

**Section 9**  
**Four-Wheel Drive Training Program**

**Purpose**

Prior to approval of the HCP a majority of the documented take of sea turtles due to public beach driving in St. Johns County occurred at Vilano Beach and South Ponte Vedra Beach. The implementation of a four-wheel drive training program and the limitation of access to one point of entry at Surfside Avenue have drastically reduced the number of recorded impacts for nesting sea turtles as well as incidents of illegal driving in the Conservation Zone (CZ) or dunes.

**Relevant ITP Conditions - G.2.h. and G.2.o**

- 2.h. Four-Wheel Drive Training Program.** The Permittee shall ensure members of the public seeking a County North Beach Vehicle Access Permit to drive north of the Vilano Road beach ramp complete training specified in Condition 11.G.2.o prior to the issuance of such permit.
- 2.o. HCP and Protected Species Training.** Within thirty (30) days of the effective date of this Permit, the Permittee shall develop and provide for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service review and approval a training program. Such program shall provide information regarding applicable HCP conditions and Permit terms and local ordinances necessary to assist individual members of the public in understanding beach driving restrictions provided pursuant to this Permit. The Permittee shall implement use of the HCP and Protected Species Training Program within two (2) months of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service approval. The Permittee may amend such program both prior to and after its implementation upon review and approval of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

**HCP Performance During 2012**

**Implementation:** In September, 2006 the Four-Wheel Drive Training Program Outline was submitted and approved through the USFWS. North Beach Permittees are required to complete HCP and Protected Species training, complete and sign an application and show a current annual pass affixed to windshield of vehicle. Training is offered either online or in person. Most permittees choose the online option as it is quick and user friendly. Upon completion of the training, permittees receive an orange permit (Appendix I) that is required to be hung from a rear view mirror. The permit is completed with a signature from the Environmental Coordinator, permit number, tag number, expiration date and an information side regarding HCP rules and regulations. There is currently no fee for the permit and they expire after three months. Permit renewals are done so by confirming the tag number and recording annual pass number that must be affixed to the windshield. Since the beginning of 2012, 117 permits were issued 36 renewals from 2012 training and 24 renewals from 2011.

**Table 11. North Beach Permit Summary**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Permits Issued</b>	<b>Permits Renewed</b>
2007	40	1
2008	63	15
2009	101	53
2010	147	69
2011	161	86
2012	117	60

Traditionally, there were three vehicular access ramps where North Beach drivers were authorized to access the beach; Usina beach, Surfside Avenue and Vilano Road beach access ramps. These ramps remained open at all times except during beach gate closing times May 1<sup>st</sup> through October 31<sup>st</sup>. The Usina beach access ramp is located at the most northern part of the driving beaches (in the parking lot of the Reef restaurant) and has been closed since 2009 due to erosion and is now only accessible for emergency access vehicles and sea turtle patrol (Object 16). Periodic visits from the Sheriff’s department are conducted by both Beach Patrol and the Vilano zone unit. The North Beach entrance located approximately 200 feet north of the Vilano Road beach access ramp has been installed with “Do Not Enter” signage (Object 17) to prevent drivers from entering. Surfside Avenue beach access ramp (Object 18) has been affixed with a combination lock and is only accessed by permitted individuals, law enforcement and County staff. permittees are contacted monthly via phone and provided with the combination to access the gate.

**Object 16. Usina beach access**



**Object 17. “Do Not Enter” signage at North Beach****Object 18. Surfside Avenue access ramp**

**Assessment:** Minor changes continue to be made to the Protected Species training PowerPoint presentations. A critical point that North Beach permittees learn during their training is that they are required to stay 15 feet landward of marked sea turtle nests. In the 2009 Annual Report, it was stated that both County staff and sea turtle patrol personnel had observed drivers with no permits in the North beach area as well as witnessing multiple tire tracks close to and seaward of marked sea turtle nests. Additionally, the PPH had brought these issues to the County’s attention prior to the 2010 nesting season in a meeting with the Environmental Division Director,

Environmental Coordinator, and Beach Manager. These concerns have almost been eliminated since the access to this stretch of beach has been controlled to only permitted individuals.

**Program Improvements:** With the increased law enforcement presence, a consistent system of tracking has been demonstrated through daily activity sheets. There are no other improvements scheduled at this time.