

This presentation is an update to the Commission on the Hunting Management Plan for Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP), located within Collier, Miami-Dade, and Monroe Counties in south Florida. Staff is seeking approval to include new lands, commonly referred to as the Addition Lands, into the Big Cypress Wildlife Management Area (BCWMA), and advertise rule amendments to establish hunting regulations on these lands for the 2014-15 hunting season for final approval at the Commission's September meeting. These changes are the outcome of a federal process by the National Park Service (NPS) in collaboration with Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), and in consultation with US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and stakeholders.

We want to thank NPS staff, especially Superintendent Pedro Ramos, for their cooperative partnership and diligent efforts to complete the required federal process for opening the Addition Lands to traditional public recreation, including hunting.

This background report details the proposed change and staff recommendations for moving forward.

Author: Don Coyner

Report date: June 19, 2014

Photo credit: Rosanna Tursi

History and Background

- 1974 – Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP) established
- 1976 – Big Cypress Wildlife Management Area (BCWMA) established
- 1988 – Addition Act
- 2010 – Addition General Management Plan
- 2011-2014 – Hunting Management Plan / Environmental Assessment



This map shows the location of BCNP in south Florida, north of Everglades National Park, and east of Naples. The original BCNP is highlighted in green.

History:

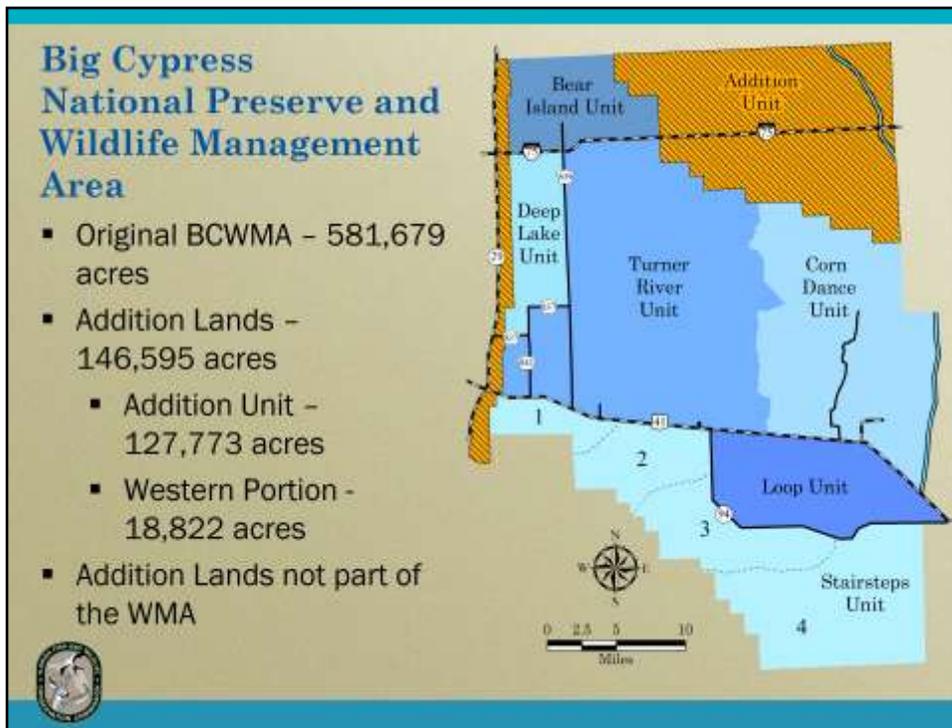
1974 – The BCNP was established as the first national preserve. The preserve differs from a national park, as traditional uses are allowed such as hunting, fishing, and off-road vehicle (ORV) access.

1976 – NPS partnered with FWC's predecessor agency, the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission, to establish BCWMA with hunting, fishing and ORV access.

1988 – US Congress passed the BCNP Addition Act, enlarging the preserve, although most of the land transfer did not take place until 1996. This acreage was not included in the BCWMA and was not opened to public hunting. The addition is highlighted in orange.

2010 – The Addition General Management Plan was completed. The document required development of a Hunting Management Plan before public hunting could be allowed. Development of this plan required an Environmental Assessment (EA) under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

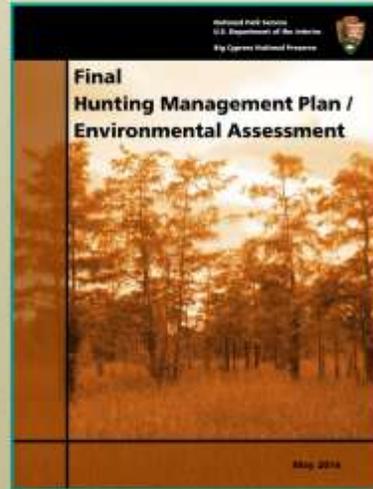
2014 – In May of 2014, the Hunting Management Plan for BCNP was completed and approved by NPS.



This is a map of the BCWMA with the Addition Lands (146,595 acres) highlighted in orange and cross-hatched. The original Preserve, and current BCWMA Units (581,679 acres), are highlighted in shades of blue. The Addition Lands are not currently part of the BCWMA.

Hunting Management Plan

- A collaborative process for managing hunting
- National Park Service (NPS) and FWC, in consultation with US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and stakeholders to meet annually
- Review survey and harvest data
- Consider potential management actions
- Maintain viable hunting program with sustainable harvest



The Hunting Management Plan / Environmental Assessment describes a preferred alternative (Alternative 3) for a collaborative adaptive management process that allows FWC and NPS, in consultation with USFWS and stakeholders, to manage hunting within the BCWMA, including the Addition Lands. Agencies and stakeholders will meet annually to review existing data, consider potential management actions, and discuss potential regulation changes. The plan describes in detail what data to consider as well as management tools to maintain a viable hunting program with sustainable harvest while considering other species that are not hunted.

Other alternatives considered but not chosen included:

Alternative 1 – No Action – Apply current management to the Addition Lands and allow hunting. Currently, public hunting does not take place in the Addition Lands and this alternative was considered to be less desirable than the preferred alternative.

Alternative 2 – No Hunting in the Addition – Current hunting management would continue within the original BCNP boundaries with no hunting in the Addition Lands. This alternative was not selected.

The NPS conducted a total of four public comment periods for this process, including five public meetings.

The Hunting Management Plan may be viewed here:

<http://parkplanning.nps.gov/document.cfm?parkID=352&projectID=34840&documentID=59507>

Current Hunt Framework

Seasons

Archery	Muzzleloading Gun	General Gun	Small Game	Spring Turkey
30 days	16 days	47-53 days	28-31 days	37 days

Legal to Hunt

- Antlered deer, wild hogs, turkeys, gray squirrels, quail, rabbits, raccoons, coyotes, and migratory game birds

Quota Permits

- Bear Island Unit - 200 each, muzzleloading gun and general gun (first 9 days only)
- Turner River Unit - 500, general gun (first 9 days only)



The hunt format for the original BCWMA includes a 30 day archery season, 16 day muzzleloading gun season, 47-53 day general gun season, 28-31 day small game season, and 37 day spring turkey season. Hunters may take antlered deer, wild hogs, and turkeys (spring turkey season only). Hunters may also take gray squirrels, quail, rabbits, raccoons, and coyotes, as well as migratory game birds in season.

Currently, quota permits are required in the Bear Island Unit for the first 9 days of muzzleloading gun and general gun seasons. Quota permits are required in the Turner River Unit for the first 9 days of general gun season.

Modern firearms are not allowed for hunting in the Deep Lake Unit.

Proposed Hunt Framework – Addition Unit

- Walk-in hunting by quota permit for antlered deer and turkey seasons
- Quota of 30 each season, no exemptions
- No quota for small game season
- Hunting regulations would be similar to Bear Island Unit



The 127,773 acre northeastern addition will be established as the Addition Unit. Because access is walk-in only and parking is limited, low quotas are necessary for the initial antlered deer and turkey seasons. The quota for archery, muzzleloading gun, general gun and spring turkey seasons will be 30, no exemptions. Quota permits will not be required during the small game season (January 5 through February 1).

