United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
South Florida Ecological Services Office
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March 27, 2009

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Service Federal Activity Code:	41420-2009-FA-0136
Service Consultation Code:	41420-2008-F-0088
Date Received:	December 15, 2008
Project:	Removal of Cattle Dipping Vat
Applicant:	MacDill Air Force Base
County:	Highlands

Dear Colonel MacLaughlin:

This document transmits the Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) biological opinion for the above referenced project and its effects on the threatened Florida scrub-jay (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*) (scrub-jay) in accordance with section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (Act) of 1973, as amended (Act) (87 Stat. 884; 16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*).

This biological opinion is based on information provided in the December 11, 2008, U.S. Department of the Air Force (Air Force) letter; telephone conversations; field investigations; and other sources of information. A complete administrative record of this consultation is on file at the South Florida Ecological Services Office, Vero Beach, Florida.

This document also represents the Service's view of the effects of the proposed action on the threatened eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon corais couperi*) in accordance with section 7 of the Act.

Eastern Indigo Snake

The Service raised concerns about the potential harm to eastern indigo snakes by activities associated with the clean up project. Suitable habitat for the threatened eastern indigo snake includes a mosaic of habitats including the project area, in which they establish home ranges of up to 183 acres on average for males and up to 120 acres for females. Eastern indigo snakes appear to be associated with burrows excavated by other animals, as well as naturally occurring cavities. The applicant has agreed to implement the Service's draft Standard Protection Measures for the Eastern Indigo Snake (Service 2004) during the activities associated with this project. Therefore, the Service concurs with the Air Force's determination of "may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect" for the eastern indigo snake.

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CONSULTATION HISTORY

On December 11, 2008, the Air Force submitted to the Service a letter requesting initiation of formal consultation under Section 7 of the Act. In the letter, the Air Force determined the proposed clean-up and remediation of an abandoned cattle dipping vat project "may affect" the threatened Florida scrub-jay. The Air Force also determined the proposed project "may affect, but it is not likely to adversely affect" the threatened eastern indigo snake.

On January 20, 2009, A Service biologist and a representative of the Air Force discussed the nature of the proposed project and its potential effect on the scrub-jay. The applicant proposed avoidance and minimization measures to reduce the likelihood of take of scrub-jays. However, we discussed the probabilities of scrub-jays colliding with trucks entering and leaving the project site. It was mutually agreed the Air Force determination for the scrub-jay was adequate.

BIOLOGICAL OPINION

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

The Air Force proposes to remove contaminated soil and eliminate a source of groundwater contamination in and around an abandoned cattle dipping vat. The remainders of what once was an active cattle dip vat structure consist of a concrete ramp, a dip vat, and a drip pad. The concrete ramp is approximately 11 feet in length and leads to the dip vat. The dip vat is approximately 35 feet in length and 4 feet wide. The east end of the vat, next to the ramp, is approximately 6 to 7 feet deep, with a shallow end leading out to the drip pad on the west end (Figure 2). The drip pad is a concrete area approximately 90 square-feet. The project is expected to last approximately 30 days from February 23, 2009 through March 23, 2009.

During the operating life of the dip vat, dipping was conducted approximately once per month per cow. Chemicals used in the dipping vat solution consisted of a mixture of sodium carbonate, arsenic trioxide, and pine tar mixed with water. Each vat held 1,500 to 2,000 gallons, of dipping solution, which contained 0.14 to 0.22 percent of arsenic. Dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane **(**DDT) and other pesticides were also used. The arsenic solution in the dipping vat required periodic changing. To accomplish this, the arsenic solution was pumped or bailed from the dipping vat and discarded on the ground near the vat. After the solution was removed, sediments on the bottom of the vat were removed and discarded on the ground near the dip vat.

The vat was used before the property was acquired by the Air Force. Chemical contamination, a byproduct of dip vat operations, has migrated and spread over the years. Soil and water samples from the project area indicate the presence of pesticides and metals, mainly arsenic in surface soil and groundwater. Concentration of arsenic exceeds standard criteria.

The contaminated soil and the dip vat structure will be removed. The cattle dipping operation encompassed approximately 1 acre. Prior to the clean-up activities, the project area will be bush-hogged. The remains of the corral, loading chute, gates, fencing, dip vat and other structures will be disposed of with the contaminated soil. An existing dirt road will be widened and refurbished

to haul the material out of the project site. Selective clearing of oak trees (*Quercus spp.*), tree limbs, and saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*) will be conducted as part of the refurbishing of the haul road and preparation of the 1-acre project area for soil extraction (Figure 3). The proposed clean-up project is located in the Avon Park Air Force Range, within an area known as the South Conventional Range. This area is currently used as a bombing range. The approximate location of the 1-acre dipping vat structure is Latitude 27.630131 and Longitude -81.542762, Highlands County, Florida (Figure 1).

The territory of a scrub-jay family is located adjacent to the project site. According to the information provided, this scrub-jay family has been monitored since the year 2006 when its territory included most of the project parcel. In 2007, the scrub-jay family shifted their territory to the west and extended it to the north. In 2008, the jays shifted their territory slightly further to the west and retracted northern boundary to the historic northern limit (Figure 4). The 1-acre project parcel has not been occupied by the resident scrub-jay family since the year 2007. The haul road cuts through the current territory of the resident scrub-jay family.

The applicant proposes to complete the clean-up operations in 30 days, from February 23, 2009 through March 23, 2009. The proposed project timeline overlaps with the early stages of the scrub-jay nesting season of March 1 through June 30. Due to the current "war time" status, the scheduled uses of the project site, calls for the cleaning activities during this part of the year. The widening of the road and associated removal of palmetto, shrubs and selected scrub-oak trees, as well as, traffic from the haul trucks through the scrub-jay territory may result in harassment of scrub-jays, the inadvertent take of scrub-jay nests, and collisions with trucks hauling contaminated material. To minimize the potential impacts on Florida scrub-jay by the proposed project, the Air Force has proposed the following conservation measures:

1. To brush hog the project area prior to or during the early stages of the scrub-jay nesting season.

2. To widen the haul road prior to or during the early stages of the nesting season. Shrubs and scrub oaks scheduled to be trimmed, will be carefully inspected for the presence of early nesting attempts by scrub-jays.

3. Scrub-oaks found on the project area and along sides of the haul road will not be permanently uprooted but cut from the base. This will allow long-term recovery of scrub-jay foraging and nesting habitat.

4. To minimize the likelihood of vehicle/scrub-jay collisions, haul trucks will not exceed 15 miles per-hour while on the portion of the haul road within the resident scrub-jay territory.

STATUS OF THE SPECIES/CRITICAL HABITAT

Species/critical habitat description

Scrub-jays are about 10 to 12 inches long and weigh about 3 ounces. They are similar in size and shape to blue jays (*Cyanocitta cristata*), but differ significantly in coloration (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996a). Unlike the blue jay, the scrub-jay lacks a crest. It also lacks the conspicuous

white-tipped wing and tail feathers, black barring, and bridle of the blue jay. The scrub-jay's head, nape, wings, and tail are pale blue, and its body is pale gray on its back and belly. Its throat and upper breast are lightly striped and bordered by a pale blue-gray "bib" (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996a). Scrub-jay sexes are not distinguishable by plumage (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984), and males, on the average are only slightly larger than females (Woolfenden 1978). The sexes may be identified by a distinct "hiccup" call made only by females (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984; Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1986). Scrub-jays that are less than about 5 months of age are easily distinguishable from adults; their plumage is smoky gray on the head and back, and they lack the blue crown and nape of adults. Molting occurs between early June and late November and peaks between mid-July and late September (Bancroft and Woolfenden 1982). During late summer and early fall, when the first basic molt is nearly done, fledgling scrub-jays may be indistinguishable from adults in the field (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984). The wide variety of vocalizations of scrub-jays is described in Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick (1996b).

Scrub-jays are in the order Passeriformes and the family Corvidae. They have been called a "superspecies complex" and described in four groups that differ in geographic distribution within the United States and Mexico: *Aphelocoma californica*, from southwestern Washington through Baja California; *A. insularis*, on Santa Cruz in the Channel Islands, California; *A. woodhousii*, from southeastern Oregon and the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains to Oaxaca, Mexico; and *A. coerulescens* in peninsular Florida (American Ornithologists' Union [AOU] 1983). Other jays of the same genus include the Mexican jay or gray-breasted jay (*A. ultramarina*) and the unicolored jay (*A. unicolor*) of Central America and southwest North America (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b).

The Florida scrub-jay, which was originally named *Corvus coerulescens* by Bosc in 1795, was transferred to the genus *Aphelocoma* in 1851 by Cabanis. In 1858, Baird made *coerulescens* the type species for the genus, and it has been considered a subspecies (*A. c. coerulescens*) for the past several decades (AOU 1957). It recently regained recognition as a full species (Florida scrub-jay, *Aphelocoma coerulescens*) from the AOU (AOU 1995) because of genetic, morphological, and behavioral differences from other members of this group: the western scrub-jay (*A. californica)* and the island scrub-jay *(A. insularis)*. The group name is retained for species in this complex; however, it is now hyphenated to "scrub-jay" (AOU 1995). From here on in the document, Florida scrub-jays will be referred to as scrub-jays.

