

Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area Visitor Services Plan



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Southeast Region
2020

EVERGLADES HEADWATERS
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE AND CONSERVATION AREA
Visitor Services Plan

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Summary

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) established Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area (Refuge) on January 18, 2012. The Refuge currently includes approximately 3,854 acres of lands that support public uses. The Refuge is actively acquiring fee-title lands through a willing seller approach that will connect wildlife habitats, help to protect water resources, and provide outdoor recreational opportunities for present and future generations.

This Visitor Services Plan (VSP) was based on the Conceptual Management Plan (CMP) approved as part of the Everglades Headwaters Conservation Partnership: Land Protection Plan for the Establishment of the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area (LPP) in 2012 (USFWS, 2012). It ensures that recreational uses on the Refuge are compatible with the National Wildlife Refuge System (System) mission and purposes of the Refuge.

The following wildlife dependent recreational uses have been determined to be compatible on the Refuge: hunting, fishing (including frogging), wildlife observation and photography, environmental education, and interpretation. Hiking/walking/jogging, off-road vehicle use (in support of hunting, and fishing), camping, bicycling, and horseback riding are supporting uses allowed under wildlife-dependent recreation. In addition, commercial recording, commercial tours, and pets on leash, are forms of non-wildlife dependent recreation that have been determined to be compatible in this plan.

An Environmental Assessment (EA) was prepared as part of the draft VSP, based-on and bridging-from the recently developed 2012 Everglades Headwaters Conservation Partnership: Final Environmental Assessment for the Establishment of the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area (Establishment EA - USFWS 2012) to inform the public of the possible environmental consequences of implementing the VSP for the Refuge outlining management alternatives, rationale for selecting the preferred alternative, a discussion of the environmental effects of the preferred alternative and the potential adverse effects of the action in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. As part of the NEPA planning process, the Service consulted with the State of Florida, Tribes, and with the USFWS Ecological Services office, as further detailed in the EA. See Appendix E for the Intra-Service Endangered Species Act (ESA) Section 7 Consultation.

The Service is actively acquiring fee-title lands, through a willing-seller approach identified in the 2012 LPP and providing appropriate and compatible public recreational opportunities on these lands is one of the goals of the Refuge. All fee-title lands acquired will be evaluated for their potential to offer public use opportunities outlined in this VSP through consultation with the Tribes, Service imperiled species and cultural resources experts, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), and other state and local agencies, where appropriate.

I. Background Information

A. REFUGE PURPOSE

Emphasizing management of fish and wildlife resources, migratory birds, listed species, and wetlands, protecting the important fish and wildlife resources of this landscape, and providing compatible outdoor recreation, the listed purposes have been developed for the establishment of the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge Conservation Area (EHNWR or Refuge), a unit of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). These purposes were developed as part of the Land Protection Plan (LPP) that established the Refuge on January 18, 2012 (USFWS 2012).

"... conservation, management, and ... restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats ... for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans..." 16 U.S.C. 668dd(a)(2) (National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act)

"...to conserve (A) fish or wildlife which are listed as endangered species or threatened species...or (B) plants..." 16 U.S.C. 1534 (Endangered Species Act of 1973)

"...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 U.S.C. 3901(b), 100 Stat. 3583 (Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986)

"...for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds...." 16 U.S.C. 715d (Migratory Bird Conservation 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 U.S.C. 742f(b)(1) "...for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources..." 16 U.S.C. 742f(a)(4), (Secretarial powers to implement laws related to fish and wildlife) (Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956)

"...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 U.S.C. 460k-1 "... 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 U.S.C. 460k-2 [Refuge Recreation Act (16 U.S.C. 460k- 460k-4), as amended]

The Refuge lies in the Lake Okeechobee watershed of south-central Florida, a largely rural area that has a long history of hunting, fishing, and many other forms of outdoor recreation, cattle ranching, agriculture, and forestry. The Lake Okeechobee watershed includes the Kissimmee River Basin, as well as several other sub-watersheds that drain to the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Everglades. As further detailed in the LPP, major habitat types in

consist of sandhill and scrub; freshwater wetlands; prairies; mesic, scrubby, and hydric pine flatwoods; and pasture.

Wildlife supported by the Refuge include various amphibians and reptiles that tend to stay in localized areas to wide-ranging species such as Florida black bear. Numerous bird species, both resident and migratory, utilize project area habitats for foraging, loafing, and breeding. Common mammal species include white-tailed deer and a host of other mammals, including raccoon, opossum, various rodents, and bats. Area waters provide habitat for at least 50 fish species, most of which are found across peninsular Florida. More than 400 amphibian, reptile, bird, and mammal species have been identified within the Kissimmee River Basin, and the Refuge could support many of these species. Furthermore, there are 43 federally listed or candidate plant and animal species, and 161 state listed species that may be present in the Kissimmee River Basin, some of which are currently protected by existing Refuge lands.

The vision for the Refuge as outlined in the Refuge LPP is to conserve, protect, and manage one of the great grassland and savanna landscapes of eastern North America for current and future generations, protecting the important wildlife and habitats of the working rural landscape of central Florida's Kissimmee River basin that is home to abundant fish and wildlife resources; that is vital to restoration and protection of the water quantity and quality for the Everglades ecosystem; that is resilient to the effects of global climate change; and that offers outdoor recreational opportunities important to the region's economy.

The LPP describes four overarching goals developed for the Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area that are intentionally broad, descriptive statements of the desired future conditions. They embrace the purposes and vision statement. The goals address: 1) a functional conservation landscape; 2) habitat for fish and wildlife; 3) enhanced water quantity, quality, and storage; and 4) wildlife-dependent recreation and education.

Goal 4 - Wildlife-dependent Recreation and Education of the LPP - describes the Refuge's commitment to provide outdoor recreational opportunities for the public to enjoy. Specifically envisions that 'Refuge visitors of all abilities will enjoy opportunities for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation, while increasing knowledge of and support for conservation of the important grassland and savanna landscapes of the headwaters of the Everglades.' (USFWS 2012).

B. VISITOR SERVICES PROGRAM PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF PLAN

The purpose of Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area (NWR or Refuge) visitor services program is to foster understanding and instill appreciation of the fish, wildlife, and plants and their conservation by providing the public with safe, appropriate, and compatible wildlife-dependent recreational and educational programs and activities.

In 1997, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act (Improvement Act) which identified six priority wildlife-dependent public use activities and programs that are compatible with the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. These uses include hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation.

The purpose of the visitor services program is to connect visitors with the Refuge's fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats through safe, high quality, appropriate, and compatible wildlife-dependent recreational and educational programs and activities. This Visitor Services Plan (VSP or Plan) was prepared based upon these guidelines. With the adoption and implementation of a future Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and this step-down plan, all public use activities and programs on the Refuge would be in conformance with national guidelines and would ensure that all visitor activities are compatible with the Refuge's overarching wildlife mission and purposes.

The purpose of the VSP is to establish priorities and identify opportunities, which will guide the Refuge's visitor services program over the next fifteen years. The Refuge was established on January 18, 2012 (USFWS 2012), and a CCP has not been developed. The Conceptual Management Plan (CMP), an appendix of the LPP, outlines visitor services goals and objectives, and interim compatible public uses on newly acquired lands. A Hunting and Fishing Plan, which is a step-down plan from this VSP, has also been prepared (Appendix A). The VSP addresses compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses on the Refuge, including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation. The VSP also addresses several uses that support or facilitate wildlife-dependent uses, including camping, horseback riding, ORV use (in support of hunting and fishing), bicycling, and hiking/backpacking/jogging. In addition, commercial recording, commercial tours, and pets on leash, are forms of non-wildlife dependent recreation that have been determined to be compatible in this plan.

Currently, outdoor recreational opportunities are available to the public on Refuge fee-title lands as administered through the Refuge's CMP. The CMP includes goals and objectives for wildlife-dependent and other public uses and related recreational activities that were analyzed for their compatibility with Refuge purposes. Furthermore, the potential environmental impacts of compatible recreational opportunities were evaluated in the associated Environmental Assessment (USFWS 2012). The CMP provides further details on the Service's Preferred Alternative and how the lands identified therein will be administered (USFWS 2012). The LPP and Final EA examine the feasibility of establishing the Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area in the upper Everglades watershed. In Chapter III of the Final EA for the Establishment of the Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area, three alternatives for a potential refuge are described, with Alternative C (Conservation Partnership Approach) presented as the Service's preferred management action (USFWS, 2012). The LPP lists all parcels in conservation focal areas that could potentially be acquired in fee from willing sellers. Imperiled species presence, habitat types, and other attributes associated with each parcel were considered in developing the conservation focal areas.

