSI Scope of Work

Introduction

The Grand Bay Land Acquisition and Habitat Management project includes a combination of acquisition and habitat management within the Grand Bay National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Grand Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR), and Grand Bay Savanna Coastal Preserve boundaries in Jackson County, Mississippi.

In coordination with the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources, the Grand Bay National Wildlife Refuge, the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality, and the MS Trustee Implementation Group, the Grand Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve has begun work to restore over 3,100 acres of wet pine savanna and wet pine flatwoods within an area historically called “Pecan,” in Moss Point, MS. Historical imagery from this area shows that grasslands dominated the landscape for most of the 20th century until the 1990s, when fire suppression led to increases in woody vegetation. This project was designed to reduce areal coverage of woody and invasive vegetation using combinations of mechanical, chemical, and prescribed fire treatments and thus promote recovery of native herbaceous communities.

Scope of Work

Timber Stand Improvement (TSI)

The goal of this project is to selectively thin the highly disturbed project area (see map) to reduce the amount of vegetation while allowing sunlight to reach the ground promoting herbaceous understory development. An insured and licensed contractor will use power tools and hand tools to minimize ground disturbance and negative impacts on soils within the project area. The contractor is also expected to take all necessary precautions to prevent the spread of invasive species throughout the project area. The contractor will only cut slash pine (*Pinus elliottii*) and loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) with a diameter at breast height (dbh) of six inches within the 244-acre project area. The contractor will ensure that longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*), live oak (*Quercus virginiana*), pecan (*Carya illinoensis*) and pond cypress (*Taxodium ascendens*) **will not** be cut since they provide food and habitat for wildlife and are representative species of the target habitats.

Firelanes

Firelanes are an integral part of wildland fire operations and habitat management at the Grand Bay NERR. An insured and licensed contractor, using low ground pressure heavy equipment, will re-open approximately 8800 feet of pre-existing roadbeds within the project area. The contractor will also cut a new firelane, approximately 30 X 3500 feet, along the southern border of the Johnny’s management unit. Before moving to a new area, the contractor will ensure that their equipment has been cleaned properly to reduce the spread of invasive species across the project area.

Qualifications

Each bidder will provide three professional references and proof of license and insurance. Experience with selective thinning for habitat restoration and knowledge of local flora is preferred.