This species account references the full species name, *A. coerulescens*, as listed in the Federal Register (Service 1987).

No critical habitat has been designated for this species; therefore, none will be affected.

Life history/Population dynamics

The scrub-jay has specific habitat needs. It is endemic to peninsular Florida's ancient dune ecosystems or scrubs, which occur on well-drained to excessively well-drained sandy soils (Laessle 1958; Laessle 1968; Myers 1990). This relict oak-dominated scrub, or xeric oak scrub, is essential habitat to the scrub-jay. This community type is adapted to nutrient-poor soils, periodic drought, and frequent fires (Abrahamson 1984). Xeric oak scrub on the Lake Wales

Ridge is predominantly made up of four species of stunted, low-growing oaks: sand live oak (*Quercus geminata*), Chapman oak (*Q. chapmanii*), myrtle oak (*Q. myrtifolia*), and scrub oak (*Q. inopina*) (Myers 1990). In optimal habitat for scrub-jays on the Lake Wales Ridge, these oaks are 3 to 10 feet high, interspersed with 10 to 50 percent unvegetated, sandy openings, and a sand pine (*Pinus clausa*) canopy of less than 20 percent (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1991). Trees and dense herbaceous vegetation is rare. Other vegetation noted along with the oaks includes saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens)* and scrub palmetto *(Sabal etonia*), as well as woody shrubs such as Florida rosemary (*Ceratiola ericoides*) and rusty lyonia (*Lyonia ferruginea*). Scrub-jays occupy areas with less scrub oak cover and fewer openings on the Merritt Island/Cape Canaveral Complex and in southwest Florida than typical of xeric oak scrub habitat on the Lake Wales Ridge (Schmalzer and Hinkle 1992b; Breininger et al. 1995; Thaxton and Hingtgen 1996). The predominant communities here are oak scrub and scrubby flatwoods. Scrubby flatwoods differ from scrub by having a sparse canopy of slash pine (*Pinus elliotii*); sand pines are rare. Shrub species mentioned above are common, except for scrub oak and scrub palmetto, which are restricted to the Lake Wales Ridge. Runner oak (*Q. minima*), turkey oak (*Q. laevis*), bluejack oak (*Q. incana*), and longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*) also have been reported. Kennedy Space Center, in Brevard County, supports one of the largest contiguous populations of scrub-jays. Studies conducted there give good descriptions of this habitat type (Schmalzer and Hinkle 1992b).

Optimal scrub-jay habitat occurs as patches with the following attributes: (1) 10 to 50 percent of the oak scrub made up of bare sand or sparse herbaceous vegetation; (2) greater than 50 percent of the shrub layer made up of scrub oaks; (3) a mosaic of oak scrubs that occur in optimal height (4 to 6 feet) and shorter; (4) less than 15 percent canopy cover; and (5) greater than 984 feet from a forest (Breininger et al. 1998). Much potential scrub-jay habitat occurs as patches of oak scrub within a matrix of little-used habitat of saw palmetto and herbaceous swale marshes (Breininger et al. 1991; Breininger et al.1995). These native matrix habitats supply prey for scrub-jays and habitat for other species of conservation concern. The flammability of native matrix habitats is important for spreading fires into oak scrub (Breininger et al. 1995, Breininger et al. 2002). Degradation or replacement of native matrix habitats with habitat fragments and industrial areas attract predators of scrub-jays, such as fish crows (*Corvus ossifragus*), that are rare in most regularly burned native matrix habitats (Breininger and Schmalzer 1990; Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1991). Matrix habitats often develop into woodlands and forests when there is a disruption of fire regimes. These woodlands and forests are not suitable for scrub-jays, decrease the habitat suitability of nearby scrub, attract predators, and further disrupt fire patterns.

Scrub-jays have a social structure that involves cooperative breeding, a trait that the other North American species of scrub-jays do not show (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984; Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1990). Scrub-jays live in families ranging from two birds (a single mated pair) to extended families of eight adults (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984) and one to four juveniles. Fledgling scrub-jays stay with the breeding pair in their natal territory as “helpers,” forming a closely-knit, cooperative family group. Prebreeding numbers are generally reduced to either a pair with no helpers or families of three or four individuals (a pair plus one or two helpers) (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996a).

Scrub-jays have a well-developed intrafamilial dominance hierarchy with breeder males most dominant, followed by helper males, breeder females, and, finally, female helpers (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1977; Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984). Helpers take part in sentinel duties (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984; McGowan and Woolfenden 1989), territorial defense (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984), predator-mobbing, and the feeding of both nestlings (Stallcup and Woolfenden 1978) and fledglings (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984; McGowan and Woolfenden 1990). The well-developed sentinel system involves having one individual occupying an exposed perch watching for predators or territory intruders. When a predator is seen, the sentinel scrub-jay gives a distinctive warning call (McGowan and Woolfenden 1989; McGowan and Woolfenden 1990), and all family members seek cover in dense shrub vegetation (Fitzpatrick et al. 1991). Scrub-jay pairs occupy year-round, multipurpose territories (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1978; Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984; Fitzpatrick et al. 1991). Territory size averages 22 to 25 acres (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1990; Fitzpatrick et al. 1991), with a minimum size of about 12 acres (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984; Fitzpatrick et al. 1991). The availability of territories is a limiting factor for scrub-jay populations (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984). Because of this limitation, nonbreeding adult males may stay at the natal territory as helpers for up to 6 years, waiting for either a mate or territory to become available (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984). Scrub-jays may become breeders in several ways: (1) by replacing a lost breeder on a non-natal territory (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984); (2) through "territorial budding," where a helper male becomes a breeder in a segment of its natal territory (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1978); (3) by inheriting a natal territory following the death of a breeder; (4) by establishing a new territory between existing territories (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984); or (5) through "adoption" of an unrelated helper by a neighboring family followed by resident mate replacement (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984). Territories also can be created by restoring habitat through effective habitat management efforts in areas that are overgrown (Thaxton and Hingtgen 1994).

To become a breeder, a scrub-jay must find a territory and a mate. Evidence presented by Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick (1984) suggests that scrub-jays are monogamous. The pair retains ownership and sole breeding privileges in its particular territory year after year. Courtship to form the pair is lengthy and ritualized and involves posturing and vocalizations made by the male to the female (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b). Copulation between the pair is generally out of sight of other scrub-jays (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984). These authors also reported never observing copulation between unpaired scrub-jays or courtship behavior between a female and a scrub-jay other than her mate. Age at first breeding in the scrub-jay varies from 1 to 7 years, although most individuals become breeders between 2 and 4 years of age (Fitzpatrick and Woolfenden 1988). Persistent breeding populations of scrub-jays exist only where there are scrub oaks in sufficient quantity and form to provide an ample winter acorn supply, cover from predators, and nest sites during the spring (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b).

Scrub-jay nests are typically constructed in shrubby oaks, at a height of 1.6 to 8.2 feet (Woolfenden 1974). Sand live oak and scrub oak are the preferred shrubs on the Lake Wales Ridge (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b), and myrtle oak is favored on the Atlantic Coastal Ridge (Toland 1991) and southern Gulf coast (Thaxton 1998). In suburban areas, scrub-jays nest in the same evergreen oak species as well as in introduced or exotic trees; however, they build their nests in a significantly higher position in these oaks than when in natural scrub habitat

(Bowman et al. 1996). Scrub-jay nests are an open cup, about 7 to 8 inches outside diameter and 3 to 4 inches inside diameter. The outer basket is bulky and built of course twigs from oaks and other vegetation, and the inside is lined with tightly wound palmetto or cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*) fibers. There is no foreign material as may be present in a blue jay nest (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b).

Nesting is synchronous, normally occurring from 1 March through 30 June (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984). On the Atlantic Coastal Ridge and southern Gulf coast, nesting may be protracted through the end of July (Thaxton 1998). In suburban habitats, nesting is consistently started earlier (March) than in natural scrub habitat (Fleischer 1996), although the reason for this is unknown.

Clutch size ranges from one to five eggs, but is typically three or four eggs (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1990). Clutch size is generally larger in suburban habitats, and the birds try to rear more broods per year (Fleischer 1996). Double brooding by as much as 20 percent has been documented on the Atlantic Coastal Ridge and in suburban habitat within the southern Gulf coast, compared to about 2 percent on the Lake Wales Ridge (Thaxton 1998). Scrub-jay eggs measure 1.1 inches x 0.8 inches (length x breadth) (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b), and coloration "varies from pea green to pale glaucous green… blotched and spotted with irregularly shaped markings of cinnamon rufous and vinaceous cinnamon, these being generally heaviest about the larger end" (Bendire 1895). Eggs are incubated for 17 to 19 days (Woolfenden 1974), and fledging occurs 15 to 21 days after hatching (Woolfenden 1978). Only the breeding female incubates and broods eggs and nestlings (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984). Average production of young is two fledglings per pair, per year (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1990; Fitzpatrick et al. 1991), and the presence of helpers improves fledging success (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1990; Mumme 1992). Annual productivity must average at least two young fledged per pair for a population of scrub-jays to support long-term stability (Fitzpatrick et al. 1991).