The Service is actively acquiring fee-title lands, through a willing-seller approach, and providing appropriate and compatible outdoor recreational opportunities on these lands is one of the goals of the Refuge. All new fee-title lands acquired will be evaluated for their potential to offer public use opportunities outlined in this VSP through consultation with the Tribes, Service imperiled species and cultural resources experts, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), and other state and local agencies, where appropriate. Additionally, a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis will be conducted, and it is expected that the compatible public uses outlined in this plan will likely meet the criteria for Categorical Exclusion for each new tract of fee-title land. Outdoor recreational opportunities for all new fee-title units would be consistent with and therefore provided for through this VSP. Outdoor recreational opportunities as expressed in the VSP will be evaluated for each additional fee-title unit acquired for the Refuge. The process to provide outdoor recreational opportunities will remain consistent across newly acquired fee-title lands as analyzed and administered through this VSP and accompanying EA.

C. HISTORY OF THE REFUGE VISITOR SERVICES PROGRAM

The Refuge was established on January 18, 2012, and the first fee-title lands were acquired in 2015. Hence, the visitor services program is in its initial phase. Starting in 2015, public use opportunities were limited to youth hunts and wounded veteran hunts on the Arbuckle and Hatchineha Units. In 2017 and 2018, the Arbuckle Unit and Hatchineha Unit, respectively were added to the state's Wildlife Management Area (WMA) program.

Since their acquisition in 2015, the Refuge has readied both the Arbuckle and Hatchineha units for public use. In early 2016, the parking area and drive entrance at the Arbuckle Unit was enhanced. In addition, an informational kiosk was installed. A similar gravel parking area was provided at the Hatchineha Unit in 2017. On both units, trails have been maintained since the acquisition of these properties. Furthermore, several culverts were replaced or installed to maintain access to the entire units. The Okeechobee Unit (renamed the Kissimmee Bend Unit following release of the Draft VSP) was acquired in April 2019 and offers several miles of trails.

D. VISITOR SERVICES ISSUES, CONCERNS, AND FACTORS TO CONSIDER

Issues:

- All the Refuge Units are located in rural areas with low population densities. No public transportation to the units is available.
- A Friends group has not yet been established for the Refuge.
- Due to the geographic separation between Refuge units, there is difficulty in staff's ability to monitor visitor activity and maintenance needs in different areas.

Concerns:

- Local communities are only recently becoming aware of the Refuge, which means visitation and support are still relatively low.

E. THEMES, MESSAGES, AND TOPICS

Messages:

- Refuge personnel are working to increase the visibility of the Refuge in the local community and local support through conservation organizations, community groups, and private citizens.
- The Refuge anticipates increased public use and visitation as visibility of the Refuge increases and additional fee-title lands are acquired from willing sellers.

F. VISITOR FACILITIES

Trails:

Many designated trails exist throughout Refuge units. Trail and road facilities identified in this plan are not intended to represent all facilities and opportunities as additional designated trails may become apparent as a feature of the unit landscape, or additionally provided for through the life of this Plan. Visitors are encouraged to refer to the WMA regulations summary and associated map of a specific unit for the most up-to-date representation of designated trail and road infrastructure.

Arbuckle Unit

Most of the trails on the unit run along the boundary and are maintained for access and management purposes and provide fires brakes.

Hatchineha Unit

A network of trails branch-off of a large, well-maintained north to south grass road (Dairy Road) that bisects the site. All parts of the Hatchineha Unit are within 0.5 miles of this road and the maintained network of trails and fire breaks.

Okeechobee Unit

There is a main grass road that bisects the property from east to west. A second main grass road connects the center of that road to the center of the southern boundary. In addition, firebreaks are accessible and maintained throughout the tract - predominantly located along perimeter boundaries. The unit has been actively managed as a cow/calf ranch and several equestrian trails exist throughout the unit as well.

Parking:

Arbuckle Unit

A gated entrance exists and a parking area was enhanced with gravel and a boundary fence in 2016 on the east side of Old Avon Park Road. This entrance and parking area is located on the western boundary of Arbuckle Unit, just north of the centerline.

Hatchineha Unit

A gated entrance exists and a parking area was enhanced with gravel and a boundary fence in 2017 at the junction of County Road 542 (Lake Hatchineha Road) and the Hatchineha Unit's main north-south road (Dairy Road).

Okeechobee Unit

Currently, limited parking facilities exist on the Okeechobee Unit. Visitors can park along designated roads for access.

Signs:

Arbuckle Unit

An entrance sign developed in coordination with the Florida Forest Service (FFS) and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) has been placed at the entrance. Signs designating the property to be a refuge are posted per Service guidelines along the boundary.

Hatchineha Unit

An entrance sign developed in coordination with the FWC has been placed at the entrance. Signs designating the property to be a refuge are posted per Service guidelines along the boundary.

Okeechobee Unit

A sign developed in coordination with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), FFS, and FWC would be placed at the entrance. Signs designating the property to be a refuge are posted per Service guidelines along the boundary.

Camping sites:

Camping in this Plan is considered primitive, overnight cooking and sleeping accommodations at designated sites that facilitate access to remote areas of the Refuge that would otherwise be unavailable during priority public use activities such as hunting and fishing. Camping is only authorized in support of other approved refuge uses and to facilitate access to remote areas. Campsites will typically be located at the terminus of a designated trail. The Visitor Service Plan includes Appendices C and D, which evaluate the appropriateness and compatibility of camping on the Refuge and provide stipulations necessary to ensure camping is managed in a compatible manner consistent with the purpose for which the Refuge was established and with other uses provided for in this Plan. Since camping rules vary between units, consult the most current FWC WMA brochure while planning a visit.

