



Florida Department of Transportation

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SECRETARY

February 28, 2020

FWC Commenting Coordinator
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
620 S. Meridian Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Transmitted via email to fwcconservationplanningservices@myfwc.com

RE: LISTED SPECIES COORDINATION
Project Name: Suncoast Parkway 2 (SR 589) – From SR 44 TO CR 486
FPID No.: 442764-1
Location: Township 18 S, Range 18 E, Sections 29, 30, 32
County: Citrus

To Whom it May Concern:

The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), Florida's Turnpike Enterprise (Turnpike), previously known as the FDOT, Turnpike District, completed a State Environmental Impact Report (SEIR) for the proposed Suncoast Parkway – Project 2, a four-lane limited-access divided toll facility from US 98 in Hernando County to US 19/98 in Citrus County, on February 6, 1998. As you are aware, Turnpike has designed and permitted the section from US 98 to SR 44 and is proposing the construction northward from its intersection with State Road (SR) 44 to County Road (CR) 486, a distance of approximately 2.4 miles (Figure 1). The project includes stormwater treatment facilities designed to accommodate the ultimate eight (8) lane condition and an extension of the Suncoast Trail along the proposed alignment. The proposed project right-of-way (ROW) width is 350 ft, and the project area is approximately 208 acres. The purpose of this new alignment is to extend the Suncoast Parkway, which will increase mobility between the Tampa Bay region and Citrus County and relieve traffic congestion on local routes. ROW acquisition will be required. Permanent lighting is also proposed to meet roadway safety criteria.

Turnpike proposes that the project will not jeopardize the continued existence of protected species and is seeking the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) review and comment on the proposed finding that the project may affect state-protected resources. This project is also being coordinated with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to address federally protected species.

Existing Conditions

Seventeen land use and vegetative cover type classifications were mapped within the project area, based upon the Florida Land Use, Cover, and Forms Classification system (FLUCCS) data (Southwest Florida Water Management District 2014) (Figure 2). Approximately one-fourth of the project area (50 acres) was mapped as relatively natural habitat, which is predominately upland hardwood forest (FLUCCS 4200 and 4340) with nine acres of long leaf pine – xeric oak forest (FLUCCS 4120). There are no state lands or conservation easements within the proposed extension. Natural habitats within the project area are in private ownership, are fire-suppressed and fragmented by lands modified or developed for human use. Agriculture, mining, utilities, transportation, and residential development comprise the remainder of the project area land uses. Table 1 lists these land use classifications, as well as the approximate acreage and percentage of each land use designation within the project area. Please note that there are no wetland or water related land uses in the proposed project area.

Table 1. Existing land use within the project area

FLUCCS	Description	Acres	Percent of Project Area
1100	RESIDENTIAL LOW DENSITY < 2 DWELLING UNITS PER ACRE	18.9	9.1%
1180	RURAL RESIDENTIAL 2 TO 5 ACRES FOR EACH DWELLING	15.5	7.4%
1300	RESIDENTIAL HIGH DENSITY	0.1	0.0%
1500	INDUSTRIAL	0.5	0.2%
1600	EXTRACTIVE	68.0	32.7%
1700	INSTITUTIONAL	0.4	0.2%
2110	IMPROVED PASTURES	12.6	6.1%
2120	UNIMPROVED PASTURES	9.9	4.8%
3100	HERBACEOUS	11.7	5.6%
3300	MIXED RANGELAND	8.5	4.1%
4120	LONGLEAF PINE - XERIC OAK	9.1	4.4%
4200	UPLAND HARDWOOD FORESTS	7.8	3.8%
4340	UPLAND HARDWOOD - CONIFEROUS MIX	31.7	15.2%
4400	TREE PLANTATION	6.0	2.9%
6530	INTERMITTENT PONDS	1.1	0.5%
8100	TRANSPORTATION	1.4	0.7%
8300	UTILITIES	4.7	2.3%
	Total	207.9	100%

Protected Species

Literature and database searches were conducted using information from the FWS, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), and the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI). Based on information collected from these sources, state and federally protected species that have historically been documented in the project area or may occur within or adjacent to the project area and the anticipated project impact, are discussed below.