Fledglings depend upon adults for food for about ten weeks, during which time they are fed by both breeders and helpers (Woolfenden 1975; McGowan and Woolfenden 1990). Survival of scrub-jay fledglings to yearling age class averages about 35 percent in optimal scrub, while annual survival of both adult males and females averages around 80 percent (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b). Data from Archbold Biological Station, however, suggest survival and reproductive success of scrub-jays in suboptimal habitat is lower (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1991). These data help explain why local populations inhabiting unburned, late successional habitats become extirpated. Similarly, data from Indian River County show mean annual productivity declines significantly in suburban areas where Toland (1991) reported productivity averaged 2.2 young fledged per pair in contiguous optimal scrub, 1.8 young fledged per pair in fragmented moderately-developed scrub, and 1.2 young per pair fledged in very fragmented suboptimal scrub. The longest observed lifespan of a scrub-jay is 15.5 years at Archbold Biological Station in Highlands County (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b).

Scrub-jays are nonmigratory and permanently territorial. Juveniles stay in their natal territory for up to 6 years before dispersing to become breeders (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984; Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1986). Once scrub-jays pair and become breeders, generally within

two territories of their natal area, they stay on their breeding territory until death. In suitable habitat, fewer than 5 percent of scrub-jays disperse more than 5 miles (Stith et al. 1996). All documented long-distance dispersals have been in unsuitable habitat such as woodland, pasture, or suburban plantations. Scrub-jay dispersal behavior is affected by the intervening land uses. Protected scrub habitats will most effectively sustain scrub-jay populations if they are located within surrounding habitat types that can be used and traversed by scrub-jays. Brushy pastures, scrubby corridors along railway and road rights-of-way, and open burned flatwoods offer links for colonization among scrub-jay populations. Stith et al. (1996) believe a dispersal distance of 5 miles is close to the biological maximum for scrub-jays.

Scrub-jays forage mostly on or near the ground, often along the edges of natural or man-made openings. They visually search for food by hopping or running along the ground beneath the scrub or by jumping from shrub to shrub. Insects, particularly orthopterans (*e.g.*, locusts, crickets, grasshoppers, beetles) and lepidopteran (*e.g.*, butterfly and moth) larvae form most of the animal diet throughout most of the year (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984). Small vertebrates are eaten when encountered, including frogs and toads (*Hyla femoralis*, *H. squirella*, rarely *Bufo quercicus*, and unidentified tadpoles, lizards (*Anolis carolinensis*, *Chemidophorus sexlineatus*, *Sceloporus woodi*, *Eumeces inexpectatus*, *Neoseps reynoldsi*, *Ophisaurus compressus*, *O. ventralis*), small snakes (*Thamnophus sauritus*, *Opheodrys aestivus*, *Diadophis punctatus*), small rodents (cotton rat [*Sigmodon hispidus*], *Peromyscus polionotus*, black rat [*Rattus rattus*] young), downy chicks of the bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*), and fledgling common yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*). In suburban areas, scrub-jays will accept supplemental foods once the scrub-jays have learned about them (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984).

Acorns are the principal plant food (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984; Fitzpatrick et al. 1991). From August to November each year, scrub-jays may harvest and cache 6,500 to 8,000 oak (*Quercus* spp.) acorns throughout their territory. Acorns are typically buried beneath the surface of bare sand patches in the scrub during fall, and retrieved and consumed year-round, though most are consumed in fall and winter (DeGange et al. 1989). On the Atlantic Coastal Ridge, acorns are often cached in pine trees, either in forks of branches, in distal pine boughs, under bark, or on epiphytic plants, between 1 to 30 feet in height (Toland 1996). Other small nuts, fruits, and seeds also are eaten (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984).

Many scrub-jays occur in habitat conditions where their long-term persistence is doubtful, although their persistence in these areas can occur for many years (Swain et al. 1995; Stith et al. 1996; Root 1998; Breininger et al. 2001). A primary cause for scrub-jay decline is poor demographic success associated with reductions in fire frequency (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984; Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1991; Schaub et al. 1992; Stith et al. 1996; Breininger et al. 1999). The reduction in fire frequency is associated with increases in shrub height, decreases in open space, increases in tree densities, and the replacement of scrub and marshes by forests (Duncan and Breininger 1998; Schmalzer and Boyle 1998; Duncan et al. 1999). These habitat trajectories result in declines in habitat use and demographic success (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984; Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1991). As a result, mean family size declines, and eventually the number of breeding pairs can decline by 50 percent every 5 to 10 years (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1991; Breininger et al. 1999; Breininger et al. 2001).

Status and distribution

The scrub-jay was federally listed as threatened in 1987 primarily because of habitat fragmentation, degradation, and loss (Service 1987).

Historically, oak scrub occurred as numerous isolated patches in peninsular Florida. These patches were concentrated along both the Atlantic and Gulf coasts and on the central ridges of the peninsula (Davis 1967). Probably until as recently as the 1950s, scrub-jay populations occurred in the scrub habitats of 39 of the 40 counties south of, and including Levy, Gilchrist, Alachua, Clay, and Duval Counties. Historically, most of these counties would have contained hundreds or even thousands of breeding pairs (Fitzpatrick et al. 1994). Only the southernmost county, Monroe, lacked scrub-jays (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996a). Although scrub-jay numbers probably began to decline when European settlement began in Florida (Cox 1987), the decline was first noted in the literature by Byrd (1928). After 40 years of personal observation of the Etonia scrub (now known as Ocala National Forest), Webber (1935) observed many changes to the previously-undisturbed scrub habitat found there, noting that "The advent of man has created a new environmental complex."

A state-wide scrub-jay census was last conducted in 1992 and 1993, at which time there were an estimated 4,000 pairs of scrub-jays left in Florida (Fitzpatrick et al. 1994). At that time, the scrub-jay was considered extirpated in ten counties (Alachua, Broward, Clay, Duval, Gilchrist, Hernando, Hendry, Pinellas, and St. Johns), and were considered functionally extinct in an additional five counties (Flagler, Hardee, Levy, Orange, and Putnam), where ten or fewer pairs remained. Recent information indicates there are at least 12 to 14 breeding pairs of scrub-jays located within Levy County, higher than previously thought (Miller 2004), and there is at least one breeding pair of scrub-jays remaining in Clay County (Miller 2004). A scrub-jay has been documented in St. Johns County as recently as 2003 (Miller 2003). Populations are close to becoming extirpated in Gulf coast counties (from Levy south to Collier) (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996a). In 1992-1993, population numbers in 21 of the counties were below 30 or fewer breeding pairs (Fitzpatrick et al. 1994). Based on the amount of destroyed scrub habitat, scrub-jay population loss along the Lake Wales Ridge is 80 percent or more since pre-European settlement (Fitzpatrick et al. 1991). Since the early 1980s, Fitzpatrick et al. (1994) estimated in the northern third of the species' range, the scrub-jay has declined somewhere between 25 and 50 percent. The species may have declined by as much as 25 to 50 percent in the last decade alone (Stith et al. 1996).

On protected lands, scrub-jays have continued to decline due to inadequate habitat management (Stith 1999). However, over the last several years, steps to reverse this decline have occurred, and management of scrub habitat is continuing in many areas of Florida (Hastie and Eckl 1999; Stith 1999; The Nature Conservancy 2001; Turner et al. 2006).

Stith (1999) utilized a spatially explicit individual-based population model developed specifically for the scrub-jay to complete a metapopulation viability analysis of the species. The species' range was divided into 21 metapopulations demographically isolated from each other. Metapopulations are defined as collections of relatively discrete demographic populations

distributed over the landscape; these populations are connected within the metapopulations through dispersal or migration (Hanski and Gilpin 1991). A series of simulations were run for each of the 21 metapopulations based on different scenarios of reserve design ranging from the minimal configuration consisting of only currently protected patches of scrub (no acquisition option) to the maximum configuration, where all remaining significant scrub patches were acquired for protection (complete acquisition option) (Stith 1999). The assumption was made that all areas that were protected were also restored and properly managed.

Results from Stith's (1999) simulation model included estimates of extinction, quasi-extinction (the probability of a scrub-jay metapopulation falling below 10 pairs), and percent population decline. These were then used to rank the different statewide metapopulations by vulnerability. The model predicted five metapopulations (Northeast Lake, Martin, Merritt Island, Ocala National Forest, and Lake Wales Ridge) have low risk of quasi-extinction. Two of the five (Martin and Northeast Lake), however, experienced significant population declines under the "no acquisition" option; the probability for survival of both of these metapopulations could be improved with more acquisitions.

Eleven of the remaining 21 metapopulations were shown to be highly vulnerable to quasi-extinction if no more habitats were acquired (Central Brevard, North Brevard, Central Charlotte, Northwest Charlotte, Citrus, Lee, Levy, Manatee, Pasco, St. Lucie, and West Volusia). The model predicted the risk of quasi-extinction would be greatly reduced for 7 of the 11 metapopulations (Central Brevard, North Brevard, Central Charlotte, Northwest Charlotte, Levy, St. Lucie, and West Volusia) by acquiring all or most of the remaining scrub habitat. The model predicted the remaining four metapopulations (Citrus, Lee, Manatee, and Pasco) would moderately benefit if more acquisitions were made.

