



Draft Environmental Assessment

**Construction of an Office Wing Addition to the
Visitor and Education Center**

at

J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge

May 2025

Southeast Region

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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This Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) (Service; 550 FW 3) regulations and policies, is consistent with the President's January 2025 Order and Memorandum. The Service has also voluntarily considered the Council on Environmental Quality's rescinded regulations implementing NEPA, previously found at 40 C.F.R. Parts 1500–1508, as guidance to the extent appropriate and consistent with the requirements of NEPA and Executive Order 14154. NEPA requires examination of the effects of proposed actions on the natural and human environment.

Proposed Action

Supporting refuge management priorities, the Service is proposing to construct, operate, and maintain an approximately 1,500-square-foot office space wing addition to the existing Visitor and Education Center at J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge (JNDDNWR) to replace offices that were destroyed during Hurricane Ian in 2022. Part of the Southwest Florida Gulf Coast National Wildlife Refuge Complex (Refuge Complex), the 6,406-acre refuge is located on Sanibel Island on Florida's southwest Gulf coast (see figures 1-2 in Appendix A). The proposed site is located on an existing parking area adjacent to the existing Visitor and Education Center and refuge headquarters with native vegetation along the southeastern side at 1 Wildlife Drive (see figures 2-3 in Appendix A).

A proposed action may evolve during the NEPA process as the agency refines its proposal and gathers feedback from the public, partners, Native American Tribes, and other agencies. Therefore, a final proposed action may be different than the original. The Proposed Action presented in this Draft EA may be finalized after the conclusion of the public comment period for the Environmental Assessment.

Background

Located along Florida's Southwest Gulf coast in Lee and Charlotte counties, the Refuge Complex includes the JNDDNWR and four satellite refuges: Pine Island, Matlacha Pass, Island Bay, and Caloosahatchee NWRs (Figure 1 in Appendix A). The JNDDNWR (Figure 2 in Appendix A) was established in 1945 as Sanibel National Wildlife Refuge and later renamed in honor of Jay Norwood 'Ding' Darling, the noted editorial cartoonist, conservationist, and first Chief of the U.S. Biological Survey, the founding agency of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The 6,406-acre refuge supports hundreds of species of wildlife and plants, providing protection for 15 Federally listed species, numerous migratory birds, and native wildlife and habitat diversity through a mix of habitats, including tropical hardwood forests, beaches, mangrove swamps, mixed wetland shrubs, salt marshes, open waters and seagrass beds, and lakes and canals.

The refuge holds several special designations, including Wilderness Area, Research Natural Area, Marine Protected Area, Florida Important Bird Area, and Outstanding Florida Water. Due to hurricane impacts and closures, visitation to the refuge in 2024 was 190,000, however average annual visitation has historically been over 800,000, which would be expected to continue into the future.

National wildlife refuges are guided by the mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS, Refuge System); the purposes, goals, and objectives of an individual refuge; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Department of the Interior policies; and laws and international treaties refined by administrative guidelines. Policies for management options of refuges are further refined by administrative guidelines established by the Secretary of the Interior and by policy guidelines established by the Director of the Service. Relevant guidance includes the NWRS Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the NWRS Improvement Act of 1997; Refuge Recreation Act of 1962; and selected portions of the Code of Federal Regulations and Fish and Wildlife Service Manual. Treaties, laws, administrative guidelines, and policy guidelines assist refuge managers in making decisions pertaining to soil, water, air, flora, fauna, and other natural resources; cultural resources; research; and recreation on refuge lands and provide a framework for cooperation between the Service and other partners.

The NWRS Improvement Act [16 USC § 668dd(a)] spells out wildlife conservation as the fundamental mission of the Refuge System; requires comprehensive conservation planning to guide management of the Refuge System; directs the involvement of private citizens in land management decisions; and provides that compatible wildlife-dependent recreation is a legitimate and appropriate use that should receive priority in refuge planning and management. Specifically, the Act directs the Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior to:

- Ensure that the mission of the NWRS described at 16 USC § 668dd(a)(2) and the purposes of each refuge are carried out,
- Recognize compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses as the priority general public uses of the NWRS through which the American public can develop an appreciation for fish and wildlife, and
- Ensure that opportunities are provided within the National Wildlife Refuge System for compatible recreational uses.

The refuge was established in 1945 by agreement through a lease with the state of Florida “...for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds” (Migratory Bird Conservation Act, 16 USC §§ 715-715r, February 18, 1929, as amended).

Secondary purposes were subsequently applied to the refuge, as listed.

“...wilderness areas...shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so as to provide for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character, and for the gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness...” 16 USC § 1131 (Wilderness Act)

“...suitable for (1) incidental fish and wildlife-oriented recreational development, (2) the protection of natural resources, (3) the conservation of endangered species or threatened species” 16 USC § 460k-1 (Refuge Recreation Act) “...the Secretary...may accept and use...real...property. Such acceptance may be accomplished under the terms and conditions of restrictive covenants imposed by donors.” 16 USC § 460k-2 (Refuge Recreation Act)

“...the conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions.” 16 USC § 3901(b), 100 Stat. 3583 (Emergency Wetlands Resources Act)

“...for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources” 16 USC § 742f(a)(4) (Fish and Wildlife Act) “...for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services. Such acceptance may be subject to the terms of any restrictive or affirmative covenant, or condition of servitude.” 16 USC § 742f(b)(1) (Fish and Wildlife Act)

Purpose and Need

In September of 2022, Sanibel Island was hit by Hurricane Ian. The category 5 storm sent a 13-foot storm surge across the island and damaged nearly every facility on the refuge. The purpose is to address the destruction of office space by Hurricane Ian where the first-floor office space at 1 Wildlife Drive was flooded. The need is evidenced by the serious and pervasive impacts on Sanibel Island from Hurricane Ian, including the loss of 1,500 square feet of refuge office space; the previously ongoing use of the now lost office space by Service staff, interns, volunteers, and researchers to support refuge management activities, including staffing the Visitor and Education Center operations and outreach and education activities; the currently crowded office conditions created by the loss of office space that forced the sharing of remaining office space; the temporary condition of some staff, interns, volunteers, and researchers not having access to workspace at the refuge headquarters and Visitor and Education Center; the need to have Service staff, interns, volunteers, and researchers centrally located in proximity to each other to efficiently and effectively facilitate coordination and refuge management activities; the subsequent decrease in the number of volunteer-led programs and activities; and the decrease in the number of interns that the refuge is able to support. Further, the need is also to meet the Service’s priorities and mandates as outlined by 16 USC § 668dd(a)(4) in the NWRS Administration Act, as amended by the NWRS Improvement Act; serve refuge purposes; and serve refuge management goals and objectives.

As one of the nation's premier refuges with high visitation and numerous visitor services and environmental education program opportunities, JNDDNWR provides opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational activities and provides education and

outreach opportunities to nearby communities and visitors from throughout the U.S. and from all over the world. The refuge aims to teach the next generation of conservation leaders and volunteers through proper stewardship, restoration activities, and management of refuge habitats; hands-on learning about biological communities; and the connection with the surrounding community and related recreational opportunities. To provide high quality opportunities for visitors and environmental education, including the over 800,000 annual visitors, the refuge needs sufficient support infrastructure, including office space, to support the refuge's and the Service's priorities.

Alternatives Considered

Alternative A – Continue Current Management (No Action Alternative)

Under the No Action Alternative, current management conditions would continue, and an office wing would not be constructed to replace the lost office space. The site location would continue to be a gravel parking area on the refuge. The refuge would continue under the currently inadequate and crowded office conditions. After Hurricane Ian and the destruction of the first-floor offices, many activities have been on hold or cancelled. The volunteers that used those offices are now located offsite, reducing coordination with Service staff and island partners, such as the city of Sanibel and Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF) and limiting refuge activities supported by volunteers such as outreach, education, and habitat protection. Staff members have been relocated to less ideal areas of the refuge, reducing effective and efficient coordination. The number of interns the refuge can support has decreased. These limitations are currently reducing refuge priority activities. Under the No Action Alternative, these limitations and reductions would continue.

Alternative B – Construct an Office Wing Addition to the Visitor and Education Center (Proposed Action)

Under Alternative B, the Service would construct an office wing addition to the refuge's Visitor and Education Center at 1 Wildlife Drive (Figure 2 in Appendix A) on the existing gravel employee parking lot (Figure 3 in Appendix A) to replace offices that were destroyed during Hurricane Ian in 2022. The Proposed Action was developed based on internal meetings with engineers, facility managers, and refuge staff. The Proposed Action was designed to meet Service needs while reducing long-term costs and safety concerns with minimal disturbance to the environment. The need and benefits of replacing the office was analyzed alongside the need to minimize long-term costs and habitat disturbance associated with the proposed replacement offices. A suitable site for the building was defined as one that is safe and accessible for volunteers; occurs in an already disturbed site; and minimizes visual or physical intrusions to other parts of refuge.

Under the Proposed Action, the project at the refuge would include the listed items below.

- The work site would be located just south of the existing Visitor and Education Center adjacent to the paved parking lot (Figure 3 in Appendix A).
- The new 1,500-square-foot wing would be built over the existing gravel staff parking area. See area photos and building layout in figures 3-4 in Appendix A.
- The elevated design would be at the same elevation as the existing Visitor and Education Center to prevent flooding.
- The office would have one single occupancy Americans with Disabilities Act compliant bathroom, a break room, six offices, an open office space with 2 cubicles, and a reception desk area; it would include internet and Wi-Fi capacity.
- Nearby water, sewer, and electric utilities would be extended consistent with designs and implementation that facilitate minimum disturbance.
- Safety requirements such as fire alarms would be incorporated.
- Construction would occur during daytime hours.

Since the Proposed Action would be built on the existing gravel employee parking area, removal of native species would not be anticipated. The proposed additional office space would provide Service staff, interns, researchers, and volunteers with needed workspace to support refuge management priorities and activities.

While the Proposed Action would indirectly support all refuge management goals and objectives, it would specifically support the listed goals and objectives (USFWS 2010b).