G. VISITOR SERVICES MAP(S)

Figure 1: Arbuckle Unit location

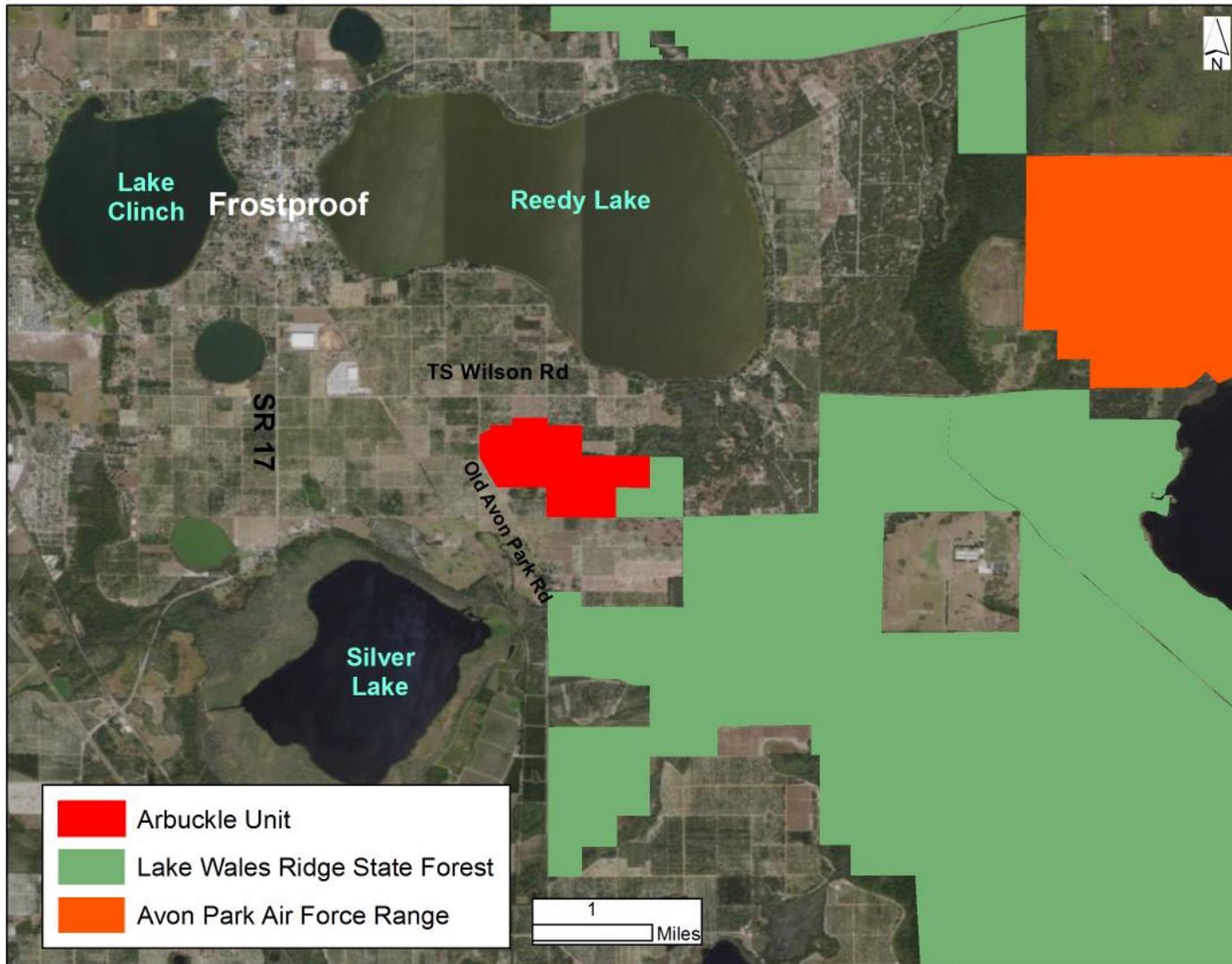


Figure 2: Arbuckle Unit entrance, parking, and trails

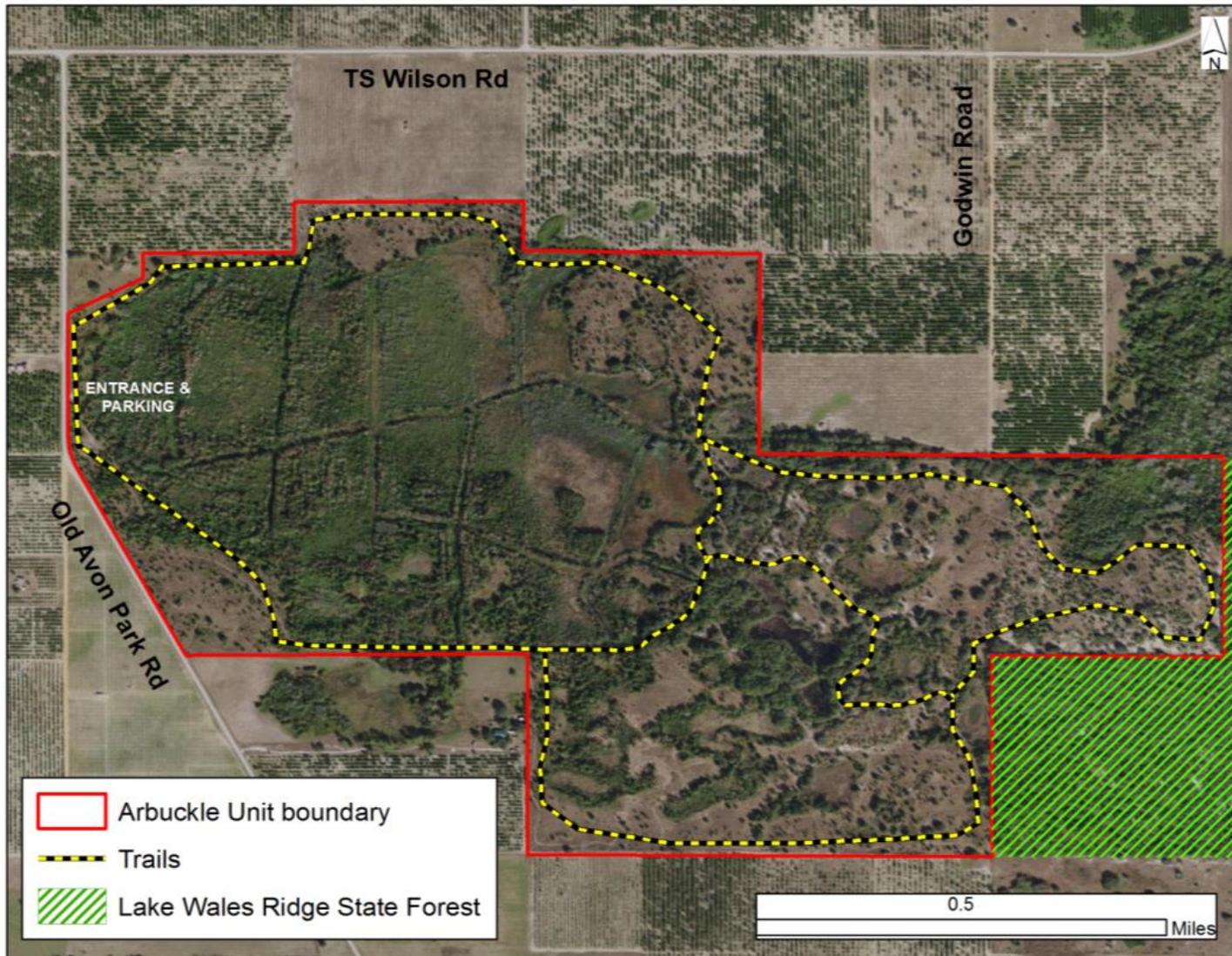


Figure 3: Hatchineha Unit location