Stith (1999) classified two metapopulations (South Brevard and Sarasota) as moderately vulnerable with a moderate potential for improvement; they both had one or more fairly stable populations of scrub-jays under protection, but the model predicted population declines. The rest of the metapopulations could collapse without further acquisitions, making the protected populations there vulnerable to epidemics or other catastrophes.

Three of the metapopulations evaluated by Stith (1999) (Flagler, Central Lake, and South Palm Beach) were classified as highly vulnerable to quasi-extinction and had low potential for improvement, since little or no habitat is available to acquire or restore.

Current threats

Research and monitoring of scrub-jays has revealed more information about threats to this species since the time the scrub-jay recovery plan was approved in 1990 (Service 1990). The following discussion is intended to give an up-to-date analysis:

The Present or Threatened Destruction, Modification, or Curtailment of its Habitat or Range: Scrub habitats have continued to decline throughout peninsular Florida since listing occurred, and habitat destruction continues to be one of the main threats to the scrub-jay. Cox (1987) noted local extirpations and major decreases in numbers of scrub-jays and attributed them to the clearing of scrub for housing and citrus groves. Eighty percent or more of the scrub

habitats have been destroyed along the Lake Wales Ridge since pre-European settlement (Turner et al. 2006). Fernald (1989), Fitzpatrick et al. (1991), and Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick (1996a) noted that habitat losses due to agriculture, silviculture, and commercial and residential development have continued to play a role in the decline in numbers of scrub-jays throughout the state. State-wide, estimates of scrub habitat loss range from 70 to 90 percent (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996a). Various populations of scrub-jays within the species' range have been monitored closely, and more precise estimates of habitat loss in these locations are available (Snodgrass et al. 1993; Thaxton and Hingtgen 1996).

Toland (1999) estimated about 70 to 78 percent of pre-European settlement scrub habitats had been converted to other uses in Brevard County. This is due mainly to development activity and citrus conversion, which were the most important factors that contributed to the scrub-jay decline between 1940 and 1990. A total of only 10,656 acres of scrub and scrubby flatwoods remain in Brevard County (excluding federal ownership), of which only 1,600 acres (15 percent) is in public ownership for the purposes of conservation. Less than 1,977 acres of an estimated pre-European settlement of 14,826 acres of scrubby flatwoods habitat remain in Sarasota County, mostly occurring in patches averaging less than 2.5 acres in size (Thaxton and Hingtgen 1996). Only 10,673 acres of viable coastal scrub and scrubby flatwoods remained in the Treasure Coast region of Florida (Indian River, Saint Lucie, Martin, and Palm Beach counties) according to Fernald (1989). He estimated 95 percent of scrub had already been destroyed for development purposes in Palm Beach County.

Habitat destruction not only reduces the amount of area scrub-jays can occupy, but also increases fragmentation of habitat. As more scrub habitat is altered, the habitat is cut into smaller and smaller pieces, separated from other patches by larger distances; such fragmentation increases the probability of inbreeding and genetic isolation, which is likely to increase extinction probability (Fitzpatrick et al. 1991; Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1991; Stith et al. 1996; Thaxton and Hingtgen 1996). Dispersal distances of scrub-jays in fragmented habitat are further than in optimal unfragmented habitats, and demographic success is poor (Thaxton and Hingtgen 1996; Breininger 1999).

Disease or Predation: Most scrub-jay mortality probably is from predation (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b). The second most frequent cause may be disease, or predation on disease-weakened scrub-jays (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b). Known predators of scrub-jays are listed by Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick (1990), Fitzpatrick et al. (1991), Schaub et al. (1992), Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick (1996a), Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick (1996b), Breininger (1999), and Miller (2004); the list includes eastern coachwhip (*Masticophis flagellum*, known to eat adults, nestlings, and fledglings), eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon corais couperi*, known to eat adults and fledglings), black racer (*Coluber constrictor*, known to eat eggs), pine snake (*Pituophus melanoleuous*), and corn snake (*E. guttata*). Mammalian predators include bobcats (*Lynx rufus*), raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), sometimes cotton rats (known to eat eggs), black rats, and free-roaming cats (*Felis catus*, known to eat adults). Franzreb and Puschock (2004) also have documented spotted skunks (*Spilogale putorius*) and grey fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*) as mammalian predators of scrub-jay nests. Fitzpatrick et al. (1991) postulate that populations of free-roaming cats are able to eliminate small populations of scrub-jays. Avian nest predators

include the great horned owl (*Bubo virginianus*), eastern screech-owl (*Otus asio*), red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), northern harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), fish crow, boat-tailed grackle (*Quiscalus major*), common grackle (*Q. quiscula*), American crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*), blue jay, and swallow-tailed kites (*Elanoides forficatus*).

Fitzpatrick et al. (1991) reported overgrown scrub habitats are often occupied by the blue jay, which may be one factor limiting scrub-jay populations in such areas. Raptors which seem to be important predators of adult scrub-jays are merlin (*Falco columbarius*), sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*), Cooper's hawk (*A. cooperii*), and northern harrier. During migration and winter, these four raptor species are present in areas which contain scrub habitat, and scrub-jays may experience frequent confrontations (as many as one pursuit a day) with them (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1990).

In coastal scrub, Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick (1996b) report scrub-jays are vulnerable to predation by raptors in October, March, and April, when high densities of migrating accipiters and falcons are present. Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick (1996b) and Toland (1999) suggest in overgrown scrub habitats, hunting efficiency for scrub-jay predators is increased. Bowman and Averill (1993) noted scrub-jays occupying fragments of scrub found in or near housing developments were more prone to predation by house cats and competition from blue jays and mockingbirds. Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick (1996a, 1996b) stated proximity to housing developments (and increased exposure to domestic cats) needs to be taken into consideration when designing scrub preserves. Young scrub-jays are especially vulnerable to ground predators (*e.g*., snakes and mammals) before they are fully capable of sustained flight.

The scrub-jay hosts two protozoan blood parasites (*Plasmodium cathemerium* and *Haemoproteus danilewskyi*), but incidence is low (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b). Several scrub-jays sick from these two agents in March 1992 survived to become breeders. The scrub-jay carries at least three types of mosquito-borne encephalitis: St. Louis, eastern equine, and "Highlands jay" (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b). Of particular concern is the arrival of West Nile virus (the agent of another type of encephalitis) in Florida during 2001 (Stark and Kazanis 2001); since corvids have been particularly susceptible to the disease in states north of Florida, it is expected scrub-jays will be affected (Breininger et al. 2003).

Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick (1996b) noted three episodes of elevated mortality (especially among juveniles) in 26 years at Archbold Biological Station. Each of these incidents occurred in conjunction with elevated water levels following unusually heavy rains in the fall, although high mortality does not occur in all such years. During the most severe of these presumed epidemics (August 1979 through March 1980), all but one of the juvenile cohort and almost half of the breeding adults died (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1984; Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1990). The 1979 through 1980 incident coincided with a known outbreak of eastern equine encephalitis among domestic birds in central Florida (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b). From the fall of 1997 through the spring of 1998, the continuing population decline of scrub-jays along the Atlantic coast and in central Florida may have been augmented by an epidemic of unknown origin (Breininger 1999).

At Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, Stevens and Hardesty (1999) noted a decline in juvenile survival from 60 to 70 percent in the preceding years to only 22 percent in 1997 and 1998. It stayed low (only 25 percent) in 1998 and 1999 before again climbing into the mid-60 percent range. Also, adult survival dropped from 70 to 80 percent survival in the preceding years to 50 to 60 percent in 1997 and 1998. Overall, their annual surveys documented the largest 1-year drop (pairs decreased by 17 percent and birds by 20 percent) in this population at the same time as the presumed statewide epidemic.

In winter-summer of 1973, 15 species of intestinal parasitic fauna (including 8 nematodes, 5 trematodes, 1 cestode, and 1 acanthocephalan) were found in 45 scrub-jays collected in south-central Florida; the parasite load was attributed to a varied arthropod diet (Kinsella 1974). These naturally-occurring parasites are not believed to have a negative impact on scrub-jay population levels.

Larvae of the burrowing fly, *Philornis porteri*, occur irregularly on scrub-jay nestlings. The species pupates in the base of the nest; larvae locate in nasal openings, mouth flanges, bases of flight feathers, and toes; apparently no serious effect on the scrub-jay host occurs (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b). Additionally, one undescribed chewing louse (*Myrsidea* sp.) (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b), one wing-feather mite (*Pterodectes* sp.), two chiggers (*Eutrombicula lipovskyana* and *E. alfreddugesi*), and a flea (sticktight flea [*Echidnophaga gallinacea*]) (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b) occur on some individuals, usually at low densities. Nymphs and larvae of four ticks (*Amblyomma americanum*, *A. tuberculatum*, *Haemaphysalis leporispalustris*, and *Ixodes scapularis*) are known to occur on scrub-jays, as well as the larvae of the tick *A. maculatum* (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b). These naturally-occurring parasites were not believed to have a negative impact on scrub-jay population levels; however, a recent study of the impact of the sticktight flea on scrub-jays indicates low fitness and death can be caused by this parasite (Boughton et al. 2006). The host vector for this flea was a domestic dog (*Canis familiaris*) suggesting introduction of human pets into scrub-jay areas may increase parasite loads and reduce fitness.