Five state-listed species are documented or have the potential to, occur in the project area. Although species specific surveys were not conducted during the development of the 1998 SEIR, numerous environmental scientist-led field surveys were conducted during the history of this project. State regulated species observations within the project area were recorded for the gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*), southeastern American kestrel (*Falco sparverius paulus*), and Sherman's fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger shermani*- reclassified as southern fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger niger*)). In addition, confirmed observations for the southern fox squirrel, gopher tortoise, Florida mouse (*Podomys floridanus*), gopher frog (*Lithobates capito*), and Florida pine snake (*Pituophis melanoleucus mugitus*) were documented during clearing activities associated with the construction of the Suncoast Parkway 2 section from US 98 to SR 44. All specimens encountered were addressed in accordance with the associated FWC permits. No other state listed species have been observed in the corridor by project environmental scientists at various points in the project development or design process since project activities started in 1996.

1. Short-tailed snake (*Lampropeltis extenuate*)

The short-tailed snake is considered a cryptic species and therefore, field surveys are not recommended or proposed to document presence within the project area. Based on the current permitting guidelines, the project area falls within the one of the three counties identified by FWC habitat models to contain 60% of the suitable habitat within the species' range. Although the project area contains habitat types suitable for this species, historic and current land alterations including conversion to low-density residential and agriculture as well as fire suppression, soil compaction and mining activities have resulted in the project containing low quality habitat. Therefore, Turnpike is proposing the project would result in a low likelihood of incidental take of this species.

2. Florida pine snake (*Pituophis melanoleucus mugitus*)

The Florida pine snake is considered a cryptic species and therefore, field surveys are not recommended or proposed to document presence within the project area. However, Florida pine snakes have been documented near the project area as described above. Based on the current permitting guidelines, the project area falls within the species' range and contains gopher tortoise burrows. Based on the latest survey data collected in 2009, approximately 300 gopher tortoise burrows were recorded within the project area. Although the project area contains habitat types suitable for this species, historic and current land alterations including conversion to low-density residential and agriculture as well as fire suppression, soil compaction and mining activities have resulted in the project containing sub-optimal habitat. Therefore, Turnpike is proposing the project would result in a low likelihood of incidental take of this species.

3. Southeastern American kestrel (*Falco sparverius paulus*)

The southeastern American kestrel has been documented historically within and recently near the project area during project related field studies. Species-specific surveys for the southeastern American kestrel will be conducted to determine presence within the project area. If Southeastern American kestrel utilization is documented within the project area, Turnpike will coordinate with FWC.

4. Florida burrowing owl (*Speotyto cunicularia floridana*)

Based on the current permitting guidelines, the project area falls within the species' range and contains potential suitable habitat. The nearest documented burrowing owl observation is over 6 miles south of the project area and no owls or evidence of nesting was documented during more recent general wildlife surveys of the project corridor to the south or the entire corridor since project activities started in 1996. Therefore, utilization of the project area is not anticipated. Turnpike will perform species specific surveys to determine presence within the project area according to the approved survey methods. If burrowing owls are documented utilizing the project area, Turnpike will coordinate with FWC.

5. Gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*)

Suitable gopher tortoise habitat exists within the project area and gopher tortoises have been documented within the project area. Based on the latest survey data collected in 2009, approximately 300 burrows were recorded within the project area. Turnpike will perform species specific surveys and obtain a relocation permit from FWC in accordance with the current FWC Gopher Tortoise Permitting Guidelines as required for all unavoidable impacts to potentially occupied burrows.

Five federally listed species are historically documented from, or have the potential to, occur in the project area:

- Eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon corais couperi*): *May affect*
- Florida scrub-jay (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*): *No effect* (based on historical survey results to be confirmed by pending survey results)
- Red cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*): *No effect*
- Bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*): *No effect*
- Wood stork (*Mycteria americana*): *No effect*

Preliminary project impact determinations for these species were discussed during a December 11, 2019 Go-To Meeting with FWS.

FWS records indicate an Eastern Indigo Snake (EIS) was observed within 1 mile of the project area in the 1990's. Because of its cryptic nature, species-specific surveys for EIS are not proposed and it is anticipated that the proposed project will receive a **May affect** (A>B>C>D) determination based on the Eastern Indigo Snake Programmatic Key (2013).