- Refuge Management Goal 1. Refuge Operations and Management. Provide sufficient infrastructure, operations, volunteers, and staff to implement a comprehensive refuge management program to protect and manage refuge resources and the natural and cultural values of Sanibel and Captiva Islands.
 - Refuge Management Objective 1.a(2). Within 10 years of CCP approval, hire four additional refuge-specific staff: biologist, biological science technician, law enforcement officer, and park ranger (environmental education/outreach).
 - Refuge Management Objective 1.b(1). As staff are added to the Refuge Complex, as visitation increases, and as facilities and other infrastructure are expanded, ensure that office, support facilities, and other infrastructure are sufficient to support Refuge Complex management, programs, staff, and volunteers.
- Refuge Management Goal 2. Partners. Foster strong and effective working relationships with existing and new governmental and non-governmental partners for the purposes of accomplishing refuge management goals and objectives and protecting the natural and cultural resources of Sanibel and Captiva Islands.

Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

The proposed site is located next to the refuge's Visitor and Education Center at 1 Wildlife Drive (Figure 2 in Appendix A). Wildlife Drive is located off Sanibel Captiva Road, which is one of the main island roads, with Causeway Boulevard and Periwinkle Way being the other two main roadways. During peak season, nearly 13,000 vehicles enter Sanibel Island daily with high resultant congestion (City of Sanibel 2016). The Proposed Action is on an already disturbed site currently used as an employee parking area (Figure 3 in Appendix A). The site is a gravel parking lot with sparse shrubs and trees. Existing vegetation around the site includes native, non-native, and invasive species, consisting of mostly grass and weeds. Some sensitive plants, such as coontie (*Zamia integrifolia*), are located just outside of the parking lot, and contracts include instructions to avoid all vegetation and adverse impacts. Monitoring would occur daily, and any adverse impacts would be addressed immediately.

The proposed office addition would be approximately 1,500 square feet and would be a raised to the second story structure to meet the height of the existing Visitor and Education Center and protect it from high water events. The small construction project would have a limited area of influence of 200 yards around the construction site, and any impacts such as noise and dust would be limited in spatial and temporal scopes to this 200-yard distance and the limited time of construction. Since this project would be built on an already disturbed area of the refuge, no land use changes would be expected. The structure itself would be raised onto pilings and would be located on an existing gravel parking lot; minimal ground disturbance would be expected.

The effects and impacts of the Proposed Action considered here are changes to the human environment, whether adverse or beneficial, that are reasonably foreseeable and have a reasonably close causal relationship to the Proposed Action or alternatives. This EA includes the written analyses of the environmental consequences on a resource only when the adverse impacts on that resource could be more than negligible and therefore considered an "affected resource." Any resources that would not be more than negligibly impacted by the action have been dismissed from further analyses. Table 1 below identifies those resources that either do not exist within the project area or would either not be affected or only negligibly adversely affected by the Proposed Action; as such, these resources are not further analyzed in this EA. Table 1 also identifies those resources that have the potential for greater than negligible adverse impacts; those resources are further analyzed in this EA.

Table 1. Potential for Adverse Impacts from the Proposed Action and No Action Alternatives

Resources*	Not Applicable: Resource does not exist in project area	No/Negligible Adverse Impacts: Exists but no or negligible impacts	Greater than Negligible Adverse Impacts: Impacts analyzed in this EA
Threatened and Endangered Species and Other Special Status Species		X	
Other Wildlife Species			X
Habitat and Vegetation (including vegetation of special management concern)		X	
Geology and Soils			X
Air Quality		X	
Water Quality		X	
Floodplains	X		
Wetland/Aquatic Species	X		
Wilderness	X		
Visitor Use and Experience		X	
Cultural Resources		X	
Indian Trust Resources	X		
Refuge Management and Operations		X	
Socioeconomics* ¹		X	

^{*1}Executive Order 14154, *Unleashing American Energy* (Jan. 20, 2025), and a Presidential Memorandum, *Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity* (Jan. 21, 2025), require the Department to strictly adhere to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321 et seq. Further, such Order and Memorandum repeal Executive Orders 12898 (Feb. 11, 1994) and 14096 (Apr. 21, 2023). Because Executive Orders 12898 and 14096 have been repealed, complying with such Orders is a legal impossibility. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service verifies that it has complied with the requirements of NEPA, including the Department's regulations and procedures implementing NEPA at 43 C.F.R. Part 46 and Part 516 of the Departmental Manual, consistent with the President's January 2025 Order and Memorandum. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has also voluntarily considered the Council on Environmental Quality's rescinded regulations implementing NEPA, previously found at 40 C.F.R. Parts 1500–1508, as guidance to the extent appropriate and consistent with the requirements of NEPA and Executive Order 14154.

