

Larry Williams, the State Supervisor for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) in Florida, has recently announced efforts to make the practices and procedures of the various Ecological Services Offices around the state (Jacksonville, Panama City and Vero Beach) more consistent and streamlined. The Ecological Services Offices focus primarily on protection and recovery of threatened and endangered species, as well as conservation efforts for other species such as migratory birds. They handle applications for incidental take/habitat conservation plans and consultation requests from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for dredge and fill activities.

As part of the streamlining/consistency effort, the offices will be implementing measures to ensure species are handled consistently throughout their range regardless of the Office. Specifically, Mr. Williams announced plans to develop uniform **sand skink** guidelines between the North and South offices and will be developing new uniform guidelines for the **Eastern indigo snake**. Recent skink consultation decisions will be made publicly available statewide to ensure consistent results. Additionally, the offices are developing a checklist for use by federal agencies to ensure a complete consultation package, which Mr. Williams asserts will reduce the time it takes for the USFWS to come to a decision (a particularly long, drawn out process in the Vero Beach office). Additional staffing is proposed in the Vero Beach office as well, which is widely known for its long delays in processing consultation and take permit requests.

What this means to you:

- If you are in North Florida, you can potentially expect a more burdensome process than before, as it can be expected that any efforts to make species guidelines consistent statewide will use the most restrictive guidelines as a starting point. Typically, the Vero Beach office has been more demanding than the Jacksonville office where species overlap.
- You can expect more stringent indigo snake guidelines will be developed than are currently in place. It is uncertain at this time what those guidelines will look like, but at a minimum I would expect more burdensome survey requirements.
- Ideally, additional staff in the Vero Beach office and the consultation checklist will mean consultation requests for Central and South Florida projects will be faster. (They honestly can't get much slower.)

Please let me know if you have any questions or if you would like additional information.

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