Because four Florida scrub-jay groups were documented near the project area in the 1998 SEIR study, rigorous species-specific surveys were conducted by Turnpike in the early 2000s and again in the spring and fall of 2007–2009. Surveys were repeated in the spring of 2014 based on agency approved survey methods. Survey results indicate that scrub-jays are no longer present within the proposed project area. However, Turnpike has requested technical assistance from the FWS and will fulfill an existing Planning, Development and Environment (PD&E) commitment to survey all Type I Florida scrub jay habitat within the project area and all-natural habitat within ¼ mile of the Type I habitat. Pending these survey results, the project is anticipated to have **No effect** on the Florida scrub-jay.

A **No effect** determination is also anticipated for red cockaded woodpecker, bald eagle and wood stork because of lack of suitable habitat within the project area confirmed by previous habitat assessments and surveys within the corridor.

Avoidance and Minimization Measures

Unlike commercial or residential developments, the routing and construction of a highway system is often less flexible. The 1998 approved SEIR documented the avoidance and minimization measures implemented for the selected alternative. Design level avoidance and minimization measures are more limited given the placement of the already constructed Suncoast Parkway, and some impacts cannot be further avoided or minimized.

Despite these restrictions, Turnpike is avoiding and minimizing impacts to the greatest reasonable extent in final design.

Relevant minimization measures that Turnpike proposes to implement include the following:

- Following the Standard Protection Measures for Eastern Indigo Snake (FWS 2013) during the construction of the Parkway. These protection measures will also be adapted to provide protection measures for the short-tailed snake and Florida pine snake. If a clutch of snake eggs is discovered while performing gopher tortoise relocation activities, the snake eggs would be removed without rotation and placed in moist sand. If identified as eastern indigo snake, eggs will be taken to the Orianne Center for Indigo Conservation (OCIC) for incubation and captive rearing to benefit the OCIC eastern indigo snake reintroduction program. If eggs are identified as a state listed species, FWC will be contacted within 24 hours. Agents authorized to temporarily handle eastern indigo snakes and their eggs for this purpose would be limited to the following qualified personnel: Biological Monitors, FWC-approved Gopher Tortoise Authorized Agents and their designated Assistants, and Environmental Inspectors with experience identifying and handling eastern indigo snakes.
- Installing and maintaining silt fence along the entire project boundary to help reduce wildlife interactions within the construction zone, in addition to the silt fence operating as an erosion and turbidity control measure.
- Limiting clearing and grubbing to only those areas necessary for construction.
- If survey results indicate Southeastern American kestrel nests are within the project area, Turnpike proposes installing kestrel nesting boxes adjacent to the Parkway within the multi-use path portion of the project area to provide supplemental nesting habitat for this species.
- Adjacent habitat is available to receive gopher tortoise commensals from the project area. Any incidentally captured commensals, including pine snakes, occurring from authorized gopher tortoise relocation activities will be released on-site or allowed to escape unharmed according to the current FWC Policy on the Relocation of Priority Commensals.

Mitigation Measures

FDOT has committed to providing mitigation for unavoidable direct impacts associated with the project. Turnpike proposes the following minimization measures and mitigation options:

- Provide habitat credits as required from Platt Branch Mitigation Bank for impacts to

eastern indigo snake habitat.

- Provide identification information to project personnel and direct workers to avoid directly harming short-tailed and Florida pine snakes.
- Allow listed species observed during construction activities to move safely away from an area by ceasing activity until the listed species has moved away.
- Report live and dead listed species observations to FWC
- Provide any listed species specimens discovered to FWC for location vouchers, etc.

Your review and comment of the proposed findings for this project will be greatly appreciated. Should you have any questions or comments concerning the proposed project, please contact Tiffany Crosby at 407-264-3828 or Tiffany.Crosby@dot.state.fl.us.

Sincerely,



Annemarie Hammond
Environmental Permits Coordinator
Florida's Turnpike Enterprise

Attachments: Location Map, Land Use Map

cc: Terry Gilbert, FWC
Tiffany Crosby, Atkins