Since floodplains, wetlands and aquatic species, Wilderness, and Indian Trust resources are not on the site or within the region of influence, they would not be adversely impacted and are not further analyzed in this EA. Further, since no or negligible adverse impacts would be anticipated for habitat and vegetation (including

vegetation of special management concern), air quality, water quality, visitor use and experience, cultural resources, refuge management and operations, and socioeconomics, these impact topics are also not further analyzed in this EA. While the Service recognizes that wildlife use of the immediate area could be impacted with wildlife temporarily avoiding the area during construction activities, short-term impacts associated with construction vehicles and transportation of materials would be expected during construction, and short-term impacts to visitors could be experienced such as additional noise and dust, these impacts would be limited in spatial and temporal scope and would be negligible.

According to Florida's Department of Traffic (FDOT) in a 2023 traffic count for Sanibel Captiva Road, the annual average daily transportation count was 13,800 (FDOT 2023). If the equivalent of 4 daily vehicles were used for construction, the addition would be less than 0.03% and would be short-term. Long-term adverse impacts from the additional vehicles regularly using the site would also be minimal, representing less than 1% of the average daily transportation on Sanibel Captiva Road.

No or negligible adverse impacts would be anticipated for cultural resources; while they are not further analyzed in this EA, additional context is provided. As a federal land management agency, the Service is responsible for locating and protecting all historic resources, specifically archeological sites, historic landscapes, and historic structures eligible for, or listed in, the National Register of Historic Places. This applies not only to refuge properties, but also to properties affected by refuge activities. For compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, the Service, during the early planning stages of a proposed new action, coordinates with the Regional Historic Preservation Officer, including providing a description and the location of all projects, activities, routine maintenance, and operations that affect ground and structures, details on requests for compatible uses, and the range of alternatives considered.

The Service's Regional Historic Preservation Officer analyzes proposed undertakings for their potential to affect historic and prehistoric sites, and consults with the State Historic Preservation Officer, the relevant Native American Tribes, and other parties as appropriate. Under either alternative, we evaluated the potential for impacts on archeological, prehistoric, and historical resources. This care ensures that the refuge complies with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, regardless of the alternative. Both alternatives would work to protect cultural resources and would follow the same laws, regulations, and policies in relation to cultural resource protection, including during any planning, earth moving, maintenance, and management activities. Neither alternative would be anticipated to have adverse impacts to cultural resources.

No or negligible adverse impacts would be anticipated for socioeconomics; while they are not further analyzed in this EA, additional context is provided. Sanibel Island is largely an affluent older community. More than 59% of the island's population was reported to be between the ages of 65 and 84 (Headwaters Economics 2024). Almost all areas of Lee County report higher than the national average in education, including high school diplomas and higher degrees of learning (Headwaters Economics 2024).

Most of Sanibel's population report incomes of \$50,000 or more, and more than 22% report over \$200,000 annually, double the nationwide average (Headwaters Economics 2024). Given the affluence of the surrounding community and the small size of the Proposed Action, the Service does not anticipate any adverse socioeconomic impacts.

Certain threatened and endangered species and other special status species have the potential for greater than negligible adverse impacts under the Proposed Action. The Service conducted a Section 7 Endangered Species Act biological evaluation with draft findings of "No Effect" and "May Affect but Not Likely to Adversely Affect."

The draft Section 7 included findings of "No Effect" for the following species: Aboriginal prickly apple cactus [*Harrisia* (= *Cereus*) *aboriginum* (= *gracilis*)], beautiful pawpaw (*Deeringothamus pulchellus*), Florida bonneted bat (*Eumops floridanus*), tricolored bat (*Perimyotis subflavus*), West Indian manatee (*Trichechus manatus*) or its critical habitat, Florida panther (*Puma concolor coryi*), American crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*), eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon couperi*), green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), Kemp's ridley sea turtle (*Lepidochelys kempii*), Gulf sturgeon (*Acipenser oxyrinchus*), piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*) or its designated critical habitat, rufa red knot (*Calidris canutus rufa*) or its proposed critical habitat, , eastern black rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis ssp. jamaicensis*), Everglade snail kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis plumbeus*), and because they are not known to occur in the project area, nor does the project area contain suitable habitat for these species.

American Alligator: Alligators are known to occur in the freshwater sand cordgrass marshes to the south of the project area. This project could cause a temporary disturbance to loafing or feeding individuals near the project area due to construction activity noise. However, alligators are highly adaptable and mobile and will likely seek less disturbed habitat in adjacent areas during the construction activities. Once construction activities are complete it is expected that alligators will resume normal behaviors. Alligators occur throughout the island and are very habituated to human disturbances due to the urban interface and the high number of seasonal visitors to the island. This species was included in this evaluation due to the similarity of appearance to the threatened American Crocodile. The proposed project will have no effect on the American alligator.

American Crocodile: There are 2 American crocodiles known to be living on Sanibel Island at this time and both are females. However, these 2 individuals are frequently spotted in the Dunes Golf and Tennis Club approximately six (6) miles east of the project area. There have been no verified sightings of crocodiles within refuge boundaries since 2010 despite suitable habitat being present. If crocodiles are present in the adjacent wetlands, they are highly mobile and will be able to move from any areas of disturbance to more suitable areas nearby since the species is highly mobile and

adaptable. Therefore, the proposed action will have no effect on the American Crocodile.

