



Aquatic Management Strategies and Actions Through a Comprehensive Management Plan for the Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership (GCPEP) Phase I and II

04-182

Background:

The Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership (GCPEP) is an example of a successful partnership that has been able to frequently attain ambitious landscape scale conservation goals and objectives through respectful, positive, and result-oriented action. Operating under a Memorandum of Understanding since 1996, the strength of the partnership is facilitating cooperative projects among partners of differing missions while overcoming significant challenges. GCPEP has established effective cross-boundary methods for managing and restoring both aquatic and terrestrial systems in northwest Florida and south Alabama.

Objective:

Initially, the partnership consisted of 850,000 acres with 6 public and private partners enrolled. Collectively, the partnership now contains over 1,052,000 acres of land and water in one of the most biologically significant regions in North America with the 10 partners enrolling lands that are being managed for a wide variety of missions. The initial goal was to connect adjacent lands for wildlife habitat as well as for addressing other land management issues. The GCPEP partners continue to receive extensive benefits from involvement in the partnership including resource and information sharing, cooperative project support, and leverage of existing funds for each of the partners.

Summary of Approach:

This collaborative project was modeled on previous successful GCPEP projects and addressed the following threats: encroaching incompatible development, incompatible/inadequate water management, information and data gaps, and other emerging threats. The GCPEP Steering Committee identified the following as priority issues to be addressed through research, improved management and cooperative projects:

- Aquatic species and natural communities management;
- Land and watershed protection;
- Dirt road management;
- Invasive/Exotic species management and native plant restoration;
- Nature based tourism and recreation; and
- Communications and public education.

Benefit:

With support from the Legacy Resource Management Program, forward progress has been made in improving management of the focal conservation targets selected by the GCPEP Steering Committee. This progress towards improving conservation conditions on the lands and waters surrounding military lands within the GCPEP area has led to greater flexibility for the military mission. This project significantly increases the options available to Eglin AFB flight path and military operations, while improving the management and restoration of aquatic species and natural community conservation targets found on Eglin AFB and the surrounding GCPEP landscape in both Florida and Alabama.

Accomplishments:

This project addresses threats and solutions on and surrounding Eglin AFB, leading to a more effective regional aquatic conservation effort. In addition, this regional landscape scale effort could prevent future state or federal listings of imperiled aquatic species, such as the Florida bog frog (*Rana okaloosae*), by improving the conservation status of imperiled aquatic species and natural communities regionally. GCPEP is having significant regional and national implications, serving as a model of how to regionally manage and restore aquatic resources.

The main emphasis of this project involved working with the GCPEP partners to develop a comprehensive GCPEP Aquatic Management Plan. The GCPEP staff accomplished this task by facilitating and participating in partnership-wide planning and collaborating, building upon the previously completed GCPEP Conservation Area Plan, to strengthen aquatic conservation strategies and actions.

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