

USFWS Seeks Comments on Proposed Charlotte County Habitat Conservation Plan

VERO BEACH, Fla. – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) published a notice in the Federal Register today seeking public comment on a proposed countywide Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for Charlotte County, Fla. and the related environmental assessment.

These draft documents, which can be viewed at www.fws.gov/verobeach, look at potential effects of development activities on Florida scrub-jays and eastern indigo snakes in Charlotte County over the life of the requested 30-year permit. They balance economic needs and development with needs of the two listed species.

The USFWS will consider the public comments received during the 60-day comment period in making the final decision on the HCP, which is expected this summer.

If you wish to comment, you may submit comments by any one of several methods. Please reference TE09117B–0 in such comments. You may mail comments to David Dell or Liz Landrum at the below addresses:

David Dell
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service SE Regional Office
1875 Century Boulevard, Suite200
Atlanta GA 30345

Liz Landrum
South Florida Ecological Services Office
1339 20th Street
Vero Beach FL 32960

You may also comment via the internet to david_dell@fws.gov. Please include your name and return address in your message.

Since a permit decision is anticipated in the near future and preparation of the decision documents in a timely fashion is the top priority, the USFWS will devote its resources to that effort. Therefore, the USFWS won't be able to review/approve requests for new HCPs or scrub-jay surveys in Charlotte County while that process is going on.

In addition, if the countywide HCP is approved, neither the individual HCPs nor the scrub-jay surveys would be necessary.

“Realigning our priorities will allow us to complete our review of the countywide HCP much more quickly, serve the greatest number of customers and provide the greatest conservation benefit,” said Craig Aubrey, Field Supervisor of the South Florida Ecological Services Office.

Of Florida's hundreds of native bird species, only one, the Florida Scrub-jay, is found nowhere else. Conserving these birds is tough because they're found only in "scrub habitat," one of the most endangered ecosystem types in Florida. As a result, their populations have declined dramatically and this species is federally listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act.

The eastern indigo snake was listed as a "threatened" species as a result of dramatic population declines caused by over-collecting for the domestic and international pet trade as well as mortalities caused by rattlesnake collectors who gassed gopher tortoise burrows to collect snakes. Since its listing, habitat loss and fragmentation by residential and commercial expansion have become much more significant threats to the eastern indigo snake.

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