Eastern Indigo Snake: Although the Eastern indigo snake historically occurred on the Refuge and on Sanibel, and were once considered common, none have been sighted within the Refuge in more than 24 years, last verified sighting was a road killed individual in 1999. Survey efforts for Indigo snakes have been undertaken by Refuge biologists and partner conservation organizations since 2003 and no individuals have been encountered on the island during these efforts. Indigo snakes have been recently documented on Captiva and North Captiva Islands, approximately 9 miles northwest of the project area but that was prior to the landfall of Category 5 Hurricane Ian in September 2022. There have been no documented sightings of eastern indigo snakes on these islands since this event. Although known to cohabitate with gopher tortoises, no gopher tortoise burrows have been documented in the vicinity of the project footprint.

Historically indigo snakes were found on the highest forested ridges and coastal scrub habitat within the Refuge. The project footprint lies within a disturbed area that once was the headquarters for a local utility provider and the surrounding areas are characterized by interior freshwater sand cordgrass marsh which is not a known habitat for the eastern indigo snake. USFWS standard protection measures for the eastern indigo snake will be used throughout the duration of this project despite the absence of the species for some time as an additional protection measure. Therefore, this proposed activity will have no effect on the eastern indigo snake.

Green Sea Turtle: The proposed project will have no effect on the green sea turtle due to the project location being over a mile from any marine or estuarine habitats.

Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle: The proposed project will have no effect on the Kemp's ridley sea turtle due to the project being over a mile from any marine or estuarine habitats.

Gulf Sturgeon: The proposed project will have no effect on the Gulf sturgeon due to the project being located over a mile from any marine or estuarine habitats and the project location is well south of the species documented range.

Aboriginal Apple Cactus: This species nearest known location is on Buck Key nearly 6.5 miles to the north and west of the proposed project location. This species is known to only occupy shell middens and carbonate dredge spoil mounds and there is no similar habitat type within the project vicinity. Therefore, the proposed project will have no effect on the aboriginal apple cactus.

Beautiful Pawpaw: The proposed project will have no effect on the beautiful pawpaw. This species has never been documented on Sanibel Island or the Refuge. This species inhabits poorly drained and xeric flatwoods, and this habitat type does not occur on Sanibel Island. The nearest known location of occurrence for this species is approximately 8.5 miles to the north/northwest on Pine Island.

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Crested Caracara: The crested caracara has not been documented on Sanibel Island nor within refuge boundaries. This species inhabits open plains and savanna habitats typically found inland of coastal Lee County and therefore is not expected in the project vicinity. Therefore, there will be no effect on the species from the proposed project.

Eastern Black Rail: The eastern black rail has not been documented within refuge boundaries nor on Sanibel Island. Dr. Kara Lefevre, Florida Gulf Coast University, conducted standardized surveys for eastern black rails in April of 2022. The survey efforts failed to produce any indications of the presence of eastern black rails on the island. Habitats adjacent to the project location could be utilized by eastern black rails but is unlikely due to their historical absence from occurring on Sanibel Island. Therefore, since the presence of eastern black rails within the vicinity of the project footprint is highly unlikely there will be no effects to this species from the proposed project.

Everglade Snail Kite: The Everglade snail kite has not been documented on Sanibel or within refuge boundaries. This species is typically found inland from the SW coast of Florida inhabiting freshwater lake and marsh habitats where it feeds exclusively on species of snail in the genus *Pomacea spp.* These habitat types and prey items are not found on Sanibel Island. Therefore, no effect to this species is expected from the proposed activity.

Piping Plover: The proposed project will have no effect on the piping plover. Piping plovers are found on beach habitats managed by the refuge and the nearest available habitat type to be utilized by this species is nearly 3.0 miles to the SE of the project vicinity. This species is a wintertime resident that utilizes the beach habitats for foraging and loafing. There is no suitable foraging or loafing habitat for this species in the project area.

Rufa Red Knot: The proposed project will have no effect on the rufa red knot. This species can be found within refuge boundaries in habitat types typically found in beach and estuarine mudflats where it forages and loafs. This species is a winter migrant and does not nest on Sanibel Island. The project vicinity does not support any rufa red knot habitat.

Florida Bonneted Bat: The Florida bonneted bat has not been documented on Sanibel Island nor within refuge boundaries. The island does not support suitable roosting habitats for this species. Partner biologists with the Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF) have been conducting acoustic surveys for bats on the island for several years and this species has not been documented during these efforts. Previous to those more recent efforts, SCCF had conducted additional surveys, and this species was not encountered. Therefore, due to the absence of this species and lack of suitable roosting habitat the proposed project will have no effect on the Florida bonneted bat.

Tricolored Bat: The tricolored bat is a candidate species for listing under the ESA. The species has not been documented on Sanibel Island at this time. Partner biologists with the Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundations (SCCF) have been conducting acoustic surveys for bats on the island for several years and the tricolored bat has not been observed/encountered during these efforts. Therefore, this project will have no effect on this species.

Florida Panther: The proposed project will have no effect on the Florida panther. This species has not been documented on Sanibel Island nor within refuge boundaries. The nearest known Florida panther sightings are in central and eastern Lee County, approximately 20 miles to the east at the closest documented observations. Sanibel Island does not support the needed habitat size or type required for this species nor the prey base required for the survival of the Florida panther.