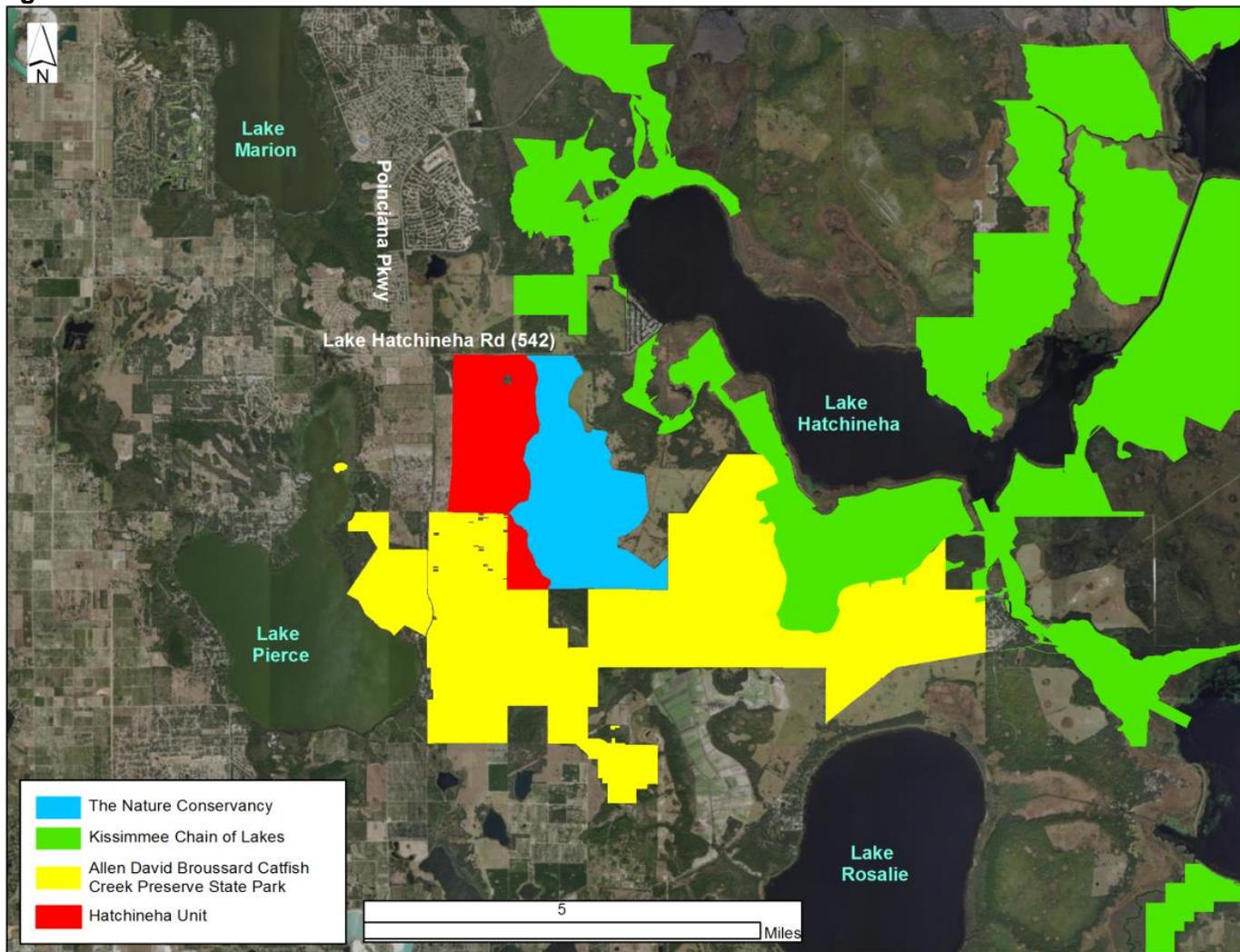


Figure 4: Hatchineha Unit entrance, parking, and trails

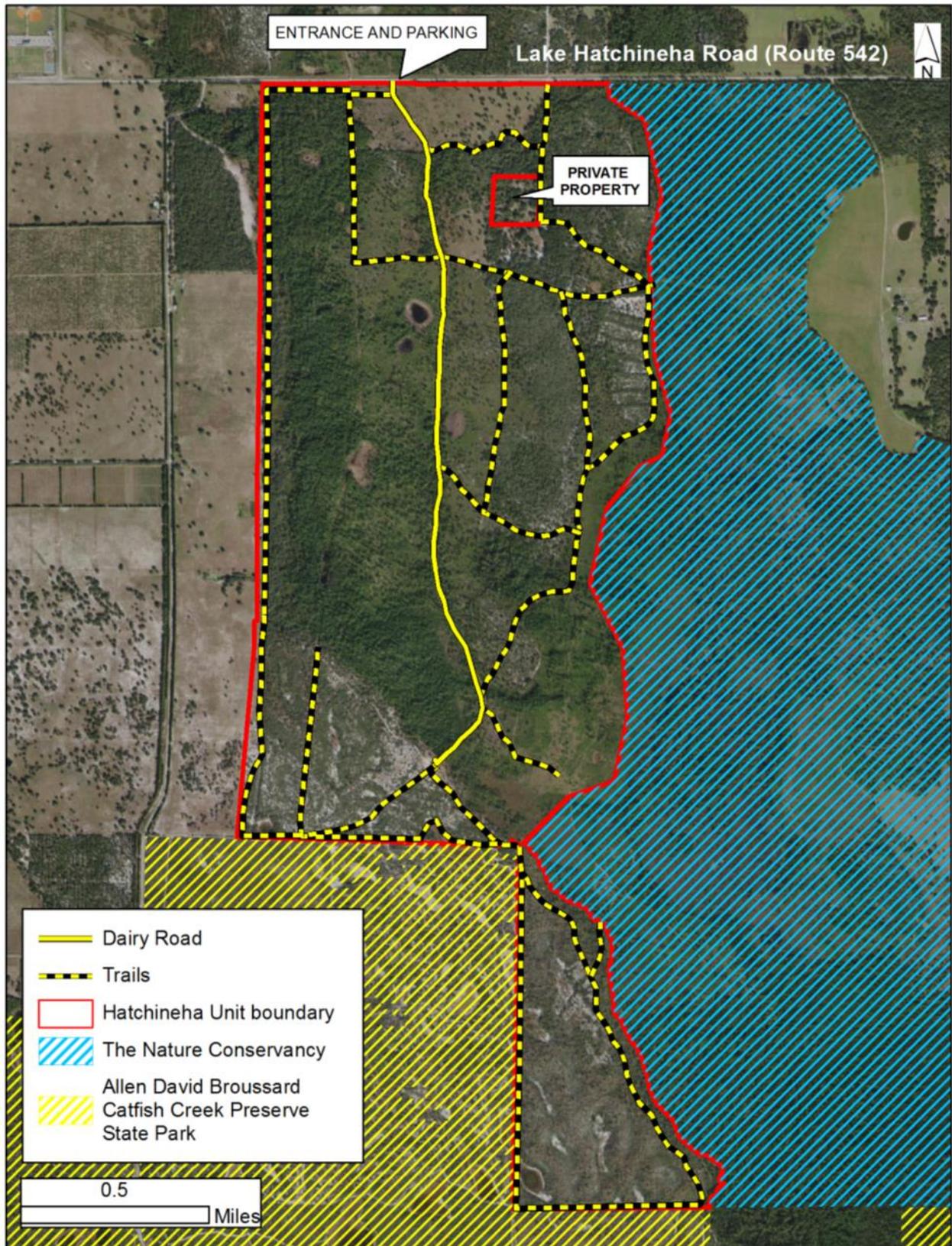


Figure 5: Okeechobee Unit location

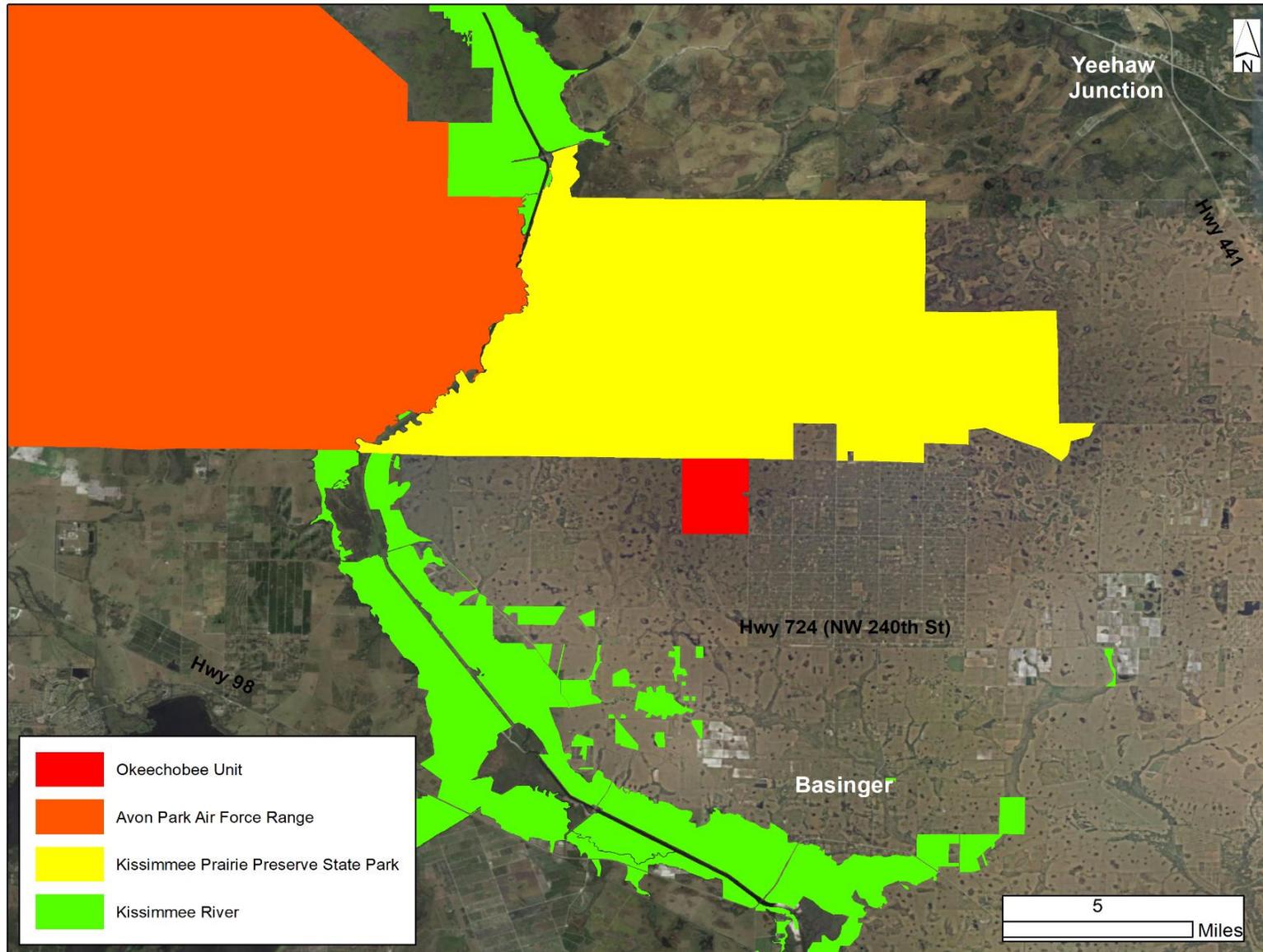
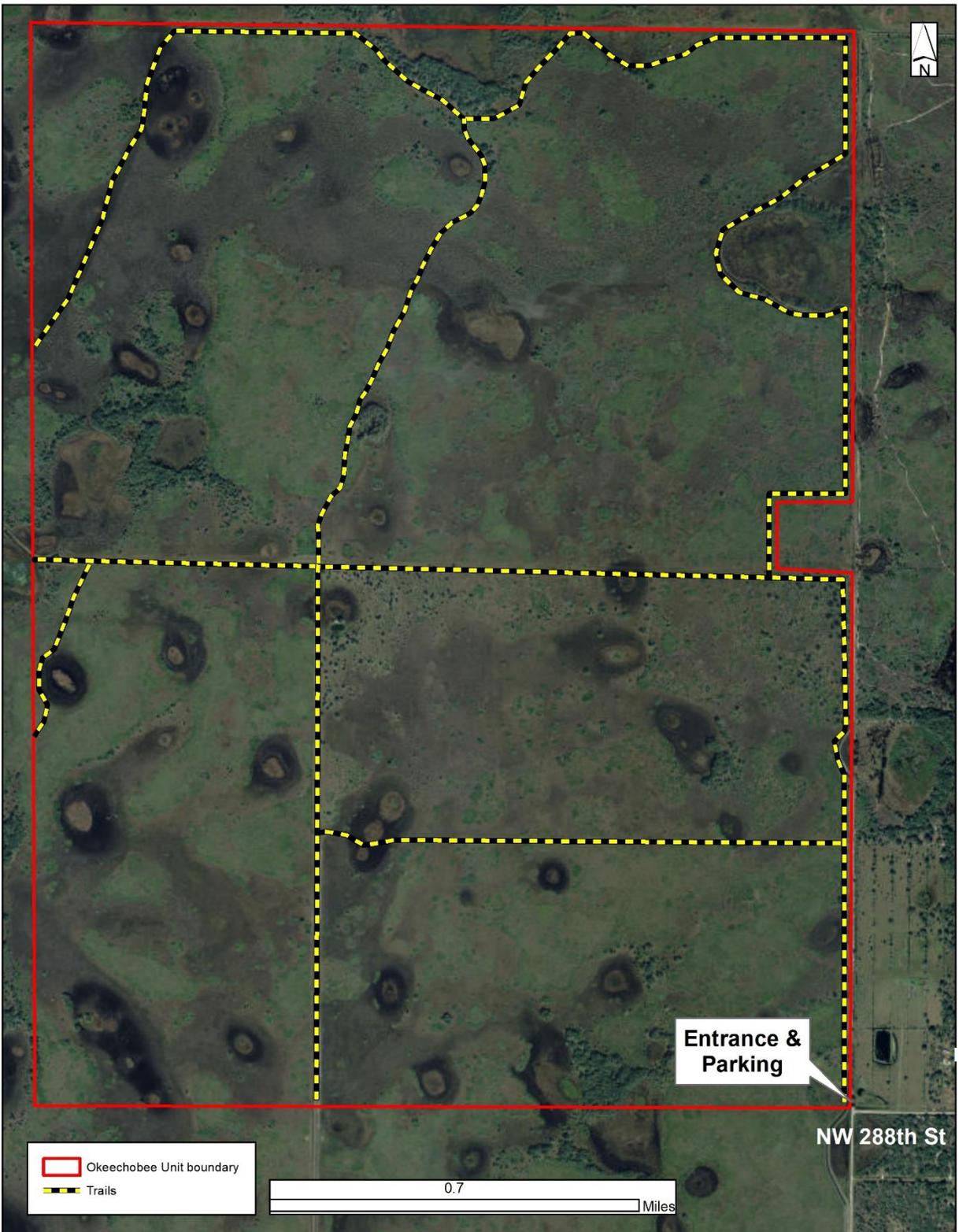


