

SUMMARY & Transcription

Artificial Reef Management Plan Public Workshop

Tuesday, March 3, 2015, 3:00 PM - 5:00 PM
South Walton Annex Board Room

Presenters: Melinda Gates, Matt Trammell, Andy McAlexander, Bill Horn

Attendees: Donna Amend, Edmond Alexander, Larry & Mary Pentel, Ford Torrey, Phil Hammond, Dotty Nist, Mark Thompson, Garner Chandler, Jon Dodrill, Bradley Ennis, Tyler Hammond, Chip Letcher, Jen McAlexander, Jody Wesley, Jim Richard, Bill Davis, Cindy Stenberg

Along with the published public notice of workshop, the County Artificial Reef Management Plan (CARP) and reef site map were shared on South Walton Artificial Reef Association's (SWARA) website & facebook page, Walton Outdoors.com and SoWal.com for stakeholder review. Hard copies of the CARP and reef site location maps were provided for workshop attendees.

A voice recording of the meeting is preserved.

I. Following introductions, Andy McAlexander gave a synopsis of SWARA's background, mission (as a grass roots Non profit charitable organization), and \$120K funds raised that covered initial costs of

- 1) Permitting of 13 beach accessible near shore reef sites (SAARS)
- 2) Permitting of 1 LAARS site (in order to simplify the process for public deployments)
- 3) 10 year County Artificial Reef Plan development

Matt Trammell of Taylor Engineering presented a general overview of the draft 10 year CARP including history, location selection, goals, objectives, benefits, and future management, monitoring, & maintenance procedures.

Mapped artificial reef locations including currently permitted SAARS (small area artificial reef sites) and proposed LAARS (large area artificial reef sites) were reviewed.

Funding and procedural deployment considerations discussed:

1. FWC (Florida Wildlife Commission) annual funding opportunities for permitted reef areas presented by Bill Horn of SWARA (FWC retiree).
2. NRDA Phase III monies were outlined by Melinda Gates, Walton County.
3. Jon Dodrill of FWC provided further explanation of the reasoning for and process by which NRDA Ph.III funds will be distributed; additionally the concept of 13 near shore reef sites (and adoption of a CARP) is an important step and FWC is very supportive of Walton County's plans for reef deployments.

II. Public comments, questions, suggestions, and discussion regarding LAARS site and CARP commenced at 3:45 PM:

1. Edmond Alexander: *Expressed concern (on behalf of the charter captains) about the location of the Grayton Beach snorkel reef interfering with their beach launch area.*

- Response: Location and depth of site clarified as being off Grayton Beach State Park not the beach launch area.

Will spear fishing be allowed?

- Response: Spear fishing is specifically prohibited on snorkel reefs, however state law permits spear fishing on the other sites. Fishing is allowed... just not spear fishing. Regulation requires staying 300' away from a dive flag.

Will snorkel reefs have dive flags on them?

- Response: No. None of the sites will be buoyed. The current plans encompass having kiosks at the state park locations that include a map showing where the snorkel reef is with two guide marker poles that divers and kayakers can use to orient themselves. It is state regulation that divers use dive flags. Common sense and courtesy dictate that if a boat rolls up on a SAARS site to an anchored/flagged kayak that it is easier for a boat to motor 1000' away to the next site then for the kayaker to unhook.

2. Phil Hammond: *How bad is the June grass going to get on them? Is that going to turn green?*

- Response: The existing ones in Navarre, Santa Rosa Island, and Escambia (near Ft. Pickens) sometimes are sheltered and other times completely covered.

Every one of them will have a tremendous amount of bait on them.

- Comments: No Doubt.
 - That'll be good.

3. Larry Pentel: *I'm all in favor of all the reefs we can put out there. I do have a couple of questions. You said the snorkel reef at Grayton is in front of the state park then you said it was 1,000' west of the state park walkover. That puts it in front of the lake.*

- Response: No, it's about 4,000' to the lake break from the dune walkover

It's not ¾ of mile or a mile...

- Response: Here's the drawing... it's more like 500 - 1,000' from the boardwalk. The location was coordinated with the park manager and he didn't want it in front of the boardwalk. He wanted it 500 - 1,000' away from the boardwalk. The bar and outfall movements were also considered and the location should not effect that nor should it effect your launching.