Legal to take, season lengths and bag limits will be consistent with the current framework in the Bear Island Unit including: 30 day archery season, 16 day muzzleloading gun season, 47-53 day general gun season, 28-31 day small game season, and 37 day spring turkey season. The bag limit for antlered deer, turkey, and wild hog will be 1 per day, 2 annually.

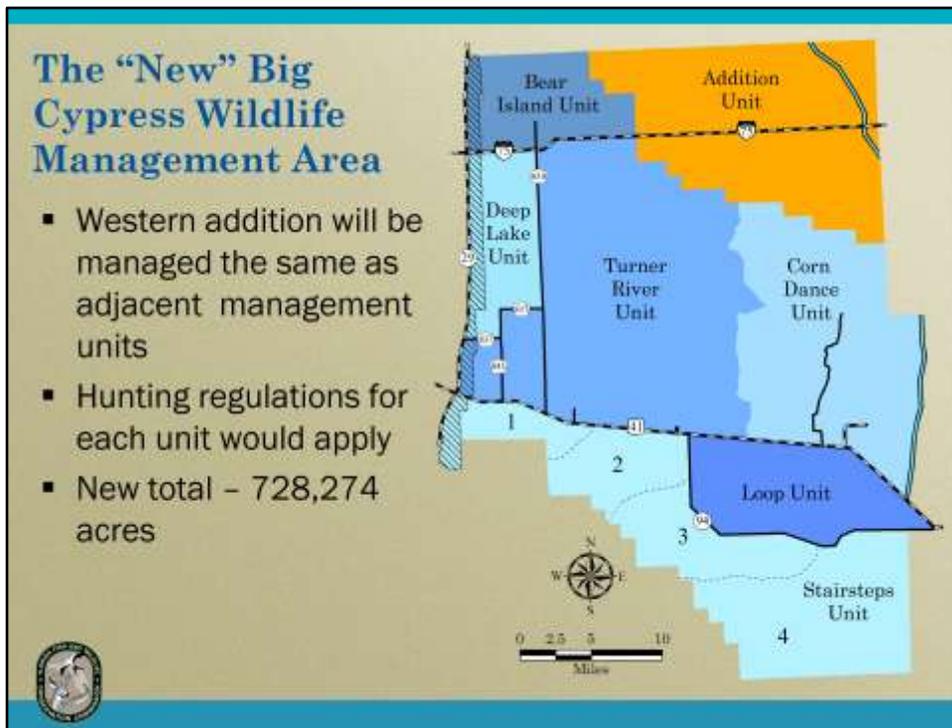
If approved, staff would facilitate as much hunting opportunity as possible starting this Fall (2014). Future years would have the full length seasons (archery).

Access – Addition Unit

- Limited parking available
- Two major access points at rest areas on I-75
 - Mile marker 63
 - Rest area under construction
 - Mile marker 51
 - Hunters may disperse along the L-28 Interceptor Canal levee



Access to the Addition Unit is limited. Currently, off-road vehicles (OHVs) are not allowed because the management plan for OHV trails within the Addition Lands has not been implemented. For now, access for hunters is limited to walk-in only from two major access points at rest areas off I-75. Both areas have limited parking. However, at the mile marker 51 rest area, hunters will be able to disperse by vehicle along the L-28 Interceptor Canal levees, park, and walk into the area. Vehicle access is restricted to the portion of the L-28 Interceptor Canal levee north of I-75 with walk-in access to the south.



The NPS has requested that the remaining portion of the addition be managed the same as the adjacent management units. Initially, there will be walk-in access only, as ORV access has not been approved. Upon establishment, the new map for the BCWMA would appear as shown. The new WMA would total 728,274 acres, an increase of 146,595 acres.

If approved, quotas and new acreage would be established with final rule consideration at the September, 2014 Commission meeting.

Requested Action

- Approve Addition Unit draft rule amendments for advertising in the Florida Administrative Register
 - Establish seasons
 - Walk-in only from designated access points
 - Prohibit take of wildlife from L-28 Levees
- Additional guidance to staff



Approve draft rule amendments for advertising in the Florida Administrative Register. If approved, staff recommends returning for final public hearing at the September, 2014 Commission meeting.

Provide any additional guidance and direction to staff as we move forward.