The Inadequacy of Existing Regulatory Mechanisms: Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick (1996a) state the importance of enforcing existing Federal laws regarding the management of Federal lands as natural ecosystems for the long-term survival of the scrub-jay. The Service consults regularly on activities on Federal lands which may affect scrub-jays and also works with private landowners through the section 10(a)(1)(B) incidental take permitting process of the Act when take is likely to occur and no Federal nexus is present. Florida's State Comprehensive Plan and Growth Management Act of 1985 is administered mostly by regional and local governments. Regional Planning Councils administer the law through Development of Regional Impact Reviews; at the local level, although comprehensive plans contain policy statements and natural resource protection objectives, they are only effective if counties and municipalities enact and enforce ordinances. As a general rule, counties have not enacted and enforced ordinances that are effective in protecting scrub-jays (Fernald 1989).

The Wildlife Code of the State of Florida (Chapter 68A, Florida Administrative Code) prohibits taking of individuals of threatened species, or parts thereof, or their nests or eggs, except as

authorized. The statute does not prohibit clearing of habitat occupied by protected species, which limits the ability of the FWC to protect the scrub-jay and its habitat.

Other Natural or Man-made Factors Affecting its Continued Existence: Human interference with natural fire regimes has continued to play a major part in the decline of the scrub-jay and today may exceed habitat loss as the single most important limiting factor (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1991; Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996a; Fitzpatrick et al. 1994). Lightning strikes cause virtually all naturally-occurring fires in south Florida scrub habitat (Abrahamson 1984; Hofstetter 1984; Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1990). Fire has been noted to be important in maintenance of scrub habitat for decades (Nash 1895; Harper 1927; Webber 1935; Davis 1943; Laessle 1968; Abrahamson et al. 1984). Human efforts to prevent and/or control natural fires have allowed the scrub to become too dense and tall to support populations of scrub-jays, resulting in the decline of local populations of scrub-jays throughout the State (Fernald 1989; Percival et al. 1995; Stith et al. 1996; Thaxton and Hingtgen 1996; Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1990; Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996a; Toland 1999). Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick (1996a) cautioned, however, fire applied too often to scrub habitat also can result in local extirpations. Data from Archbold Biological Station show that fire-return intervals varying between 8 and 15 years are optimal for long-term maintenance of productive scrub-jay populations in central Florida (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b). These intervals also correspond with those yielding healthy populations of listed scrub plants (Menges and Kohfeldt 1995; Menges and Hawkes 1998). Optimal fire-return intervals may, however, be shorter in coastal habitats (Schmalzer and Hinkle 1992a; Schmalzer and Hinkle 1992b).

Stith et al. (1996) estimated at least 2,100 breeding pairs of scrub-jays were living in overgrown habitat. Toland (1999) reported most of Brevard County's remaining scrub (estimated to be only 15 percent of the original acreage) is overgrown due to fire suppression. He further suggests that the overgrowth of scrub habitats reduces the number and size of sand openings which are crucial not only to scrub-jays, but also many other scrub plants and animals. Reduction in the number of potential scrub-jay nesting sites, acorn cache sites, and foraging sites presents a problem for scrub-jays. Fernald (1989) reported overgrowth of scrub results not only in the decline of species diversity and abundance but also a reduction in the percentage of open sandy patches (Fernald 1989; Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b). Fitzpatrick et al. (1994) believed fire suppression was just as responsible as habitat loss in the decline of the scrub-jay, especially in the northern third of its range. Likewise, the continued population decline of scrub-jays within Brevard County between 1991 and 1999 has been attributed mainly to the overgrowth of remaining habitat patches (Breininger et al. 2001). Breininger et al. (1999) concluded optimal habitat management is essential in fragmented ecosystems maintained by periodic fire, especially to lessen risks of decline and extinction resulting from epidemics and hurricanes.

Fitzpatrick et al. (1991), Fitzpatrick et al. (1994), and Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick (1996a) expressed concern for the management practices taking place on federal lands at Ocala National Forest, Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge at the Kennedy Space Center, and Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, all supporting large contiguous populations of scrub-jays. They predicted fire suppression and/or too frequent fires (on the latter two) and silvicultural activities involving the cultivation of sand pine on Ocala National Forest would be responsible for declines of scrub-jays in these large contiguous areas of scrub. These areas should be those where

populations are most secure because of federal agencies' responsibilities under section 7(a)(1) of the Act. Monitoring of scrub-jay populations, demography, and nesting success is ongoing on all of these properties to assess the effectiveness of management practices in meeting scrub-jay recovery objectives.

Housing and commercial developments within scrub habitats are accompanied by the development of roads. Since scrub-jays often forage along roadsides and other openings in the scrub, they are often killed by passing cars. Research by Mumme et al. (2000) along a two-lane paved road indicated clusters of scrub-jay territories found next to the roadside represented population sinks (breeder mortality exceeds production of breeding-age recruits), which could be supported only by immigration. Since this species may be attracted to roadsides because of their open habitat characteristics, vehicular mortality presents a significant and growing management problem throughout the remaining range of the scrub-jay (Dreschel et al. 1990; Mumme et al. 2000), and proximity to high-speed paved roads needs to be considered when designing scrub preserves (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996a).

Another potential problem in suburban areas supporting scrub-jays is supplemental feeding by humans (Bowman and Averill 1993; Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996a; Bowman 1998). The presence of additional food may allow scrub-jays to persist in fragmented habitats, but recruitment in these populations is lower than in native habitats. However, even though human-feeding may postpone local extirpations, long-term survival cannot be ensured in the absence of protecting native oak scrub habitat necessary for nesting. Scrub-jays in suburban settings often nest high in tall shrubbery. During March high winds, tend to make these nests susceptible to destruction (Woolfenden and Fitzpatrick 1996b; Bowman 1998).

Hurricanes pose a potential risk for scrub-jays, although the exact impact of such catastrophic events is unknown. Breininger et al. (1999) modeled the effects of epidemics and hurricanes on scrub-jay populations in varying levels of habitat quality. Small populations of scrub-jays are more vulnerable to extirpation where epidemics and hurricanes are common. Storm surge from Category Three to Five hurricanes could inundate entire small populations of scrub-jays, and existing habitat fragmentation could prevent repopulation of affected areas. However, this model also predicted long-term habitat degradation had greater influence on extinction risk than hurricanes or epidemics. Preliminary results of the impact of Hurricane Charley on the Charlotte County scrub-jay populations indicates at least one member of all 20 family groups surveyed after the storm passed had survived (Miller 2006).

Fernald (1989) reported many of the relatively few remaining patches of scrub within the Treasure Coast region of Florida had been degraded by trails created by off-road vehicles, illegal dumping of construction debris, abandoned cars and appliances, or household waste. The invasion of these areas by exotic species, including Brazilian pepper (*Schinus terebinthifolius*), white cypress-pine (*Callitris glaucophylla*), and Australian pine (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) also was a problem. Other human-induced impacts identified by Fernald (1989) include the introduction of domestic dogs and free-roaming cats, black rats, greenhouse frogs (*Eleutherodactylus planirostris*), giant toads (*Bufo marinus*), Cuban tree frogs (*Osteopilus septentrionalis*), brown anoles (*Anolis sagrei*), and other exotic animal species. These exotic species may compete with scrub-jays for space and food.

Analysis of the species/critical habitat likely to be affected

The scrub-jay's status since its listing in 1987 has not improved. The status and trends we discussed above clearly shows what two items are essential for recovery of this species: (1) additional purchase of xeric oak scrub for preservation in key areas, and (2) restoration and management of publicly-owned xeric oak scrub already under preservation. Without both, it is unlikely recovery can be achieved.

ENVIRONMENTAL BASELINE

The environmental baseline includes the past and present impacts of all Federal, State, or private actions and other human activities in the action area, the anticipated impacts of all proposed Federal projects in the action area that have already undergone formal or early section 7 consultation, and the impact of State or private actions, which are contemporaneous with the consultation in progress.

Action Area

Florida Scrub-Jay

The action area for this biological opinion is defined as the Avon Park Air Force Range (APAFR). The APAFR is a large, active military range used by the U.S. Air Force and the National Guard for live-fire bombing and gunnery practice. A state prison, juvenile detention facility, and numerous other buildings are located onsite. A majority of the 106,073-acre APAFR remains in natural habitats, although 2,199 acres (889 hectares) are developed, and 19,728 acres (7983 ha; 19 percent) were converted to pine plantations in the 1960s and 1970s. Lake Arbuckle and Arbuckle Creek form the western boundary, while the Kissimmee River forms the eastern boundary.

Status of the Species within the Action Area

Florida Scrub-Jay

At the beginning of the long-term demographic work on scrub-jays at APAFR in 1994, the population consisted of over 300 individuals in 85 groups. The APAFR scrub-jay population then declined, reaching its lowest recorded level of 165 birds in 51 groups. Management efforts to restore overgrown scrub in 1999 and 2001 throughout scrub-jay habitat at APAFR, helped stabilize the population and bring about population increases in some areas, largely the South Ridge HMU; a 2,000 acre patch of scrub located south of Kissimmee Road. The population increased slightly to 54 groups with 163 individuals in 2003, largely due to growth in the South Ridge. However, between 2003 and 2007, the number of groups at APAFR had declined by two, the number of individuals in the population decreased by 20 percent, and the mean group size decreased by 17 percent. These more recent declines can be partially attributed to years of very low productivity in 2003, 2005, and 2007 (Bowman et al 2008). This pattern was similar throughout the range of the scrub-jay on the Lake Wales Ridge.

Quality of the Site's Scrub

The scrub along the haul road and around the dip vat site consists of approximately 15 acres of scrub oaks (*Quercus inopina*), (*Q. geminata*), (*Q. mytifolia*), and (*Q. chapmanii*), interspersed with open pine savannah. This area has been burned in the past 5 years and is in excellent condition for scrub-jays. The 1-acre dip vat area itself where the contaminated soil excavation will take place consists of non-native grass species, mainly bahia grass (*Paspalum notatum*), cogon grass (*Imperata cylindrica*) and other species. A small oak hammock, less than 1 acre is situated to the east of the excavation site.

Relationship of the Project Site to the Action Area

A total of three scrub-jay territories occur within the vicinity of the dip vat project site. At the end of the 2008 breeding season, one territory consisted of a mating pair and two fledglings, the other territory consisted of a mated pair with no fledglings, and the other of an unmated male (Bowman, et al. 2008).

One territory is located adjacent to the project site. This scrub-jay family has been monitored since the year 2006 when its territory included most of the project site. In 2007, the scrub-jay family shifted their territory to the west and extended it to the north. In 2008, the jays shifted their territory slightly further to the west and retracted northern portion to the historic northern limit as shown in Figure (4). The subject 1-acre project parcel has not been occupied by the resident scrub-jay family since the year 2007. The haul road cuts through the current territory of the resident scrub-jay family (Figure 4).

EFFECTS OF THE ACTION

This section includes an analysis of the direct and indirect effects of the proposed action on the species and critical habitat and its interrelated and interdependent activities. To determine whether the proposed action is likely to jeopardize the continued existence of threatened or endangered species in the action area, we focus on consequences of the proposed action that affect rates of birth, death, immigration, and emigration because the probability of extinction in plant and animal populations is most sensitive to changes in these rates.

<u>Florida Scrub-Jay</u>

Factors to be Considered

Most of the project site occurs outside a known Florida scrub-jay territory. Activities associated with this project (*e.g.,* hauling of hazardous material) will occur within an active scrub-jay territory. The project footprint has been disturbed and currently contains shrub vegetation. Critical habitat has not been designated for this species. The timing of construction for this project relative to sensitive periods of the Florida scrub-jay's lifecycle is known. Florida scrub-jays may be found within and adjacent to the proposed work year-round. The project will not result in permanent loss and alteration of the native upland vegetation within the project site.

The time required to complete construction of the project is known. Removal of shrubs and scrub oaks and the transportation of contaminated soil will be completed in a month. The disturbance associated with the project will not be permanent and may result in a temporary loss of habitat currently available to the Florida scrub-jay.

Analyses for Effects of the Action

Beneficial Effects – The proposed project will result in the removal of contaminated soil and the source of water pollution in an area inhabited by scrub-jays. While the effect of contaminants on scrub-jay has not been established, it can be inferred that high concentration of arsenic and other chemicals in the area may have a negative effect on the Florida scrub-jay and its prey base. Hence, the proposed clean-up is likely to have beneficial effects on the resident population of scrub-jays.

Direct Effects - The proposed clean-up may result in harm, injury, or death of Florida scrub-jays. Harm may occur through the temporary removal of scrub oaks on 0.3 acre of habitat that is occupied by one family of scrub-jays comprised of three birds. If the area being temporarily impacted is critical to the resident scrub-jays, there is the possibility that they may abandon their territory or be forced to compete with other scrub-jay families known to have established territories in the vicinity.

Take may occur if scrub oaks likely to be removed contain scrub-jay nests. However, scrub oak removal will take place prior to or early in the nesting season when jays are not likely to have engaged in nesting activities. All scrub-oaks and other vegetation will be carefully inspected for the presence of bird nests. Scrub oaks will be allowed to regenerate as the haul road has little use for other activities.

Direct take of scrub-jay may occur as a result of collision with trucks transporting hazardous material outside the project site. The probability of direct take through collisions with trucks will be minimized by having a speed limit of 15 miles per hour on the portion of the haul road within the scrub-jay territory.

Interrelated and Interdependent Actions –

Interdependent Effects: As part of the clean-up activities, an existing dirt road will be widened and refurnished for temporary use by haul trucks. The subject road cuts across an active scrub-jay territory.

Interrelated Effects: There are no interrelated actions associated with the proposed action that are expected to impact the Florida scrub-jay.

Indirect Effects - Indirect effects are caused by or result from the proposed action, are later in time, and are reasonably certain to occur. Indirect effects may occur outside of the area directly affected by the action. Indirect effects may include other Federal actions that have not undergone section 7 consultations, but will result from the action under consideration.

Indirect affects are unlikely to occur as a result of the proposed project. The proposed clean-up will occur within the APAFR. The APAFR is not likely to undergo urban development or be subject to uses other than live-fire bombing and gunnery practice. Hence, increased traffic, habitat fragmentation, increment of domestic bird predators, are not likely to result from the proposed clean-up.

CUMULATIVE EFFECTS

Cumulative effects include the effects of future State, Tribal, local, or private actions that are reasonably certain to occur in the action area considered in this biological opinion. Future Federal actions that are unrelated to the proposed action are not considered in this section because they require separate consultation pursuant to Section 7 of the Act.

The Avon Park Air Force Range is unlikely to be affected by State, Tribal, local and private actions. Hence, cumulative effects in the Action Area are unlikely to occur.

Factors Affecting Species Environment Within the Action Area

The action area constitutes military property and is not likely to be subject to uses other than the current uses as live-fire bombing and gunnery practice.

SUMMARY

Florida Scrub-Jay

Activities associated with this project may result in temporary loss of scrub-jay habitat, collision between scrub-jays and haul trucks within an active scrub-jay territory, and accidental take of jay nests. The applicant has made an effort to minimize the potential impacts of the proposed project and proposes to establish a maximum speed limit of 15 miles per hour for haul trucks entering and leaving the project area. The applicant will inspect every scrub oak and other vegetation on the excavation site and along the haul road for the presence of scrub-jay nests prior to the temporary removal of surface vegetation. Regeneration and re-establishment of scrub-jay habitat will begin to occur after completion of the proposed clean-up project.

From the information presented above, the following facts are apparent: (1) Florida scrub-jays are dependent on continuous human management of scrub habitat; (2) Florida scrub-jay recovery depends on additional purchase of scrub lands in key areas and effective restoration and management of protected lands; (3) succession of unmanaged scrub habitat is as important a factor in the decline of Florida scrub-jay populations as is loss of habitat to competing land uses; and (4) with respect to the action area for this project, preservation and management of Florida scrub-jay habitat would enhance the potential for survival of the APAFR population and interchange with other populations within Highlands County improving chances for their long-term persistence.

CONCLUSION

After reviewing the current status of the Florida scrub-jay, the environmental baseline for the action area, the effects of the proposed action, and the cumulative effects, it is the Service's biological

opinion that the proposed project is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the Florida scrub-jay. No critical habitat has been designated for this species; therefore, none will be affected.

INCIDENTAL TAKE

Sections 4(d) and 9 of the Act, as amended, prohibit taking (harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture or collect or to attempt to engage in any such conduct) of listed species of fish or wildlife without a special exemption. "Harm" and "harass" are further defined in Service regulations (50 CFR 17.3). "Harm" is defined to include significant habitat modification or degradation that results in death or injury to listed species by significantly impairing behavioral patterns such as breeding, feeding, or sheltering. "Harass" is defined as an intentional or negligent act or omission which creates the likelihood of injury to wildlife by annoying it to such an extent as to significantly disrupt normal behavior patterns, which include, but are not limited to, breeding, feeding or sheltering.

Under the terms of sections 7(b)(4) and 7(o)(2), taking that is incidental to and not intended as part of the agency action is not considered a prohibited taking provided that such taking is in compliance with the terms and conditions of this incidental take statement.

The measures described below are non-discretionary, and must be implemented by the agency so they become binding conditions of any grant or permit issued to the applicant, as appropriate, in order for the exemption in section 7(o)(2) to apply.

The Federal agency has a continuing responsibility to regulate the activity that is covered by this incidental take statement. If the agency (1) fails to require the applicant to adhere to the terms and conditions of the incidental take statement through enforceable terms that are added to the permit or grant document, or (2) fails to retain oversight to ensure compliance with these terms and conditions, the protective coverage of section 7(o)(2) may lapse.

