



Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance

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RE: COASTAL DUNE LAKES HYDROLOGY PROJECT

To Whom It May Concern:

The Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance (CBA) of Northwest Florida State College (NWFSC) fully supports a culverts-to-bridges restoration project on five coastal dune lakes (Draper, Big Redfish, Little Redfish, Alligator, Deer) in Walton County. This work is cited as a priority in *A Management Plan for Walton County's Coastal Dune Lakes*, a collaborative document published in October 2008 and immediately adopted by the Coastal Dune Lakes Advisory Board (CDLAB) and the Board of County Commissioners (BCC).

Walton County's coastal dune lakes are unique blackwater systems which exchange water with the Gulf of Mexico. They have been identified as globally rare and critically imperiled by the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (1990). Culverts extant in the five aforementioned lakes are undersized, poorly placed, and continuously dammed by beavers; they function as barriers between the north and south sides of the lakes. As a result, each obstructed lake has been split into two distinct systems: a freshwater body north of the culvert and a brackish waterbody south of it. Fish passage is blocked in both directions. Water depth is dramatically different on either side of each culvert. I suspect that soil composition is also quite different on the north and south sides.

Culvert replacement is an essential step in restoring the ability of these five waterbodies to function as coastal dune lakes. Re-integration of the northern and southern sides of each lake will restore: hydrologic connectivity; appropriate euryhaline conditions; habitat, access, and attendant populations of flora and fauna; full functionality of the lakes' distinctive self-flushing mechanism; flood capacity; and recreational access.

Bridge spans will allow native saltwater fish species to return to the upper portions of the lakes. The re-establishment of appropriate estuarine habitat and free movement will furthermore encourage recruitment of fish populations via increased opportunity for rearing of young-of-the-year and foraging. Derivative restoration of the surrounding wetlands will limit the growth of invasive titi, providing more suitable habitat for native wildlife and moderating the associated fire regime undertaken by the Florida Park Service. A holistic approach to ecosystem health and management, such as that recently applied to Oyster Lake, insists that each coastal dune lake should be reconnected to the entirety of its wetland territory (as intended by this project). The worldwide rarity of this natural resource underscores the importance and urgency of this work.

In addition to the ecological benefits of the proposed project, community resilience will be enhanced by an increased capacity for flood conditions and by improved stormwater treatment for runoff from Scenic Highway 30A. Direct human benefits include reduced maintenance requirements (bridges vs. culverts) and increased recreational access. The coastal dune lakes provide economic value to Walton County via residents and visitors who are drawn to the lakes for recreation and aesthetic appreciation. Currently, the northern portions of these five lakes are inaccessible and effectively unavailable for human use. Increased recreational access—alongside positive rather than negative environmental impacts—assures a positive contribution to the economic health and morale of the community. The northern portions of the lakes will also be more accessible to scientists for further study and understanding.

Above all:

When we return our ecosystems to health and wholeness, we do the same for ourselves.

Sincerely,
Sarah Schindele
Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance