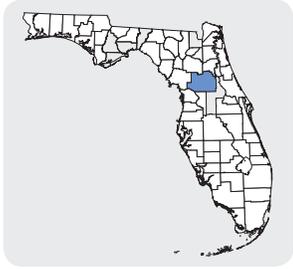


Ocklawaha Prairie Restoration Area – Habitat Enhancement

Marion County, FL



Introduction

The Ocklawaha Prairie is a 2,400-acre impounded area managed by the St. Johns River Water Management District. Historically the area was a vast floodplain marsh adjacent to the Ocklawaha River. In the late 1800s, a new channel was constructed to facilitate navigation, and the

historic river channel and adjacent floodplain marsh were isolated behind a large levee. Once isolated, the area was diked and drained to facilitate agriculture. Because soils in the impoundment are very fertile, they also supported the growth of many invasive aquatic plant species. During low water periods, these plants thrive, but when normal water levels return this dense vegetation forms thick mats of floating material. Severe drought years followed by deep flooding from Hurricane Irma in 2017 created approximately 150 acres of floating tussocks. These were very mobile, resulting in scoured bottom sediments and smothered beneficial native vegetation.

Objectives

- Reduce the number and volume of floating tussocks
- Establish a connection between the north and south open water pools within the impoundment to improve water flow
- Open the southern 3.4 miles of historic river channel, which had become overgrown, to create a deep-water refuge area and improve water flow

Approach

Mechanical plant shredders were used to dismantle and break apart floating tussocks. Shredders also were used to establish a connection between the north and south open water pools and to open the southern portion of the historic river channel.



Before Restoration



After Restoration

Benefits

Reducing the volume of tussocks helps promote reestablishment of beneficial aquatic plants, providing cover and food for fish, waterfowl and other wetland-dependent species. Establishing a connection between the north and south pools increased water exchange and provided a travel conduit for fish and wildlife. Opening the southern stretch of the historic Ocklawaha River channel also greatly increased the size of deep marsh habitat within the impounded area, which is critical for fish and wildlife during periods of low water.



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