Section 7(b)(4) and 7(o)(2) of the Act do not apply to the incidental take of listed plant species. However, protection of listed plants is provided to the extent that the Act requires a Federal permit for removal or reduction to possession of endangered plants from areas under Federal jurisdiction, or for any act that would remove, cut, dig up, or damage or destroy any such species on any State or in the course of any violation of a State criminal trespass law.

AMOUNT OR EXTENT OF TAKE

The Service anticipates that 0.3 acre of occupied scrub-jay habitat will be temporarily impacted to allow trucks to travel to and from the clean-up site. The Service expects incidental take of the scrub-jay will be difficult to detect for the following reasons: We do not know the current reproductive rate of the scrub-jays that are impacted and any birds that are injured or killed from collisions with trucks heading to and from the clean up site will be difficult to find. However, the level of take of this species can be expected by loss of 0.3 acre of scrub habitat that is being used by one scrub-jay family comprised of three birds.

EFFECT OF THE TAKE

In this biological opinion, the Service determined that this level of anticipated take is not likely to result in jeopardy to the Florida scrub-jay or destruction or adverse modification of critical habitat.

REASONABLE AND PRUDENT MEASURES

When providing an incidental take statement the Service is required to give reasonable and prudent measures it considers necessary or appropriate to minimize the take along with terms and conditions that must be complied with, to implement the reasonable and prudent measures. Furthermore, the Service must also specify procedures to be used to handle or dispose of any individuals taken. The Service believes the following reasonable and prudent measures are necessary and appropriate to reduce take:

1. Avoid the potential for Florida scrub-jays to be injured or killed by trucks heading to and from the project site or the destruction of active scrub-jay nests as part of the temporary removal of scrub oaks and other vegetation.

2. Continue with the scrub management at the APAFR.

3. Notify the Service of any unauthorized take of Florida scrub-jays.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS

To implement the above reasonable and prudent measures, the Service has outlined the following terms and conditions for incidental take. In accordance with the Interagency Cooperation Regulation (50 CFR 402), these terms and conditions <u>must be</u> complied with, to implement the reasonable and prudent measures for incidental take.

1. To minimize the likelihood of collisions between scrub-jays and trucks, the applicant has established a maximum speed limit of 15 miles per hour for vehicles transporting hazardous material or entering the project site.

2. To minimize the likelihood of taking scrub-jay nests, contractors will be instructed to inspect every scrub oak and other vegetation prior to removal.

3. The applicant will continue with the management plan established for the APAFR.

If a dead Florida scrub-jay is found on the project site, the specimen should be frozen, and the applicant should notify the South Florida Ecological Services Office in Vero Beach, Florida immediately at 772-562-3909.

CONSERVATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Section 7(a)(1) of the Act directs Federal agencies to utilize their authorities to further the purpose of the Act by carrying out conservation programs for the benefit of endangered and threatened species. Conservation recommendations are discretionary agency activities to minimize or avoid adverse effects of a proposed action on listed species or critical habitat, to help implement recovery plans, or to develop information.

1. The APAFR has an established habitat management program of the lands within its jurisdiction. The Service encourages the long term continuation of management of habitat supporting listed species.

2. The APAFR acts as counterpart of an ongoing research program focusing on species such as the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*), the Florida grasshopper sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum floridanus*), and the threatened Florida scrub-jay. These research project are expected to continue providing insights on the conservation and management of listed species.

In order for the Service to be kept informed of actions minimizing or avoiding adverse effects or benefiting listed species or their habitats, the Service requests notification of the implementation of any conservation measures.

REINITIATION OF SECTION 7 CONSULTATION

This concludes formal consultation on the actions outlined in the request. As provided in 50 CFR §402.16, reinitiation of formal consultation is required when discretionary Federal agency involvement or control over the action has been retained and if: (1) new information reveals effects of the agency action that may affect listed species or critical habitat in a manner or to an extent not considered in this biological opinion, (2) the Corps' action is subsequently modified in a manner that causes an effect to the listed species or critical habitat not considered in this biological opinion, or (3) a new species is listed or critical habitat designated that may be affected by the action.

Thank you for your cooperation and effort in protecting fish and wildlife resources. If you have any questions regarding this biological opinion, please contact Al Begazo at 772-562-3909, extension 234.

Sincerely yours,

Paul Souza
Field Supervisor
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cc: electronic only
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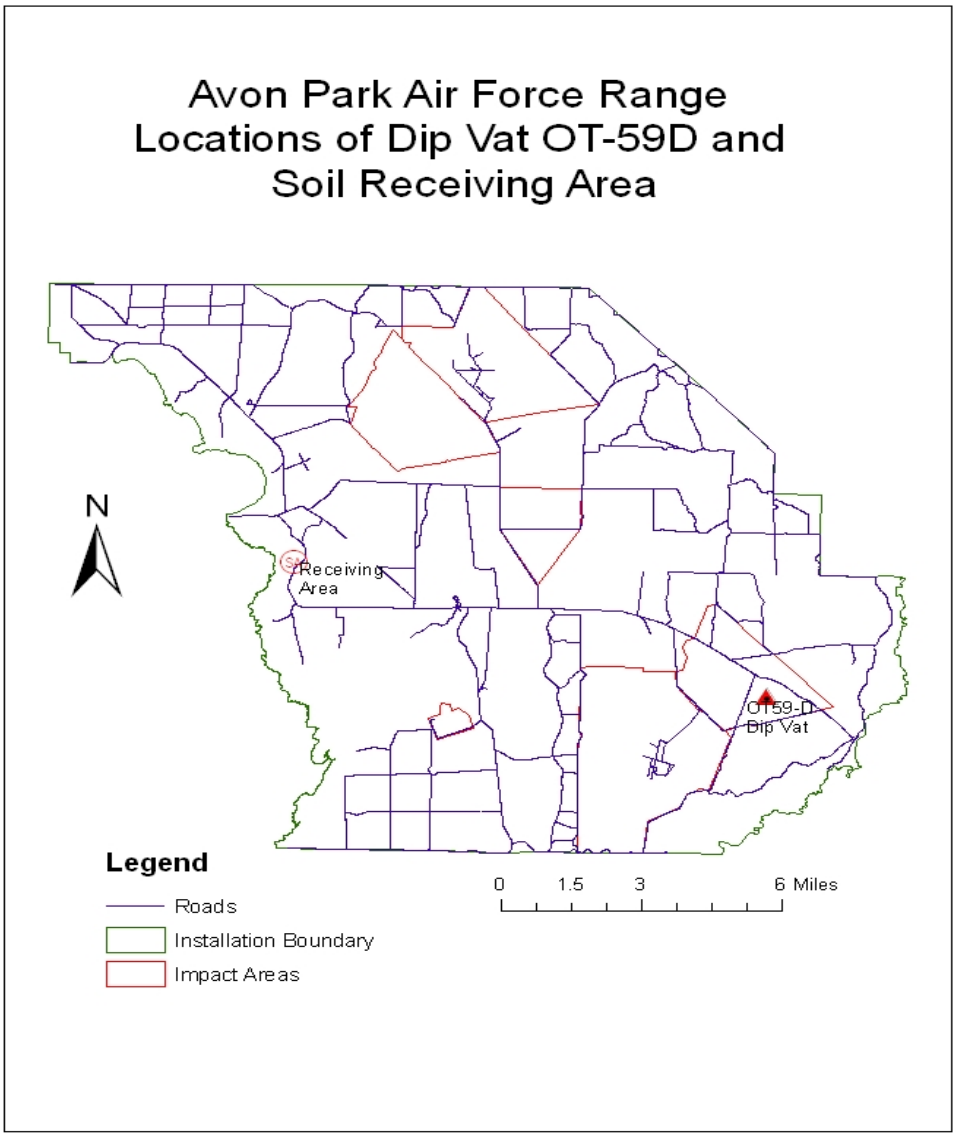

Figure 1. Map indicating the location of the project site and the soil receiving area.