Figure 6: Okeechobee Unit entrance, parking, and trails



H. REFUGE VISITATION TRENDS AND IDENTIFYING AUDIENCES

The first fee-title lands were acquired in 2012, and while the units were being readied to accept visitors, several limited hunts (youth, disabled veteran) were conducted. Interim compatibility determinations were approved through the Refuge's 2012 Land Protection Plan (USFWS 2012a) and uses such as hunting and fishing on newly acquired units were provided for. During 2016, approximately 30 hunters and their guides/chaperones visited the Refuge. In addition, in 2012, the Service entered into a Memorandum of Understanding agreement with the State of Florida's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) for FWC to conduct hunting and fishing programs on Refuge fee title units through the WMA program (see Appendix F). The Agreement establishes our commitment to work together to establish hunting and fishing programs on Refuge lands, that FWC and the Refuge would cooperate together to evaluate hunting and fishing opportunities, and FWC would administer the hunting and fishing program on the Everglades Headwaters NWR (USFWS/FWC 2012). The Arbuckle Unit became part of the Arbuckle WMA in 2017 and provided hunting opportunities during the 2018/2019 season. The Hatchineha Unit was added to the WMA program in 2018, with hunting provided during the 2018/2019 season as well. The Okeechobee Unit was added to the Refuge in 2019 and will be added to the state's WMA program, with future hunting and fishing opportunities to be provided in the future. As mentioned previously, future units acquired by the Services would be vetted for addition into the state's WMA program.

I. VISITOR CAPACITY

Balancing the needs of visitors while protecting and managing natural resources can be challenging. In addition to resource protection, visitor capacity also impacts quality of experience for visitors. Visitor capacity is not only about managing the numbers of visitors; it is also about facilitating positive visitor experiences and limiting impacts to natural resources. Currently, the Refuge only has anecdotal data on visitor capacity, which appears to be minimal. Over time, the expected increase in visitation may require specific trails for various user groups (e.g. pedestrian-only trails), to minimize user conflicts and disturbance to natural resources.

II. Implementation Strategies

This section uses the format of fourteen Visitor Services Standards of the Service in correlation with the relevant CMP goals and objectives. Visitor Services related objectives may be found within other CMP goals (i.e. Fish and Wildlife Populations, Habitat Management, Resource Protection, and Refuge Administration). This process will identify existing CMP strategies and develop additional strategies that will form the basis of the Visitor Services Plan. The Refuge is actively seeking to acquire new fee-title lands from willing sellers, and it is expected that the goals and objectives outlined in this plan will apply to all future fee-title units that become part of the Refuge.

Table 1 lists all CMP goals and objectives that are relevant to Visitor Services:

Table 1: Summary of goals and objectives that relate to Visitor Services

<i>GOAL 1 - Develop a Visitor Services Plan</i>	<i>Objective 1.1 - Develop a Visitor Services Plan within one year of acquisition of acreage suitable to support visitor programs.</i>
<i>GOAL 2 - Welcome and orient visitors</i>	<i>Objective 2.1 - Within the 15-year life of this VSP: regulatory signs; visitor information and interpretive materials, including brochures and electronic media; interpretive and information panels; kiosks; and exhibits will be updated to comply with Service standards. All text will be written interpretively; illustrations and text on panels will highlight refuge resources and management goals and activities.</i>
<i>GOAL 3 - Provide hunting opportunities</i>	<i>Objective 3.1 – Immediately upon fee acquisition, work cooperatively with FWC to evaluate the designation of Service lands as WMA and provide hunting opportunities.</i>
<i>GOAL 4 - Provide fishing opportunities</i>	<i>Objective 4.1 – Immediately upon fee acquisition, work cooperatively with FWC to evaluate the designation of Service lands as WMA and provide fishing opportunities.</i>
<i>GOAL 5 – Provide wildlife observation and photography opportunities</i>	<i>Objective 5.1 - Over the life of the plan, improve facilities and add new ones to enhance opportunities for wildlife observation and photography.</i>
	<i>Objective 5.2 - Within five years of VSP implementation, improve the Refuge's recognition as one of Central Florida's premier birding and wildlife observation areas.</i>
<i>GOAL 6 – Provide environmental education opportunities</i>	<i>Objective 6.1 - During the life of the plan, facilitate at least two opportunities per year for educational groups or private/nonprofit environmental organizations to conduct wildlife-dependent field trips or informal educational events.</i>
	<i>Objective 6.2 - Within 3 years of suitable fee-title land acquisition, identify up to three sites suitable for development or restoration of facilities to engage the public in outdoor recreation and educational programs.</i>

<i>Goal 7 – Provide opportunities for interpretation</i>	<i>Objective 7.1 - During the life of this plan, provide an average of at least three interpretive programs per year.</i>
<i>Goal 8 –Evaluate other public uses</i>	<i>Objective 8.1 - Over the life of the plan, assess all public use activities on the refuge to ensure that impacts to natural resources are kept at acceptable levels.</i>
<i>Goal 9 – Engage the public through outreach</i>	<i>Objective 9.1: Ensure all informational resources and staff-based services promote an understanding and appreciation of the Refuge’s fish, wildlife, habitat conservation, along with the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.</i>
<i>Goal 10 – Initiate and nurture relationships with volunteers and Friends</i>	<i>Objective 10.1 Ensure all public use infrastructure, informational resources, and staff-based services support effective volunteer and Friends programs.</i>
<i>Goal 11 –Provide opportunities for commercial recreational uses</i>	<i>Objective 11.1 Ensure all public use infrastructure, informational resources, and staff-based services support an effective Commercial Recreational Use Program.</i>

STANDARD 1: DEVELOP A VISITOR SERVICES PLAN

Policy (605 FW 1.14 A)

Refuge Managers will develop a VSP that addresses all compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses on their respective Refuge.