West Indian Manatee: The West Indian manatee is found within refuge boundaries occupying estuarine waters where it feeds on seagrasses, mangrove leaves, and macro algae. The proposed project is not located within this habitat type. Therefore, there will be no effect to this species from the proposed project.

The draft Section 7 included findings of “May Affect but Not Likely to Adversely Affect” for the following species: Monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*).

Monarch Butterfly: This species is a candidate for listing under the authorities of the ESA. Monarch butterflies may be found within refuge boundaries. This species is highly migratory and mobile, and it is most likely using refuge lands in a transitory fashion. The refuge does not support any suitable foraging/egg laying habitats since species of milkweed that the species is reliant upon are not found in abundance due to the somewhat saline soils. Due to the species highly motile life history there is the possibility that individuals may come into contact with dust, equipment, or other hazards while navigating the project site during construction activities which could result in mechanical injury to the organism.

While construction, operation, and maintenance of the proposed office addition could have minor adverse impacts, the Service is unaware of any adverse environmental trends or planned actions that would adversely impact Federally listed species or other special status species. No significant short-term, long-term, direct, indirect, or cumulative adverse impacts would be expected for Federally listed species, critical habitat, or other special status species under the Proposed Action; only limited insignificant short-term impacts would be expected.

Other wildlife species, specifically bird species such as the American crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*), could use the area to roost; the Atala butterfly (*Eumaeus atala*) sometimes visits nearby host plants. After construction the crow would be expected to

resume roosting behaviors in nearby open grassy areas of unimproved parking lots adjacent to the facility. The Atala butterfly would be expected to continue to visit nearby hosts plants during and after construction activities. The Service is unaware of any adverse environmental trends or planned actions that would adversely impact non-listed wildlife species. While construction, operation, and maintenance of the proposed office addition could have minor adverse impacts, the Service is unaware of any adverse environmental trends or actions that would adversely impact other wildlife species. No significant short-term, long-term, direct, indirect, or cumulative adverse impacts would be anticipated for other wildlife species under the Proposed Action, including the American crow and the Atala butterfly. If any species were to be observed during construction in the project footprint the Service would take immediate actions to minimize adverse impacts.

Geology and soils have the potential for greater than negligible adverse impacts under the Proposed Action. While geology and soils would be adversely impacted by the construction of the proposed office, the site was previously disturbed, and the adverse impacts would be minor and limited to a small portion of the site. Since the structure itself would be raised onto pilings, minimal ground disturbance would be expected. The Service is unaware of any adverse environmental trends or planned actions that would adversely impact geology and soils in the project area. No significant short-term, long-term, direct, indirect, or cumulative adverse impacts would be anticipated for geology and soils under the Proposed Action.

Mitigation Measures and Conditions

No mitigation measures would be required since there would be no anticipated long-term adverse environmental consequences. Best management practices, such as sediment/silt containment fencing and water runoff retention, would be developed during engineering and design planning and followed as part of site preparation and construction activities to minimize any adverse impacts.

Monitoring

Refuge staff would monitor construction daily to identify any adverse impacts arising from the Proposed Action. On an ad hoc basis, refuge staff would monitor any adverse impacts that occur during operation and maintenance. As appropriate, measures to minimize adverse impacts would be undertaken if any unacceptable impacts were to be observed.

Summary of Analysis

The EA briefly provides sufficient evidence and analysis for determining whether to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). Below is a summary of the analysis presented above.

Alternative A – Continue Current Management (No Action Alternative)

Under the No Action Alternative, the office space lost during Hurricane Ian in 2022 would not be rebuilt. Current measures to support ongoing office needs would continue, including crowded office conditions. Activities currently on hold would be redesigned or cancelled. Current cancelled activities would likely remain cancelled. If the offices were not rebuilt, then staff and volunteers would continue under inadequate space conditions. Administrative, visitor experience, and refuge operations would continue to be constrained. No significant adverse direct, indirect, short-term, long-term, or cumulative adverse impacts would be anticipated under the No Action Alternative.

Alternative B – Construct an Office Wing Addition to the Visitor and Education Center (Proposed Action)

Alternative B is identified as the Proposed Action because it best serves the stated purpose and need and would best promote the national environmental policy expressed in Section 101 of NEPA. The new offices would replace the lost offices that allowed staff and volunteers a place to work on site, allowing for better and more timely coordination. The Proposed Action would allow the refuge's activities to return to similar levels prior to the Hurricane Ian impacts in 2022; it would support recreational and outreach activities by providing offices and workspace for staff and volunteers to implement refuge management priorities, goals, and objectives. No or negligible adverse impacts would be anticipated under Alternative B for habitat and vegetation (including vegetation of special management concern), air quality, water quality, visitor use and experience, cultural resources, refuge management and operations, and socioeconomics. While greater than negligible adverse impacts would be expected for threatened and endangered species and other special status species, other wildlife species, and geology and soils, these impacts would be minor and limited in spatial and temporal scope. As one of the nation's top visited refuges with more than 800,000 visitors annually, the refuge offers many sought after recreational opportunities and is home to diverse and unique habitat and species. Rebuilding the offices lost during Hurricane Ian would restore functionality, efficiency, and effectiveness, better supporting refuge management priorities, goals, and objectives. No significant direct, indirect, short-term, long-term, or cumulative adverse impacts would be anticipated under the Proposed Action.