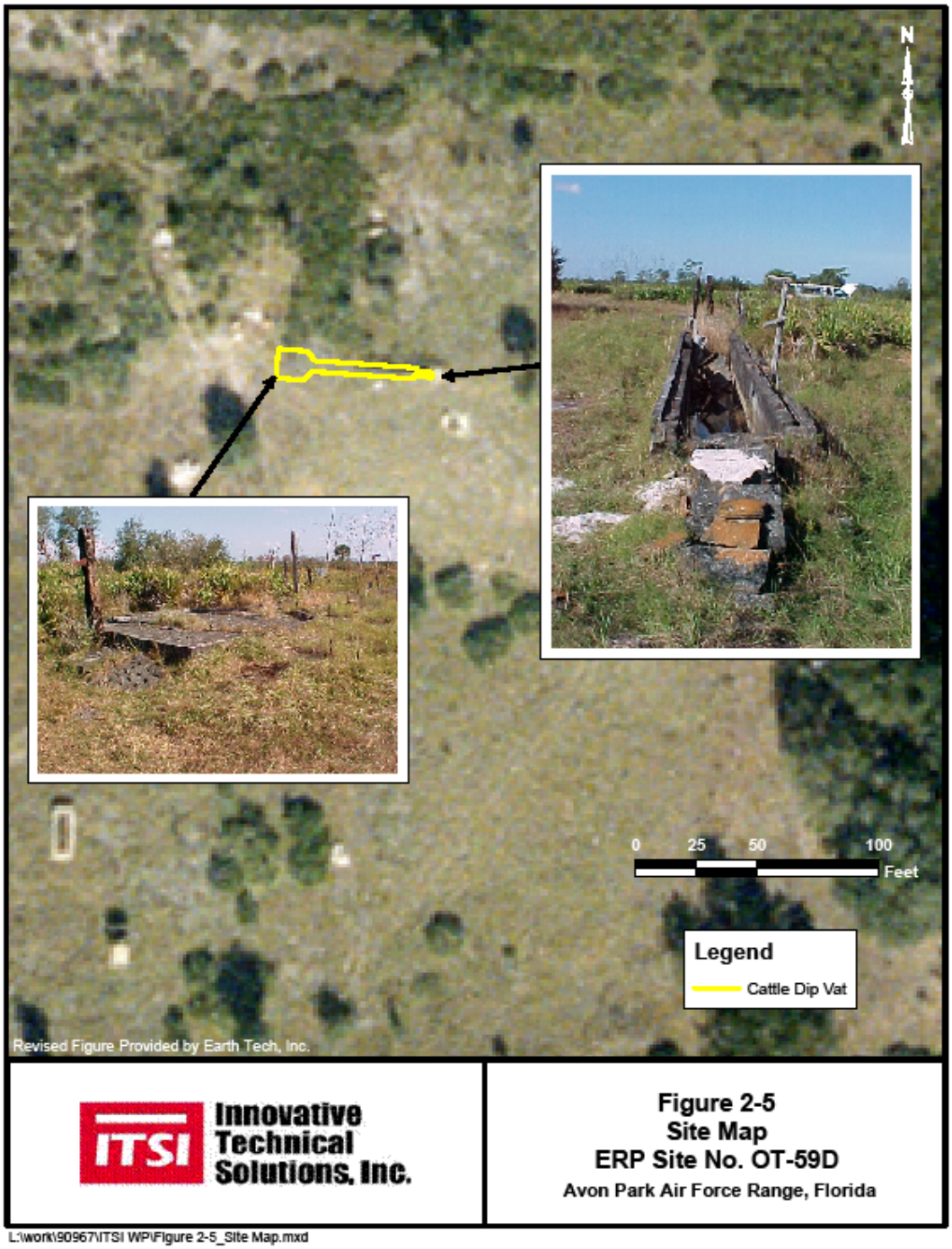

Figure 2. Picture showing the current status of the abandoned dip vat.

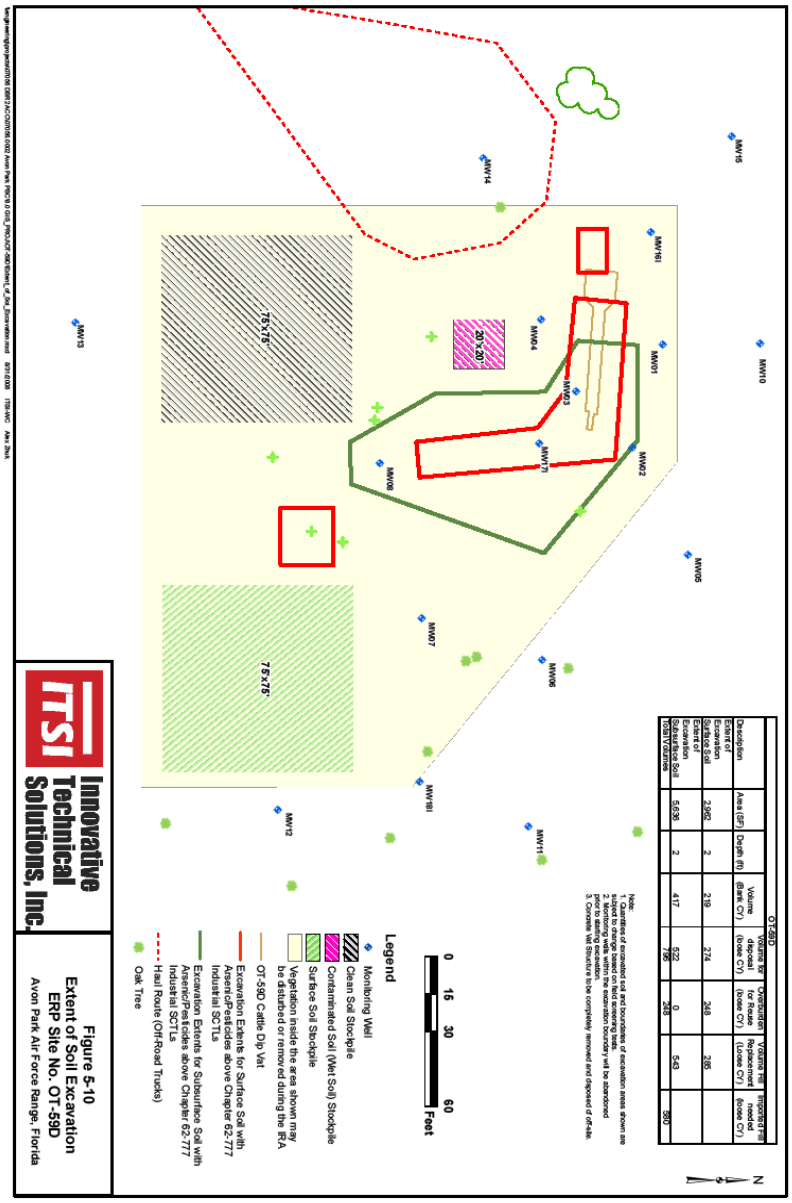

Figure 3. Map of the project site showing the location of the dip vat, proposed location of stock piles, and haul road.

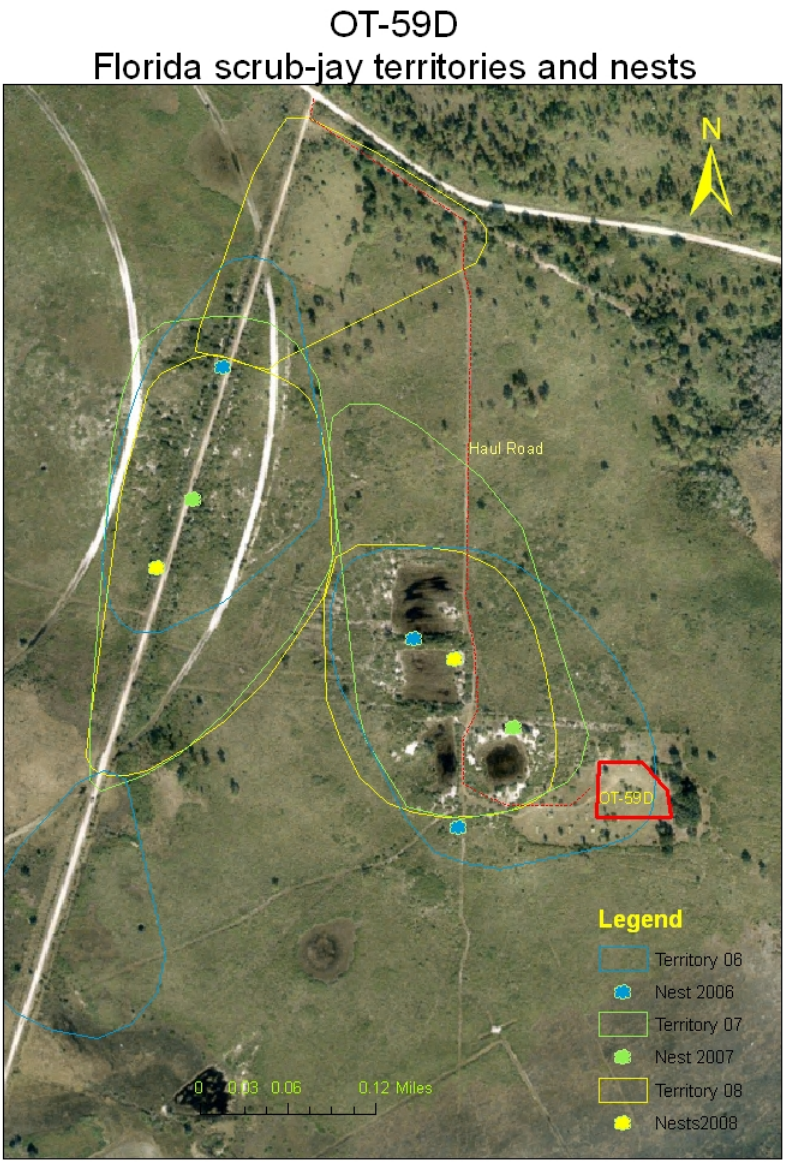

Figure 4. Map showing the project site and adjacent scrub-jay territories.