CURRENT PROGRAM DISCUSSION:

The Service anticipates finalizing the VSP during 2019.

STANDARD 1 GOAL(S), OBJECTIVE(S), STRATEGIES

Goal 1. Develop a Visitor Services Plan.

Objective 1.1: Develop a Visitor Services Plan within one year of acquisition of acreage suitable to support visitor programs.

Strategies: This plan fulfills Standard 1.

STANDARD 2: WELCOME AND ORIENT VISITORS

Policy (605 FW 1.14 B)

We will assure that our Refuges are welcoming, safe, and accessible. We will provide visitors with clear information so they can easily determine where they can go, what they can do, and how to safely and ethically engage in recreational and educational activities. Facilities will meet the quality criteria defined in 605 FW 1, Section 1.6 of the Service Manual. We will treat visitors with courtesy and in a professional manner.

CURRENT PROGRAM DISCUSSION:

The Refuge units provide a range of visitor use opportunities, ranging from bird watching to hunting. None of the units has public accommodations, except for a parking area, kiosk, and trails.

STANDARD 2 GOAL(S), OBJECTIVE(S), STRATEGIES

Goal 2. Welcome and Orient Visitors: Visitors will feel welcome and find accurate, timely, and appropriate orientation materials and information on visitor facilities, programs, and management activities.

Objective 2.1: Within the 15-year life of the VSP: regulatory signs; visitor information and interpretive materials, including brochures and electronic media; interpretive and information panels; kiosks; and exhibits will be updated to comply with Service standards. All text will be written interpretively; illustrations and text on panels will highlight Refuge resources and management goals and activities.

Strategies:

- 2.1.1 Collaborate with FWC, FFS and other partners to install and maintain signs along units.
- 2.1.2 Collaborate with partners to develop content information for kiosks and brochures.
- 2.1.3 Continue to maintain and update website and social media page(s).

MONITOR AND EVALUATE:

- The visitor services program will be evaluated by each new resident volunteer, intern, and/or staff as they start their assignment, and at various intervals (e.g. 6 month, 12 month) thereafter.
- Monitor the comments provided by visitors on social media, (including analyzing meaningful metrics for reach and success), and via Refuge emails, and respond as needed.

STANDARD 3: HUNTING

Policy (605 FW 2)

Hunting is an historic use on the Refuge and throughout the landscape within which the Refuge was established, and an appropriate use of wildlife resources of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System), when compatible. Hunting programs will be of the highest quality, conducted in a safe and cost-effective manner, and to the extent practicable, carried out in accordance with state regulations.

CURRENT PROGRAM DISCUSSION:

The Service has a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with FWC, which allows both agencies to work cooperatively in the management of the Refuge's hunting program (see Appendix F for 2012 USFWS/FWC MOU). The MOU provides the mechanism for fee-title Refuge lands to be added to FWC's WMA system. To this end, the Service would continue discussions with FWC regarding management opportunities of the hunting activities associated with this proposal. If possible, the Service would provide American with Disabilities Act (ADA)-compliant and youth hunting opportunities. Generally, the Service would allow hunting, based on state hunting seasons and consistent with the Refuge's VSP, MOU with FWC, the current CMP, and future Comprehensive Conservation Plan, upon development. The Service would continue discussions and seek to establish suitable portions (e.g. of sufficient size) of the Refuge as state-managed Wildlife Management Areas. Currently, both the Arbuckle and Hatchineha Units have been added under FWC's WMA system, and future Refuge units would be added to the WMA program, as per the MOU, and associated hunting opportunities would be provided consistent with the MOU and the VSP.

STANDARD 3 GOAL(S), OBJECTIVE(S), STRATEGIES

Goal 3. Hunting: Hunters will enjoy hunting experiences that lead to support for Refuge management.

Objective 3.1: Immediately upon fee acquisition, work cooperatively with FWC to evaluate hunting programs and designation of Service lands as WMAs.

Strategies:

- 3.1.1 Request FWC to evaluate each new Refuge tract for its hunting opportunities.
- 3.1.2 Deliver hunting program through existing Memorandum of Understanding including designating Refuge lands as a unit(s) of the state's Wildlife Management Area (WMA) program.

MONITOR AND EVALUATE:

- Work with FWC to evaluate all hunts at the end of each season.
- Hold an annual hunt meeting with stakeholders to collaborate with and share status and updates of the hunt program.

STANDARD 4: FISHING

Policy (605 FW 3)

Fishing is an appropriate use of the Refuge System, when compatible. Fishing programs will be of the highest quality, conducted in a safe and cost-effective manner, and to the extent practicable, carried out in accordance with state regulations.

CURRENT PROGRAM DISCUSSION:

The Kissimmee River and the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes, together, is a world-renowned freshwater fishery. Access to the navigable waters in this region is governed primarily by public and private boat ramps, which are numerous and scattered throughout the region. However, many of the smaller lakes and ponds do not have public access. The Service, likely working through the WMA program administered by FWC, would provide opportunities for fishing access that are compatible with the reasons for which the Refuge was established. A cursory review of the lands within the LPP planning units, that are important for the Service to conserve, reveals that the majority of shoreline and boat access to the major waterways is currently protected and managed by the State of Florida, thus providing the Service limited opportunities to increase fishing and boating access to these areas. For future units where there are opportunities to provide fishing and boating access, the Service would work with FWC and other agencies and stakeholders, as appropriate, to provide access and fishing opportunities consistent with state regulations. The units currently owned by the Service do not border any navigable water. Bodies of water are small and often ephemeral, and fishing opportunities are limited by these conditions.

STANDARD 4 GOAL(S), OBJECTIVE(S), STRATEGIES

Goal 4. Fishing: Members of the fishing public will enjoy their fishing experiences, display ethical behavior, and support Refuge management.

Objective 4.1: Provide sport fishing opportunities to the public.

Strategies:

4.1.1 Collaborate with FWC to evaluate fishing opportunities on any new Refuge units acquired, as per the MOU.

MONITOR AND EVALUATE:

- Upon acquisition of units that have fishing opportunities, annually evaluate the program (e.g. based on user comments) and make appropriate adjustments as needed.

STANDARD 5: WILDLIFE OBSERVATION AND WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

Policy (605 FW 4 and 604 FW 5)

Wildlife observation and wildlife photography are appropriate wildlife-dependent recreational uses of Refuge System lands, when compatible. Visitors of all ages and abilities will have an opportunity to observe and photograph wildlife and habitat resources of the Refuge. Viewing and photographing wildlife in natural or managed environments will foster a connection between visitors and natural resources.

CURRENT PROGRAM DISCUSSION:

Combined, the current Refuge units (Arbuckle, Hatchineha, and Okeechobee) have over 30 miles of trails that are open to the public. These trails allow visitors to observe and photograph a diversity of habitats and associated wildlife. There are currently no photo blinds or observation towers. The Refuge would provide opportunities for wildlife observation and photography (see Appendix D for the compatibility determinations addressing these uses). Working with state and local agencies, the Service would study the feasibility of connecting existing hiking, bicycle, and horseback trails through Refuge lands.

STANDARD 5 GOAL(S), OBJECTIVE(S), STRATEGIES

Goal 5. Wildlife Observation and Photography: Wildlife observers and photographers will enjoy and value the diversity of refuge wildlife and will support efforts to maintain wildlife habitat.