I'm all in favor of the reef sites, don't misunderstand me... we have a lot of people snorkeling with no flags on a daily basis already, the kiosks are great but there's also kiosks that say 'no dogs', 'no glass on the beach', ask code enforcement how often they tell people and it's a whole lot safer to have a glass bottle on the beach than to be out there snorkeling without a dive flag and have people (motors) zipping up and down... not just us...

- Response: We know. We did the best we could.

I know... obviously y'all have got these permitted which is a good thing. I would have like to have seen them where there are lifeguards... at regional accesses with lifeguards...

- Response: That puts a liability aspect on the county... that's not their job to police swimmers. It was arduous to come up with spots that were allocated equally along the 26 miles of the county and avoiding beach sand renourishment if, when, where that ever happens. The park didn't want it in front of the walkover... we tried to split the difference between the wash out and walkover and the park said move it further back east because they didn't want people walking over their dune. A LOT of thought went into it.

The original budget that was presented for BP funds... the \$10mil... that's all out? The original budget for SWARA that was posted...

- Response: That was for total funding to build out all the sites proposed back in 2013 using BP dollars. That budget is not really still in effect... it's been modified significantly.

Is there a copy of the budget we can see? Trying to figure out what's going on. This one was very interesting with \$2.5mil for permitting and deployment, \$7.5mil for monitoring these individual sites. Now we're talking about a large area site, which I'm all in favor of if I can permit stuff in it, but we have nothing budgeted to deploy or monitor but we have \$7.5mil to monitor 13 small sites up on the beach but nothing to monitor this large site. So I would love to see the budget if this one's no longer a valid thing.

- Response: The budget for how the BP money is to be spent or the SWARA 2015 budget?

Well the long term budget for artificial reefs. Not the yearly budget but the long term budget for BP money, grant money, etc. etc. what you expect to get. And I want to thank Mr. Horn for getting on this... fantastic... he helped us immensely when we permitted the Frangista Barge and what we call 1Seagrove and the grouper ghettos off Rosemary. If he wouldn't have been around we never would have permitted those. He may not be the man with the plan but he knows the plan and how to do it and that should help more than anything else.

- Response: I can help you with those numbers. I'll show you what we've got coming up...

That would be great 'cause like I said I was kind of questioning that \$7.5mil for monitoring when monitoring was going to be done by recreational divers and volunteers and why so much for monitoring and not deployment.

- Response(s): That was the original-original 20 year plan proposed to the county. Basically it should be trashed... it is history.
- It had also included 5 oyster bars in the Bay which were shelved. A lot of the monitoring costs were associated with those.

Conflicting information regarding chicken coops...

- Response: Cannot use coops in SAARS but can deploy in LAARS with county inspection & sign off. Certain things are required like attaching them together with weights, etc. Similar in Walton as what you previously did with Okaloosa.

I think everyone here would be all in favor of that.

- Jon Dodrill (FWC): In the past there have been command control issues with these private deployments. The inspection process goes fine, materials are accepted, folks leave the dock with the chicken coops but do not necessarily go to the large area sites and these things end up getting picked up as far as five miles away from the permitted area. That is a really quick way to shut down an entire reef program. So there are concerns about compliance.

- Okaloosa LAARS permit recently renewed and Army Corp requires deployment LOCATION VERIFICATION that the material IS where it's permitted to be. This prevents reefs being deployed on top of other reefs and confusion that ruins it for everybody.
- Bill Horn: There are 2 separate permits (FDEP and ACOE) with separate requirements and permit conditions. Because there is not currently a LAARS in state waters off Walton County, we don't yet know what FDEP is going to require regarding coordinates. This is new territory on this permit. A private contractor applied for an unpublicized LAARS permit off Escambia that did not make it through the corps... after that it was understood that the local coastal governments (counties, municipalities, etc.) would be the permit holders. Entities with long term responsibility that would be around for awhile; as opposed to individuals, fishing clubs or other groups that break up, move away, and accept no long term material responsibility.

Only one other comment as to where the LAARS should be. Want it as close to Grayton as possible. If something needed to be given up, the LAARS B should be it because it would be a 15-20mile run to get to that site.

- Response Question: On LAARS A (as drawn) if you had to sacrifice size, would you prefer to sacrifice on the north or south side.
I'd sacrifice ½ mile in width rather than an end, because it's nice to have stuff of different depths of water... fish move, preferring different depths of water at different times of year, etc. etc. Obviously everyone wants the area to be as big as possible.

