

HE-6

Acquisition of Submerged and Intertidal Lands in Lake Worth Lagoon

ACTION:

Acquisition and conservation of privately owned submerged and intertidal lands within the Lake Worth Lagoon (LWL).

BACKGROUND:

Over the past five years the County acquired 26 acres of mangrove wetlands along the ICW within the Ocean Ridge Natural Area North and South parcels. In addition, the County has been successful in leasing 108 acres of intertidal and submerged lands owned by the City of Lake Worth that contain seagrasses, mangroves and oyster reef habitats. The acquisition of other submerged parcels of land, most notably the seagrass area within Riviera Beach, has been less successful. Several attempts were made to find willing sellers however, due to multiple ownerships of the same privately owned submerged lands for Condominiums, agreements between sellers was difficult to achieve.

Increasing and preserving the quantity, quality and diversity of the lagoon's mangrove and seagrass habitats, through acquisition of "at risk" privately owned submerged lands, is still one of the long-term goals of this management plan. Fifty-six (56) parcels of privately owned submerged lands have been identified within the LWL, totaling 218 acres. Some of these parcels were subject of permit applications for development during the 2008-2012 timeframe. These submerged lands are primarily located within three municipalities of the County: the City of Riviera Beach, the Town of Palm Beach, and the City of Lake Worth. The majority of these parcels have been identified as areas that either support existing healthy seagrass beds, or provide valuable estuarine habitats with great potential for restoration.

Twenty-eight (28) parcels located in the City of Riviera Beach adjacent to Singer Island, are the highest priority for acquisition and conservation. These 154 acres of submerged parcels include the most abundant area of seagrass habitat within the LWL and in Palm Beach County. This area is adjacent to John D. MacArthur Beach State Park and is critical to fish and wildlife. It provides nursery grounds for juvenile fish and shellfish, as well as feeding areas for many types of birds and animals including manatees and green sea turtles. This region has been documented as a very important developmental habitat for juvenile green sea turtle with the number of turtles observed similar to other important habitats in Florida. DNA analysis has indicated that juveniles were born on beaches throughout the Caribbean and from as far away as Ascension Island in the South Atlantic.

A previous attempt to purchase these parcels in 1997 was not successful; however it did generate significant support from the community with \$103,100 collected from voluntary contributions, and the donation of an approximate three-acre parcel of submerged land containing valuable seagrasses to Palm Beach County. This critical habitat will be the focal point of a larger plan to acquire submerged lands for preservation and enhancement of existing habitats within the LWL. If these acquisitions are successful, Palm Beach County and/or State will develop a long-term management plan to preserve these valuable estuarine habitats.

STRATEGY:

- STEP 1 Survey property owners to determine number of willing sellers. Identify and obtain funding and develop an acquisition schedule.
Potential Partners: ERM
- STEP 2 Estimate total acquisition costs based on pre-appraisals projections.
Potential Partners: ERM, PBC Property & Real Estate Management (PREM)
- STEP 3 Notify property owners of the intent to acquire their property.
Potential Partners: ERM, PREM
- STEP 4 Send letter and maps to all permitting agencies recommending that acquisition of these properties be considered as partial mitigation for unavoidable impacts when evaluating permits.
Potential Partners: ERM, PREM, FDEP

SCHEDULE:

Step 1 is contingent upon the successful identification of a secure funding source. Step 2 and 3 are contingent upon Step 1. If a funding source for Step 1 is obtained, Step 2 will be implemented within two months. Step 3 will be implemented between 1 to 2 years. Step 4 will be implemented after all the previous steps have been completed.

COST:

Acquisition costs for each parcel need to be evaluated.

EXPECTED BENEFITS:

The purchase of submerged lands will increase and preserve in perpetuity critical habitats utilized by the estuarine species in the LWL.

MONITORING ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSES:

Information obtained by the monitoring of valued ecosystem species such as seagrasses, sea turtles and manatees, will be analyzed and integrated with existing monitoring programs.

REGULATORY NEEDS:

None anticipated.

FUNDING:

Funding sources need to be identified.

POTENTIAL PARTNERS AND FUNDING SOURCES*:

ERM, USFWS National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program (NCWCGP), NOAA Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program (CELP), FWC, local Municipalities

*Listed Agencies have not committed funds and are subject to Agencies' budget approvals