

Gulf Coast Parkway

Wildlife and Habitat Action Plan

The Project Development and Environment (PD&E) Study for the Gulf Coast Parkway will be developed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended; and to comply with all federal and state laws and requirements. Given that the alternatives developed for the proposed project will be on new alignment or in combination with existing roadways, the level of documentation will be an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Coordination with state, federal and local agencies, including those with jurisdiction over the referenced requirements, will be conducted throughout the EIS process.

In order to further define the project study, a scoping meeting will be conducted with the regulatory agencies to ensure that the scope of work adequately addresses all of the issues raised by the agencies. Agency coordination will continue throughout the study with regular conference calls to report on the project's progress and discuss agency concerns. The project team will meet with the Environmental Technical Assistance Team (ETAT) at key points in the study's development. In addition, the ETAT will have the opportunity to formally comment during the review period for the Draft EIS, Final EIS and Record of Decision (ROD).

Several members of the ETAT, through their review of the project in the Efficient Transportation Decision Making (ETDM) Programming Screen, had comments regarding a number of environmental issues. While Action Plans have been prepared to address several issues, the focus of this plan are the procedures used to address those comments concerning potential impacts of the proposed action to Wildlife and Habitat. Concerns expressed include the need to produce an EIS to adequately address the potential impacts from the proposed action, the potential for direct, indirect and cumulative impacts to state and federally listed species by the proposed action, habitat fragmentation, increased risk of road kill, the need for seasonal surveys to confirm the presence or absence of listed flora and fauna, and consideration of the loss and degradation of adjacent habitat utilized by migratory birds.

Given that the information in the ETDM programming screen was on the corridor level, most of these issues raised by ETAT members will be addressed during the development of alignments within the corridors selected for further study. Estimates of impacts will be based on the right-of-way width for the alternative(s) developed rather than the corridor widths. The general study process that will be utilized to address those issues raised by the agencies is as follows:

- The study team will coordinate with the FFWCC to establish an appropriate methodology to assess the presence of Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) and/or their suitable habitats. Due to the large coverage area of this project, this analysis will likely be desktop based with some field investigation for

more detailed verification. The list of SGCN and the list of 45 habitat categories are in Florida's Wildlife Legacy Initiative, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FFWCC) Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy.

The study team will conduct field investigations to identify the nature and extent of the natural resources within the alternative alignments in accordance with Part 2 of the FDOT *PD&E Manual*. This will include the identifying the location of wildlife, listed species, and their habitats within the alternative alignments, including vegetation surveys during the various flowering seasons, and the evaluation of habitat types and quality.

- An analysis of potential impacts of the proposed alternatives on listed species and habitats will include an evaluation of the connectivity between related populations and the potential for fragmentation of habitats.
- Based upon the data gathered and coordination with the agencies, adjustments will be made and/or design changes implemented to the alternative alignments, to minimize or avoid impacts where feasible to do so.
- Coordination with the FFWCC as well as informal Section 7 consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has been initiated as part of this process. If necessary, formal consultation under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act will be conducted.
- A Biological Assessment (BA) will be prepared that documents the field survey methodology, the presence of wildlife, including threatened and/or endangered species, that occur or have a potential to occur within the alternatives, the availability of habitat for these species, potential impacts of the project alternatives, and measures to avoid, minimize, or mitigate for involvement with listed species and critical habitat. The BA will also address species afforded protection under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Marine Mammals Protection Act, and the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act.
- The Essential Fish Habitat Assessment conducted for this project will be incorporated into the Biological Assessment.
- Coordination with all appropriate ETAT member agencies will be maintained throughout the process, as indicated above.

Through project scoping and direct consultation with the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and other agencies, the level of detail and scope of the Wildlife and Habitat analysis will be determined. Specific items to be discussed in the scoping meeting include the use of longer bridges to span riparian areas adjacent to waterbody crossings; structures to maintain the natural stream system to provide for fish passage; the need for and location

of wildlife crossings; the use of fencing; the use of roadside swales for stormwater treatment in addition to ponds; avoidance, minimization and mitigation for potential impacts including, but not limited to the Florida Black Bear, Panama City Crayfish, red-cockaded woodpecker, flatwoods salamander, bald eagle, Gopher tortoise, rare plants, and migratory birds.

Once the assumptions and expectations for the analysis of impacts to Wildlife and Habitat have been established, the analysis will be initiated. The procedure for analyzing the effects on Wildlife and Habitat will be conducted in the following manner and summarized in the BA and Draft EIS.

- Define the boundaries for each issue/resource.
- Inventory notable features.
- Identify project impact-causing activities.
- Evaluate the analytical results.
- Assess the consequences and develop strategies for avoidance, minimization, and mitigation.