



# United States Department of the Interior



FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE  
South Florida Ecological Services Office  
1339 20<sup>th</sup> Street  
Vero Beach, Florida 32960

July 14, 2003

James C. Duck  
Chief, Planning Division  
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers  
701 San Marco Boulevard, Room 372  
Jacksonville, Florida 32207-8175

Dear Mr. Duck:

The Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has prepared this Planning Aid Letter (PAL) in support of the Everglades Agricultural Area Storage Reservoirs Project (EAA Project), Phase 1. The EAA Project is a component of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), authorized under the Water Resources Development Act of 2000. This PAL is provided in accordance with the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act (FWCA) of 1958, as amended (48 Stat. 401; 16 U.S.C. 661 *et seq.*), the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, as amended (87 Stat. 884; 16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*), and the Scope of Work agreed upon by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) and the Service for CERP planning studies in FY 2003.

This PAL does not constitute the report of the Secretary of the Interior as required by section 2(b) of the FWCA, nor does it constitute a biological opinion under section 7 of the ESA. The purpose of this PAL is to highlight recent Service contributions to the EAA Project Delivery Team (PDT), and to provide guidance/recommendations on resource conservation issues related to the EAA Project.

## Environmental Existing Conditions

The Service is directing the development of the Environmental Existing Conditions (EEC) for the EAA Project Implementation Report (PIR). The EEC will include a habitat evaluation. In order to capture a wide range of expertise for this effort, the Service has formed an EEC Subteam (Subteam) comprised of PDT members from the Service, Corps, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, South Florida Water Management District, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and Florida Department of Environmental Protection. The Service serves as the lead for Subteam activities.

To assist in EEC development, the EAA Project Managers procured the services of technical support contractors. The Service assisted in scoping for this EEC technical support. The Subteam contributed guidance on EEC report content and preparation, supplied technical information (species lists, maps, etc.), and submitted comments on draft deliverables. The most recent draft report entitled "Appendix H: Existing Conditions, H.5 Environmental" is enclosed with this PAL (Enclosure 1). Report maps and figures are included on the attached compact disk (Enclosure 2).

To finalize the Draft EEC Report, additional information is needed. While the current draft report includes the locations of wetlands within the current EAA Project footprint, the type and extent of wetlands need to be identified and field verified in order to characterize the wetlands for the alternative formulation/evaluation process and to conduct the habitat evaluation. EAA Project Managers may enlist additional technical support to assist in completion of EEC activities. The Service will take the lead on: 1) performing verification of the location and type of wetlands within the project footprint; 2) performing the habitat evaluation; and 3) completing the Final EEC Report. The Subteam will assist in organizing, choosing a protocol, conducting, and documenting the habitat evaluation.

#### Additional PDT Participation

The Service continues to be an active participant on the EAA Project PDT in support of PIR development. In addition to the EEC activities above, Service efforts have included: 1) assisting in formulating the Enhanced Ecological Values Evaluation Criteria Hierarchy; 2) authoring and reviewing Evaluation Criteria and Performance Measure fact sheets; 3) reviewing and commenting on changes to the Evaluation Criteria and Hierarchy; 4) formulating and commenting on Screening Criteria for initial alternative evaluation; 5) providing input for public information fact sheets on wildlife issues; 6) presenting EEC progress reports to the PDT; 7) researching background land uses, contaminant surveys, and wetland locations in the EAA Project footprint; and 8) organizing and hosting a site visit to STA-3/4 for EAA Project biologists.

The Service looks forward to continued participation in upcoming PDT activities including alternative plan formulation, the screening of alternatives, and the review of Future Without Project Conditions for the PIR.

#### ESA Coordination

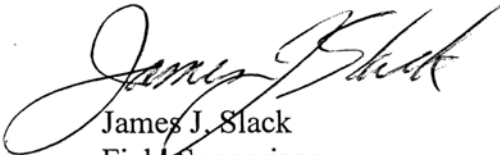
The Service continues to work closely with the Corps on ESA issues related to the EAA Project. As part of the informal consultation process, the Service received a letter from the Corps dated December 4, 2002, identifying threatened and endangered species and critical habitat that may be present in the proposed EAA Project area. In a letter dated January 2, 2003, the Service concurred with the federally listed species and critical habitats identified by the Corps.

The Service has also been gathering information for informal consultation at the CERP programmatic level. Recently our Service biologist provided a project description to the EAA Project Managers for review and concurrence in support of the draft Programmatic Biological Opinion, integrating all CERP components, that will be compiled when the Corps reinitiates programmatic consultation.

James C. Duck  
July 14, 2003  
Page 3

The Service appreciates this opportunity to provide input to the Corps in support of the EAA Project. We look forward to completing the Final EEC Report and beginning the habitat evaluation for the project. If you have questions or comments, please feel free to contact Cindy Brashear, Fish and Wildlife Biologist, at 772-532-9776.

Sincerely yours,



James J. Slack  
Field Supervisor  
South Florida Ecological Services Office

Enclosures

cc w/o enclosures:

Corps, Jacksonville, Florida (Brad Clark)  
Corps, Jacksonville, Florida (Janet Cushing)  
SFWMD, West Palm Beach, Florida (Angela Prymas)  
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Service, Loxahatchee NWR, Boynton Beach, Florida (Mike Waldon)  
FWC, Vero Beach, Florida (Yvette Alger)  
DEP, West Palm Beach, Florida (Dianne Crigger)