List of Preparers and Reviewers

- Carrie J. Beeler, Program Manager, Office of Everglades Restoration Initiatives, Southeast Region, National Park Service on Detail to JNDDNWR
- Jacob Bowen, COR., Project Architect, USFWS
- Kathy Burchett, Area II Supervisor, National Wildlife Refuge System, Southeast Region, USFWS/Jereme Phillips, Deputy Area II Supervisor
- Cheri M. Ehrhardt, AICP, Natural Resource Planner, National Wildlife Refuge System, Southeast Region, USFWS

- Maena C. Angelotti, Natural Resource Planner, National Wildlife Refuge System, Southeast Region, USFWS
- Robert Gerwig, Wildlife Refuge Manager, JNDDNWR, USFWS
- Kevin Godsea, Project Leader, JNDDNWR Complex, USFWS
- Toni Westland, Supervisory Refuge Ranger, JNDDNWR Complex, USFWS
- Haley Messer, Archaeologist, National Wildlife Refuge System, Southeast Region, USFWS

Consultation and Coordination

The Service consulted with governmental agencies during design of the Proposed Action and during public review and comment on this EA, including the City of Sanibel (including Planning and Code Enforcement Department, Public Works Department, and Natural Resources Department) and the State of Florida Clearinghouse. Native American Tribes were also consulted, including the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, the Muscogee Nation, Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, and Seminole Tribe of Florida. The Draft EA will be made available for public review and comment for 30 days. A Public Information Bulletin will be posted on the JNDDNWR website.

All comments received will be reviewed in the development of final documents and any decision. All comments received become part of the official public record. We will handle all requests for such comments in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act and NEPA regulations in 40 CFR § 1506.6(f).

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<https://iris.fws.gov/APPS/ServCat/DownloadFile/220493>

