

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

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# News Release



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## **Corps and Service Agree On Actions for Conserving Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow and Restoring Balance to Everglades Ecosystem**

*Restoration efforts already underway must happen faster to protect water, wildlife habitat and other natural resources*

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) are taking additional steps under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) to restore balance to the Florida Everglades ecosystem and help reverse decades-long population declines of the endangered Cape Sable seaside sparrow.

These steps are outlined in a new biological opinion on the Corps' Everglades Restoration Transition Plan (ERTP), which was implemented in 2012 to guide improved management of water flows in the Everglades. The new biological opinion will guide the Corps and partners in the Everglades restoration effort in better managing water in ways that improve habitat essential to the Cape Sable seaside sparrow.

Actions called for in the biological opinion include operational modifications and expediting restoration initiatives already planned for the southern portion of the Everglades ecosystem to aid in providing suitable nesting habitat for the sparrow. These measures will allow the movement of additional water southward under the Tamiami Trail One-Mile Bridge flowing through the Everglades and into Florida Bay in ways that avoid prolonged flooding of the sparrow's habitat during the nesting season. They will also provide much-needed fresh water into the Everglades and Florida Bay, benefitting wildlife such as American crocodiles, West Indian manatees, sea turtles, dolphins, a variety of bird species and gamefish.

The ESA consultation, biological opinion, and the resulting operational modifications are part of a broad collaboration between the Service, the Corps, the U.S. Geological Survey, the National Park Service, which manages Everglades National Park, and many others to save the ground-nesting Cape Sable seaside sparrow and meet water management needs. The actions reflect the complexity of restoration requirements across the Everglades and the commitment of local, state and federal partners to find creative ways to achieve long-term restoration and conservation.

“Although the Cape Sable seaside sparrow is on the brink of extinction, we believe with the timely and coordinated action of partners, we can save this and other imperiled wildlife for the long term,” said Larry Williams, the Service's State Supervisor for Ecological Services in Florida.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers echoed the importance of state and federal partners collaborating in conserving the sparrow and the Everglades.

"We're moving forward with restoration efforts and operational modifications that will ultimately provide beneficial conditions to the many species that call the Everglades home," said Col. Jason Kirk, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Jacksonville District Commander. "We have been coordinating closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to determine what measures can be taken to improve the habitat of the Cape Sable seaside sparrow and ensure we are able to operate our water management system in compliance with the Endangered Species Act. Nonetheless, multiple environmental factors continue to threaten the survival of this rare species. Successful recovery of the Cape Sable seaside sparrow requires continued collaborative efforts among our federal and state partnering agencies and we look forward to this ongoing dialogue."

Prior to Hurricane Andrew in 1992, there were 6,576 sparrows inhabiting Everglades National Park. Hurricane Andrew was followed by several wet years and high discharges of water through water control structures, causing several years of poor conditions for the Cape Sable seaside sparrow. This reduced the sparrow's ability to recover from the impact of the hurricane and its total population declined to 3,312 in 1993. The Service began consulting with the Corps on the ERTTP in 2015. Due to many factors, including loss of habitat, the sparrow's population dropped to 2,720 in 2014. After one of the wettest nesting periods on record current preliminary results for 2016 indicate the population may have decreased to approximately 2,400 birds, the lowest on record.

The biological opinion also addresses potential impacts to two other federally listed species—American wood storks and Everglade snail kites. Current water operations are not likely to impact these birds.

As a result of this interagency consultation and biological opinion, the Corps has committed to:

- Provide habitat conditions that will continue to facilitate sparrow breeding in areas where the existing habitat is of better quality.
- Provide habitat conditions that will allow the sparrow to successfully breed and recruit in currently degraded areas.
- Promote sparrow population resilience by identifying additional areas of habitat expansion or movement that may occur with implementation of water management projects and the onset of sea level rise.
- Monitor and demonstrate that successful sparrow breeding and recruitment is occurring in response to the implementation of management actions.

The Service has developed a revised set of targets to improve the conditions of the Cape Sable seaside sparrow and contribute towards the survival and recovery of the species. Targets include providing at least 90 consecutive dry nesting-season days between March 1 and July 15. The marl prairie habitat that the Cape Sable seaside sparrow requires persists under a hydrologic regime of 90-210 wet days. If the habitat is dry fewer than 90 days, the grass habitat the sparrow requires often is taken over by woody plants. If the habitat is under water more than 210 days, a wetland habitat emerges.

Conservation efforts on behalf of the Cape Sable seaside sparrow include annual range-wide population surveys by ground and helicopter, vegetation and hydrologic monitoring, use of prescribed fire to control woody vegetation, controlling wildfires to protect sparrow habitats, and banding birds so they can be identified in the future. The Service and partners are also developing new modeling tools and genetic

studies and analyzing of sparrow blood and feathers to determine if there are contaminants, such as mercury that may be negatively affecting them.

For more information, please visit: <https://www.fws.gov/verobeach/20160722NRERTPJeopardyBO.html>

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