4. Tyler Hammond: *When the money comes in what is being built first? Are snorkel reefs going in first?*

- Response: Correct. Because annual FWC grants are for fish haven constructions, NOT snorkel reefs, we figured the best bang for the buck would be to use NRDA funds to deploy snorkel reefs to completion with remaining funds deployed in a pro-rata distribution between the remaining 12 (possibly 13) permitted sites to equally deploy 1 patch site within each 40 acre reef area; not favoring one side of the county over any other, but rather a broad base of development. Within that process, if an individual or group wants to band together and donate private funds to the charity for the purchase of structure(s) (within the material scope of work agreement) and deploy in that same action... the coordinates would be of public record but you could name the patch reef / structures after your business or in memoriam of... etc. Then annually going forward, in conjunction with the county, we will be applying for FWC grant funds for deployment as well as private donations and grants to SWARA and any other grants applied for/received either by SWARA or Walton County.

5. Edmond Alexander: *Agencies don't like chicken coops because they don't last long enough. How long is long enough? I've observed coops lasting for 20 seasons. We probably have such a large snapper population because of 20yr. old chicken coops. Etc., Etc., Etc.*

- Response: It is a condition of FWC grant funding that the materials need to be resistant to a 20yr. storm event so they've got to be heavy enough to maintain that stability. That is why there is concern about putting them in the near shore sites within 1 mile of the shoreline. The materials have to be durable enough to last and we must show data / proof that they DO last.
I'm talking about off shore.
- Response: We're focusing on the concrete structures because the money we're targeting has conditions. But if materials meet the criteria and approval of the state nobody wants to inhibit you from deploying it out there.
I don't want to see coops dumped along the near shore at all.
- Bill Horn: I did a survey research project years ago that looked at fish populations over time and it turns out it's about 5 years for a reef structure to mature to where the fish population on that reef is very similar to the natural reef in that area... so obviously you don't want a reef that lasts less than 5 years or you're not doing any good.

Continuing general conversation including:

Reducing & dispersing fishing pressure to sustain fish populations.

Need for public support to qualify for government grant & private funds.

Is there a consensus that everyone is in support of the artificial reef program?

6. Larry Pentel: *Get that LAARS site!*

Now the sequential steps are approval from the county, then laying out the LAARS for the long involved permitting process. If everyone is in consensus that LAARS A is the way to go we'll get going on that one. If anyone has a

different idea take this red pen and draw a better one on the map on the wall. We're not dictating or mandating the location, size, shape, or anything.

7. Phil Hammond: *On the liability end of the deal on the snorkel reefs... what's the deal going to be on it as far as if somebody drowns out there...*

- Response: That's an unfortunate accident. We can't tell people not to go swimming, we can't tell people to stay out of the water during peak predator feeding hours; it's no different than anybody having an accident in the Gulf of Mexico. The liability ends when the material hits the floor of the sea. There's no liability to the county, or SWARA, it's state property at that point. It's no different than going out there and diving the natural bottom 3 miles offshore and getting eaten by a shark. Whose fault is that? The only liability is putting the structures where we tell the permitting agencies we're putting them. For instance, each of the structures mapped out in the snorkel reef permit gets a GPS pin; at most 3-5' leeway of placement from the permit. If a structure ends up outside the designated area that is a violation that must be corrected. THAT is the only liability.
- Bill Horn: Also a navigational clearance liability with corps and coast guard.
- The typical rule is that structures must be below $\frac{1}{2}$ the distance of the water depth. We've capped the SAARS sites at 24'. The LAARS site is still to be determined (keeping in mind typical rule of $\frac{1}{2}$ the depth of the water column).
- Compliance with this rule is a real issue with the Coast Guard.
- We're trying to foresee every possibility to avoid the adverse.

8. Edmond Alexander: *You guys had displayed some pyramids... are they going to be used?*

- Yes Sir, extensively. Not in the snorkel reefs but in the other SAARS (in 50' depths). Pointed out the display picture of the snorkel reefs structures elaborating that the number of 6' diameter discs on each fiberglass pylon is dictated by the water column depth.

LAARS permitting process... can take 1, 2 years... no promises. Prior to starting the permitting process, the after process also includes 1 week from today to allow time for any additional public comments; so if you have anybody else out there who would like input they should email their comments/suggestions/thoughts to:

Melinda Gates: <mailto:gatmelinda@co.walton.fl.us>
call 850-892-8108

SWARA: <mailto:info@waltonreefs.org>

After the public commenting period, then the CARP and LAARS go before the BCC for approval.

Please remember, communicating Public Support is also critical for future funding. Receipt of grant \$ generally require factual evidence of public support.