

# News Release

## U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Florida Scrub-Jay Conservation Breakthrough; Charlotte County Commission Approves Countywide Habitat Conservation Plan**

#### *USFWS Provided Nearly \$300,000 In Developmental Grants*

VERO BEACH, Fla. -- The Charlotte County Board of Commissioners approved the county's new Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) today at their meeting in Port Charlotte, Fla. This allows individuals who own property in areas occupied by the Florida scrub-jay to take advantage of the streamlined permitting process through the associated incidental take permit (ITP).

This action is the final step in implementation of the county's HCP and ITP, which were approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) in December 2014 and have now been incorporated into the County Code of Ordinances. Effective immediately, the regulatory burden is reduced and certainty is provided to Charlotte County landowners, while protection of imperiled species is enhanced.

Under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the ITP authorizes the incidental take of the scrub-jay and eastern indigo snake, in the course of otherwise lawful construction/development activities conducted or permitted by the county.

"This countywide HCP is a win for the people of Charlotte County and for these wildlife species," said Larry Williams, the Service's Florida State Supervisor for Ecological Services. "The HCP balances conservation with the needs of residential and commercial development, while reducing costs and speeding up the permitting process."

Conserving scrub-jays is especially tough because they're native to "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 ESA.

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.

“Many thanks to the Charlotte County Commissioners for supporting this initiative and a special salute goes to Andy Stevens and his staff at the Charlotte County Natural Resources Division. We attribute the success of this plan to their dedication and hard work,” said Williams.

In addition to advice and technical support, the Service provided Charlotte County with nearly \$300,000 to help develop the HCP.

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