Appendix A. Figures

Figure 1: Location of J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge

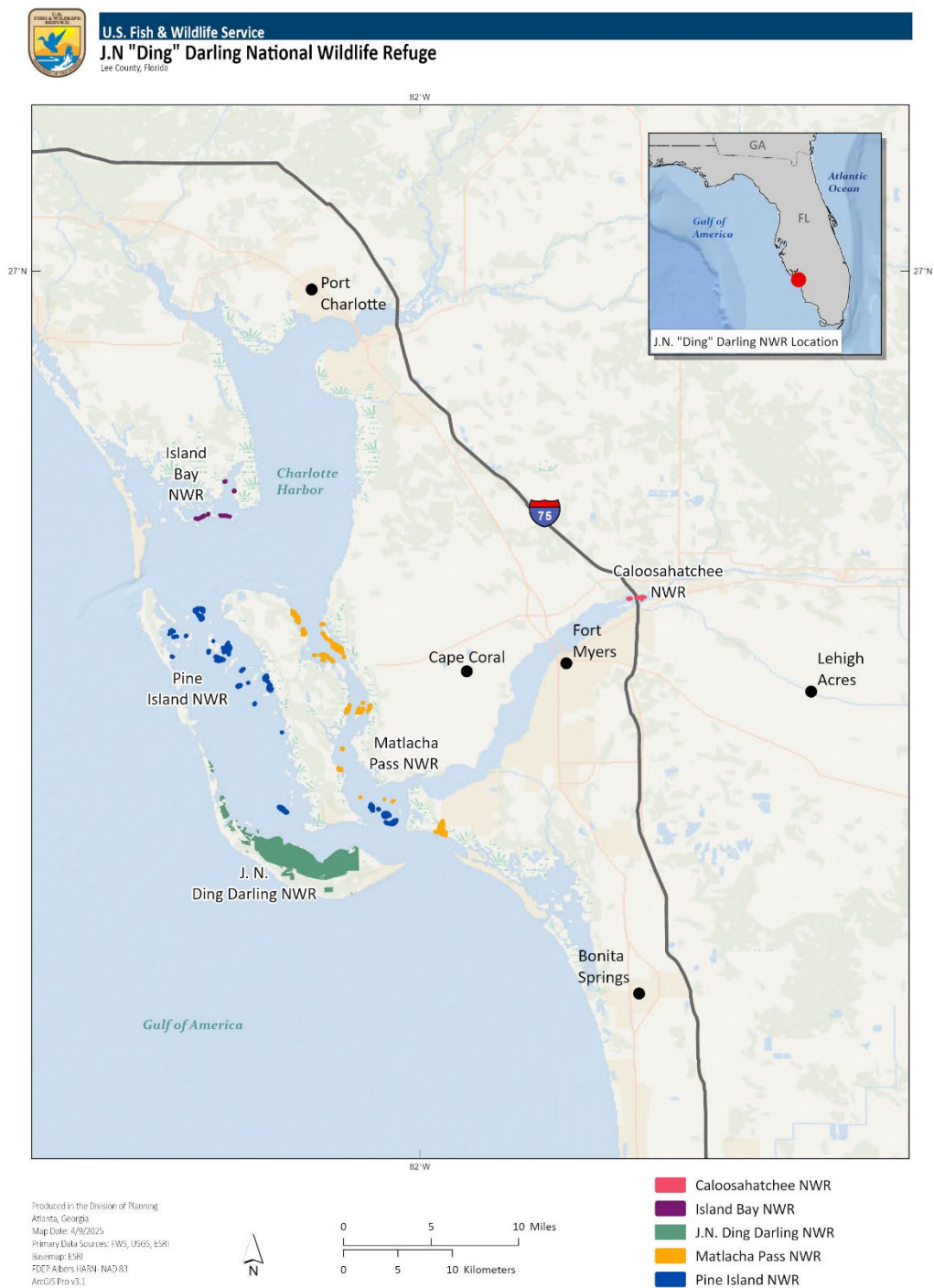


Figure 2: J.N. “Ding” Darling NWR

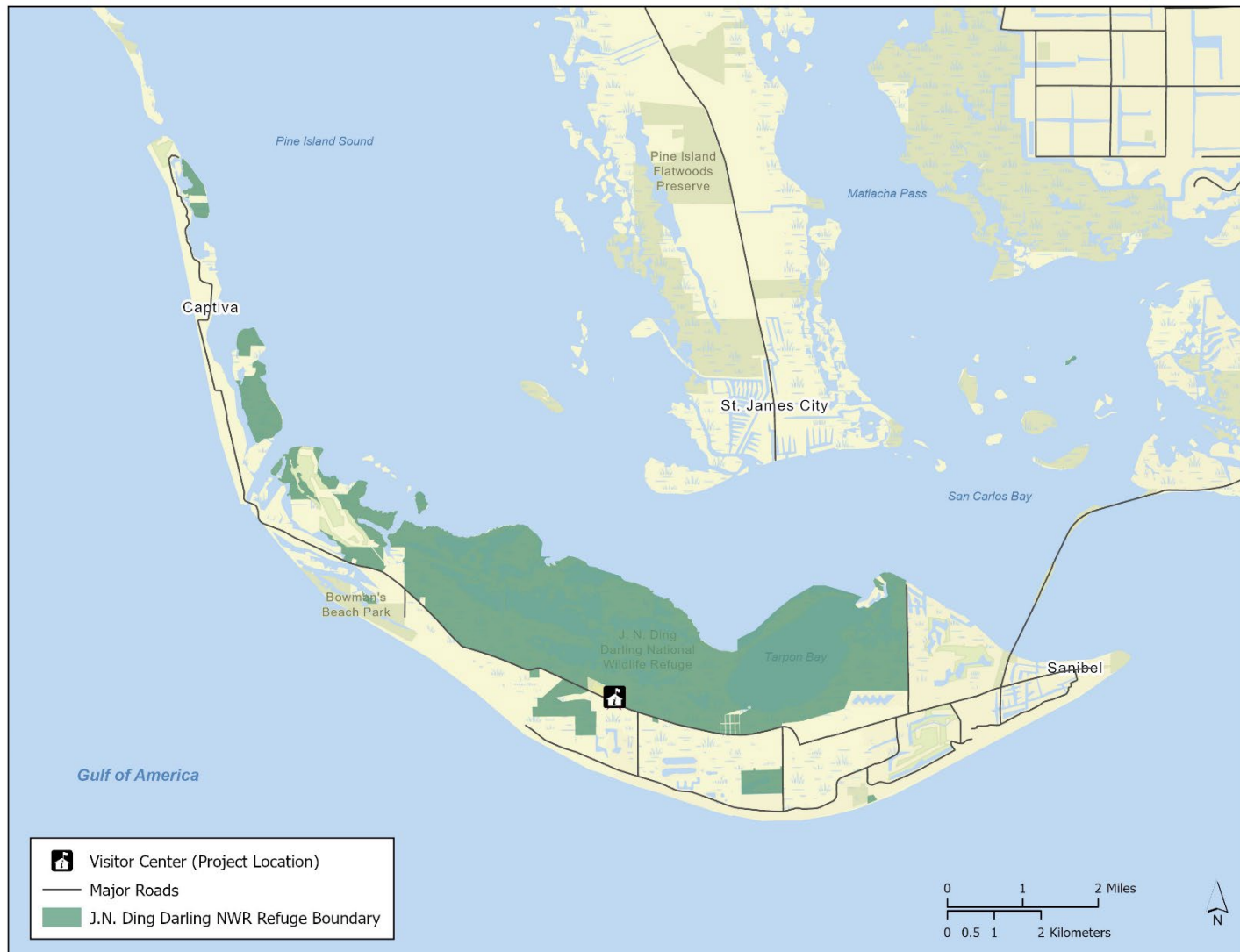


Figure 3: Proposed Work Area adjacent to the Existing Visitor and Education Center and on the Existing Parking Area at J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge Parking



Figure 4: Conceptual Site Plan, Bird's Eye View

