

## **A Plan for Citizens and Scrub-jays**

### **By Ray Sandrock, Charlotte County Administrator**

At the Sept. 11 Board meeting, the Charlotte County Board of County Commissioners (BCC) approved the submittal and transmittal of the Charlotte County-wide Florida Scrub-jay Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, taking the county one step closer to providing citizens with a solution for building on lots in the Florida scrub-jay review area. This is the most recent action in a long and complicated process—an effort to resolve conflicts between commercial and residential development and conservation of the federally and state threatened Florida scrub-jay. Currently, in order to build on a quarter-acre lot within the Florida scrub-jay review area, the lot owner needs to first hire an environmental consultant to conduct a five-day scrub-jay survey (costs range from \$700-\$2000). If the survey results are negative, the lot is released for building for one year and the owner must be actively building within that year time frame. If the survey results are positive, then the property owner must apply for an Incidental Take Permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—the time frame of that process is six months to one year and the mitigation costs of the process range from \$11,500 to \$42,500. When the HCP is in place, in order to build the lot owner would not need the survey—they would only need to pay a flat fee of \$2,200 for the quarter-acre as part of the County permitting process.

Back in 2003, staff began work on a county-wide HCP for the Florida scrub-jay. By 2004, with no firm cost amount or mechanisms to pay for the plan, the BCC directed staff to stop development on the county-wide plan and focus on only four capital improvement projects. In early 2007, Charlotte County again began pursuing a county-wide plan for the scrub-jay and was awarded a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) for the development of an HCP. The HCP, a multi-species initiative covering the Florida scrub-jay and Eastern Indigo snake, focuses on the long-term management of scrubby habitats. The plan ensures that future development meet all federal requirements of the Endangered Species Act and provides regulatory certainty to the citizens wishing to develop their properties. It is currently estimated that there are 18,000 parcels within scrub habitat that may be occupied by the Florida scrub-jay, with 95 percent of those quarter-acre single family lots. The comprehensive HCP will reduce the need, time, and cost associated with the development of these affected lots.

To proceed with the plan development, we contracted with Quest Ecology to start the biological review and status update of scrub-jays in Charlotte County. This long process involved re-surveying the county to get an accurate count of family groups, individual scrub-jays and scrub habitat, as well as examining the current public lands and potential areas of acquisition for the HCP's preservation area. In addition to the survey work, the population data and habitat availability were modeled using population viability to explicitly show where scrub-jays have the best chances of survival in the County. County staff put together two stakeholder groups that included representatives from Charlotte County, FWC, the building industry and Edison College, as well as leading Florida scrub-jay biologists. The biologists provided valuable input throughout the entire process by establishing perimeters, reviewing data and making recommendations.

Charlotte County was awarded a second HCP development grant in 2011 to develop the economic analysis portion of the HCP: determining both the cost of the plan as well as funding mechanisms for the implementation of the plan. The economic analysis was a key component of the HCP, allowing the County to incorporate all the costs associated with implementation of the plan including acquisition, restoration, management and plan implementation, as well as providing options for funding mechanism to fund the plan.

The recently-approved submittal and transmittal of the HCP to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is one of several more steps that must be completed, but the end is in sight. With development and real estate slowly regaining momentum, the HCP will help those who would otherwise have not been able to pay the high fees to develop their property. The outcome of the hard work and long, arduous process will be long-term proper management of scrub habitat, persistence of scrub-jays in Charlotte County, regulatory certainty for development and expansion of infrastructure with sound funding and implementation.