Objective 5.1: Over the life of the plan, the Refuge will improve facilities and add new ones to enhance opportunities for wildlife observation and photography.

Strategies:

- 5.1.1 Develop quarterly schedule for mowing, herbicide application, and/or clearing of walking trails
- 5.1.2 Install at least one photography blind during the life of the plan.

Objective 5.2: Within five years of VSP implementation, improve the Refuge's recognition as one of Central Florida's premier birding and wildlife observation areas.

Strategies:

- 5.2.1 Develop outreach plan targeted to birdwatchers and other wildlife observation enthusiasts, focusing on seasonal abundance and migration trends, places to observe birds, and tips for ethical wildlife watching. Utilize press releases, Refuge web site, and other electronic media (e.g., birding list serves), as well as birding journals, and promotions with local chambers of commerce and tourism bureaus to reach this audience.

MONITOR AND EVALUATE:

- Monitor comments on social media/website and respond as appropriate.

STANDARD 6: ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

Policy (605 FW 6)

Through formal, curriculum-based environmental education tied to national and state education standards, the Refuge will advance public awareness, understanding, appreciation, and knowledge of key fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats. Each Refuge staff person will assess their potential to work with schools in providing an appropriate level of environmental education. We may support environmental education through the use of facilities, equipment, educational materials, teacher workshops, and study sites that are safe and conducive to learning.

CURRENT PROGRAM DISCUSSION:

For years, National Wildlife Refuges have been connecting children with outdoor activities. However, it is now apparent that such connections are of immense importance and that today, many children are spending less time outdoors and more time indoors watching television, video games, and computers rather than experiencing nature (Louv 2005). As the Nation's primary conservation agency, the Service has a significant role in addressing this concern. The Service would also have a strong incentive to promote children in nature activities along with our other conservation partners.

The Service would attempt to work with local school districts to develop environmental education programs featuring the unique species and communities of the Kissimmee basin, including contributions of ranching and farming to sustain a healthy environment and economy. The Service would work with partners to promote environmental education, thereby maximizing the use of resources and time commitments for each organization. The Service would also consider the role of the Refuge in other potential opportunities such as small habitat restoration projects through the use of our Partners for Fish and Wildlife program in and around local schools, docent-led trail walks, birding festivals, guest lectures, youth hunting and fishing efforts, and even simple monitoring of various forms of wildlife on and off the Refuge.

The Refuge does not currently offer a structured environmental education program that includes a written curriculum and periodically scheduled teacher workshops. None of the current Refuge units is easily accessible to school groups, due to their rural setting and lack of improved parking areas for school buses.

STANDARD 6 GOAL(S), OBJECTIVE(S), STRATEGIES

Goal 6. Environmental Education: Provide quality, appropriate, and compatible wildlife-dependent environmental education opportunities to promote understanding and awareness of the Refuge.

Objective 6.1: During the life of the plan, facilitate at least two opportunities per year for educational groups or private/nonprofit environmental organizations to conduct wildlife-dependent field trips or informal educational activities.

Strategies:

- 6.1.1 Seek at least two partners who may be interested in offering educational programs on the Refuge and set schedules for trial courses or activities.
- 6.1.2 Seek and develop agreements for environmental education support and opportunities from partners (e.g. National Wildlife Refuge Association).

Objective 6.2: Within 3 years of fee-title land acquisition, identify up to three sites suitable for development or restoration of facilities to engage the public in outdoor recreation and educational programs.

Strategies:

- 6.2.1 Examine the existing trails and sites adjacent to parking areas for feasibility to serve as locations for walking educational tours.

MONITOR AND EVALUATE:

- Solicit feedback from educators following a class or field trip.
- Require educators to provide lesson materials in advance of class or field trip.

STANDARD 7: INTERPRETATION

Policy (605 FW 7)

We will communicate priority fish, wildlife, habitat, and other natural resource issues to visitors of all ages and abilities through effective interpretation. We will tailor messages and delivery methods to specific audiences and present them in appropriate locations. Through heightened awareness, we will inspire visitors to take positive actions supporting Refuge goals and the Refuge System mission.

CURRENT PROGRAM DISCUSSION:

Currently, the Refuge's interpretive program is virtual, through its website and social media pages.

STANDARD 7 GOAL(S), OBJECTIVE(S), STRATEGIES

Goal 7. Interpretation: Enhance public understanding, appreciation, and support for protection of the Refuge's natural resources.

Objective 7.1: During the life of this plan, the Service will provide an average of at least three interpretive programs per year.

Strategies:

- 7.1.1 Host special events in conjunction with existing Refuge System and other established celebrations or commemorations (e.g., National Wildlife Refuge Week, Earth Day, and International Migratory Bird Day, National Hunting and Fishing Day).
- 7.1.2 Evaluate the feasibility of establishing an interpretive trail on one of the Refuge units and establish one interpretive trail, if feasible.
- 7.1.3 Work with partners to assist the Refuge with providing educational and/or interpretive opportunities

MONITOR AND EVALUATE:

- Monitor comments on social media/website and respond as appropriate.

STANDARD 8: MANAGE FOR OTHER RECREATIONAL USE OPPORTUNITIES

Policy (605 FW 1 and 603 FW 1)

The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, states that compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses are the priority public uses of the Refuge System (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation) and will receive enhanced consideration over other general public uses. Volunteers, partners, recreation fees, and concessions are tools available to assist in providing for and managing these uses. We will only permit other uses when we determine that they are legally mandated, provide benefits to the Service, occur due to special circumstances, or facilitate one of the priority wildlife-dependent recreational uses.

CURRENT PROGRAM DISCUSSION:

Where any of the priority public uses may conflict with the conservation of federally-listed, endangered or threatened species, appropriate measures (e.g., buffers and seasonal restrictions) would be identified and implemented to avoid adverse effects. This would be done in consultation with the Service's Endangered Species Program. Additionally, public uses other than the six priority public uses, such as horseback riding, biking, and hiking trails must pass the same standards of appropriateness, compatibility, and conservation planning. While activities such as camping and off-road vehicle (ORV) use may not pass standards of appropriateness and compatibility in and of themselves, these uses may be allowed as components in support of other compatible uses (e.g., camping in remote locations during hunting seasons, ORV access on designated trails and roads during hunting seasons). Appropriate use and compatibility determinations for non-wildlife-dependent uses such as camping can be found in Appendix C and D, respectively.

STANDARD 8 GOAL(S), OBJECTIVE(S), STRATEGIES

Goal 8. Other Recreation Opportunities: Analyze all public use activities for appropriateness and compatibility. Visitors will support priority public use activities that minimize wildlife and habitat disturbance.

Objective 8.1: Over the life of the plan, assess and mitigate all public use activities on the Refuge to ensure that impacts to natural resources are kept at acceptable levels.

MONITOR AND EVALUATE:

- Maintain a list of all appropriate use and compatibility determinations and dates to be renewed.
- Annually evaluate requests by the public for additional recreational opportunities for appropriateness.

STANDARD 9: OUTREACH

Policy (605 FW 1 and 603 FW 1)

Effective outreach depends on open and continuing communication and collaboration between the refuge and its many publics. Effective outreach involves determining and understanding the issues, identifying audiences, listening to stakeholders, crafting messages, selecting the most effective delivery techniques, and evaluating effectiveness. If conducted successfully, the results we achieve will further refuge purpose(s) and the Refuge System mission.

CURRENT PROGRAM DISCUSSION:

Outreach is a two-way communication between the USFWS and the public to establish and promote involvement, and influence attitudes and action, with the goal of improving joint stewardship of our natural resources. Outreach includes but is not limited to the following: relations with news media, congressional, corporate, constituent groups, community, state and local government, state wildlife agencies, environmental education and interpretive activities, public involvement, traditional public information activities such as open houses, information products such as brochures, leaflets, exhibits, slide shows, videos, public service announcements, and web based media.

Media outreach at the Refuge typically occurs in the form of news releases, radio and television interviews, and phone contacts. Staff maintain good working relationships with local media sources, and a number of articles are printed each year covering various Refuge topics.

Refuge staff, volunteers, and Friends are invited to participate in a number of outreach events each year such as special events, festivals, and workshops. All requests are considered with actual participation based on staff schedules and availability, as well as budget considerations for the cost associated with participation. Over the years, the staff has typically participated in numerous outreach events at other refuges within the Complex, including Annual Pelican Island Wildlife Festival, various other environmental festivals, Career Days at local schools, and through repeated engagements with partners including, environmental education centers, Boys and Girls Clubs, other organizations.

STANDARD 9 GOAL(S), OBJECTIVE(S), STRATEGIES

Goal 9. Engage off-site public in effective outreach.

Objective 9.1: Ensure all informational resources and staff-based services promote an understanding and appreciation of the Refuge's fish, wildlife, habitat conservation, along with the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Strategies:

9.1.1 The Refuge web-based media will be maintained to provide the public with current information regarding national outreach messages and initiatives, visitor services, resource management, and the permitted and prohibited activities for all Refuge units.

9.1.2 Expand and maintain relationships with regional television stations, radio stations, and news media.

9.1.3 Expand and maintain media contact lists, local government lists, colleges and universities, chambers of commerce, and other civic organizations

MONITOR AND EVALUATE:

- Monitor comments received through social media/website and respond as appropriate.

STANDARD 10: VOLUNTEERS AND FRIENDS

Policy (605 FW 1)

Volunteer and Friends organizations fortify refuge staffs with their gifts of time, skills, and energy. They are integral to the future of the Refuge System. Where appropriate, refuge staff will initiate and nurture relationships with volunteers and Friends organizations and will continually support, monitor, and evaluate these groups with the goal of fortifying important refuge activities. The National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnership Enhancement Act of 1998 strengthens the Refuge System's role in developing effective partnerships with various community groups. Whether through volunteers, Friends organizations, or other important partnerships in the community, refuge personnel will seek to make the refuge an active community member, giving rise to a stronger Refuge System.

CURRENT PROGRAM DISCUSSION:

The Refuge's volunteer program is gradually being developed. Currently, volunteers primarily support the Refuge by helping address maintenance and repair needs. A Friends group has not been established. It is anticipated that as local area residents and visitors become more aware of the Refuge, there will be an increased interest to help support the variety of infrastructure, visitor services, and biological needs.

STANDARD 10 GOAL(S), OBJECTIVE(S), STRATEGIES

Goal 10. Ensure Refuge staff initiate and nurture relationships with volunteers and Friends organizations.

Objective 10.1: Ensure all public use infrastructure, informational resources, and staff-based services support effective volunteer and Friends programs.

Strategies:

10.1.1 Promote volunteer opportunities on www.volunteer.gov webpage.

10.1.2 Conduct periodic volunteer, orientations, trainings, and meetings.

10.1.3 Support the establishment of a Friends group.

MONITOR AND EVALUATE:

- Solicit feedback from volunteers on a regular basis.
- Conduct exit interviews with all volunteers that leave the program.
- Assess volunteer program regularly and make adjustments as needed.

- Visitor service program reviews will be conducted periodically to ensure the Refuge is meeting visitor service standards. These programmatic reviews will also assess if the VSP goals and objectives are being met. To ensure a thorough external and internal review of the program or service, we will monitor and evaluate the program or service using a variety of methods, including program reviews, literature reviews, site visits, focus groups, personal interviews, economic analyses, and surveys.
- Incorporate public input from planning meetings and written input.

COMMERCIAL RECREATIONAL USES

Policy (50 CFR 29.1; 50 CFR 27.97; 8 RM 16; 603 FW 1; 605 FW 5)

A commercial recreational use is a use that generates revenue or that results in a commodity which is or can be sold for income or revenue. Before considering compatibility, the use must be determined to contribute to the achievement of the refuge purpose or the mission of the Refuge System, as outlined in Title 50 Code of Federal Regulations, 29.1.

To be allowed on a refuge, a commercial use must go beyond the “not materially interfere with...” requirement and must contribute to the achievement of the refuge purpose or mission of the Refuge System. The contribution must be clearly defined in the justification section of the compatibility determination for any commercial use (Appendix D).

Title 50, Code of Federal Regulations, 27.97, Private Operations, prohibits an unauthorized commercial enterprise on any national wildlife refuge. Thus, commercial tours are required to apply for a special use permit (SUP) from the Refuge Manager. By establishing a SUP system, the refuge staff is able to set sustainable limits on the number of permits issued.

In determining if a commercial recreational use is compatible, one way to connect it to the mission of the System is to determine if the commercial recreation use will facilitate one of the wildlife-dependent priority public use activities which are “directly related to the mission of the System.” (Refuge Improvement Act – 1997).

CURRENT PROGRAM DISCUSSION:

The Refuge does not currently have any commercial recreational uses. However, it is anticipated that a public interest will develop to conduct commercial recording and commercial tours. The compatibility determinations for these uses are detailed in Appendix D.

Goal 11: Provide opportunities for commercial recreational users to enjoy and benefit from compatible activities on the Refuge that minimize conflicts with other user groups.

Objective 11.1: Ensure all public use infrastructure, informational resources, and staff-based services support an effective Commercial Recreational Use Program.

Strategy:

11.1.1 Offer opportunities for the public to inquire about commercial use opportunities, regulations, and the permit processes.

MONITOR AND EVALUATE:

- Upon permitting commercial recreational uses, conduct phone interviews with all commercial use SUP holders to ensure understanding of permit conditions and relay appropriate Refuge messages.

III. Visitor Services Annual Work Plan

Table 2 provides a condensed overview of visitor services program plans for the year and associated deadlines for the task.

Table 2. Visitor Services Annual Work Plan

Category	Event	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	Comments
Annual Events	National Wildlife Refuge Week										X			
	NWRS Anniversary			X										
	National Public Lands Day									X				
	Hunt Seasons	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	See WMA regulations
	Intl. Migratory Bird Day					X								
	Great Backyard Bird Count		X											
	Christmas Bird Count												X	
Annual Meetings	Hunt meeting with FWC			X										
	Friends Group Meeting												X	
	Volunteer Recognition Day			X										
	Public hunt/fish meeting							X						
Routine Activities	Infrastructure Maintenance Checks (e.g. gates, trails)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Special Projects	As needed													

IV. Visitor Services Annual Partnership Planning

Table 3 tracks the Refuge's formal and informal partnerships. This table could also cross reference with the Project Cost Table to help identify potential project funding opportunities,

Table 3. Visitor Services Annual Partnership Planning (Fiscal Year 2019)

Partners	Type of Partnership (Academia, Non-profit, Agency, etc.)	Agreement Type (Grant, Challenge Cost Share, Cooperative, MOU, Donation, Programmatic, etc.)	Partnership's Goal for Refuge	Type of Contribution		Time Frame of Project	Comments
				In-kind (materials, labor)	Monetary		
FWC	Agency	MOU	Designate units as WMA; Conduct hunting and fishing program	Labor	-	Ongoing	
FDEP	Agency	MOU	Land protection	Labor	-	Ongoing	
FFS	Agency	MOU	Support fire and land management	Labor	-	Ongoing	
NWRA	Non-profit	Cooperative	Land protection planning	-	Monetary	Ongoing	
TNC	Non-profit	MOU	Fire management and land protection planning	Labor	-	Ongoing	
FDEP=Florida Department of Environmental Protection, FFS=Florida Forest Service, FWC=Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, MOU=memorandum of understanding, NWRA=National Wildlife Refuge Association, TNC=The Nature Conservancy							

V. References

Louv, Richard. (2005). Last child in the woods: saving our children from nature-deficit disorder." *SCHOLE: A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education*, 21(1), pp. 136–137.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2012. Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment. https://www.fws.gov/refuge/everglades_headwaters/. Accessed: August 2019.

VI. Appendices

APPENDIX A: HUNT AND FISH PLAN

Under separate cover.

APPENDIX B: LIST OF PREPARERS

Names and titles of individuals involved in preparing the VSP.

Lance Arvidson, Consultant, Common Ground Ecology
Jeremy Edwardson, Deputy Project Leader, Everglades Headwaters NWR Complex
Julie Morris, Consultant, National Wildlife Refuge Association
William Miller, Project Leader, Everglades Headwaters NWR Complex
Oliver van den Ende, Refuge Manager, Everglades Headwaters NWR

APPENDIX C: APPROPRIATE USE DETERMINATIONS

Under separate cover.

APPENDIX D: COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATIONS

Under separate cover.

APPENDIX E: PUBLIC COMMENTS AND SERVICE RESPONSES

Under separate cover.

APPENDIX F: USFWS HUNTING AND FISHING MOU WITH FWC

Agreement Number 40181CK005: Memorandum of Understanding between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Agreement under separate cover.

APPENDIX G: FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

Under separate cover.

