

Department of Environmental Management  
Environmental Lands Division  
Tarpon Springs, FL 34688

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*Clarification of Recent Misconceptions Regarding the Brooker Creek Preserve and Other  
Matters Pertinent to the Environmental Lands Division*

The following represents a summary response to several e-mails and blogs recently received by the Environmental Lands Division (attached) in reference to projects and activities related to the Brooker Creek Preserve; specifically,

- 15 August 2006 blog posted by Dr. Craig Huegel on the “It’s Your Times” site hosted by the *St. Petersburg Times* (repeated in part on 30 August 2006 in the *St. Petersburg Times* )
- 5 September 2006 e-letter from Ms. Lorraine Margeson to BOCC and various members of the public (with copy to a reporter at the *St. Petersburg Times*)
- 6 September 2006 e-letter from Dr. Craig Huegel to BOCC (with copy to same reporter at the *St. Petersburg Times*)

The Division’s summary response, however, will focus on the latter document (viz., Dr. Huegel’s 6 September 2006 e-letter to the Pinellas County Board of Commissioners). Overall, we recognize and appreciate Dr. Huegel’s knowledge and field experience with the diverse ecology of the Brooker Creek Preserve. Several of his written comments, however, require clarification due to their inherent inaccuracies, discrepancies, or lack of scientific corroboration.

Huegel blog, 15 August 2006:

- Regarding Dr. Huegel’s blog posting, he stated “... there never was a distinction made as to who had originally made the purchase [of Brooker Creek Preserve] and there were no strings attached to their future.” Further, he wrote “the County has a 15-year record of extolling its commitment to protecting the Preserve. It never waived. It was never predicated on which agency or County department made the original purchase.” Many of these statements are inaccurate either in fact or in sentiment. All P2000/FCT lands, presently representing about 8% of the Brooker Creek Preserve and including the Four Lakes Hammock, were acquired with grant-award agreements that mandate specific management and development practices. Regarding Utilities parcels within the Preserve, the Department has always recognized Utilities functions within the Preserve, both present and the potential for future use. Maps made in the 1990’s clearly show distinctions of ownership, including parcels purchased by SWFWMD, FCT grants and Utilities funds but managed by the Environmental Lands Division. That said, the County has continued to pursue the long-term protection of the Brooker Creek

Preserve, including its biodiversity and other natural resources; but always with acknowledgment of these commitments or the terms of the original purchase agreements. Environmental Lands Division has always been fully aware of those commitments and agreements.

- Further, Dr. Huegel stated that “The sandhill ecosystem has completely vanished from Pinellas County except for the small, but beautiful remnant remaining north of Keystone Road (in the ‘Utilities-purchased’ portion) and the potential sandhill remaining to be restored in the adjacent old dairy farm.” We agree that xeric areas represent some of the last remaining sandhills in Pinellas County; however, we note that another tract near Wall Springs Park supports this community type. Although not a dominate community within the Brooker Creek Preserve, several patches of sandhill also exist there. In various conditions, some of these are earmarked for oak removal and fire reintroduction to restore them to a healthy sandhill community.
- Dr. Huegel also commented that “Most significant of these is the large stand of giant wild coco orchid (*Pteroglossaspis ecristata*), a tall terrestrial state-listed orchid found only in deep sands and not known to occur in Pinellas until we found this population.” Unfortunately, this finding was not documented with a recognized herbarium at the time or within the files of Environmental Lands and so went unrecorded. Recently, the Division’s research and operations staff located and verified this species as occurring near the main office for Division Administration at Fletch Haven Drive and south of Keystone Road and near the geo-webbing on Progress Energy property. Due to their rarity (i.e., one individual at each location), specimens in these locations have not been collected for vouchering but will be documented via photography and GPS.
- Concerning the gopher frog (*Rana capito*), a state-listed species of special concern, it appears that during Dr. Huegel’s tenure with the Division two individuals were found during the installation of a pipeline and these individuals subsequently were relocated to an adjacent area. A representative from the Florida Natural Areas Inventory program inspected the site approximately 2 years ago, but was unable to locate this species at that time.
- Concerning the Florida mouse (*Peromyscus floridanus*), another state-listed species of special concern, we are unaware of any information concerning the live-trapping records to which Dr. Huegel refers. However, we note reports of several individuals being live-trapped at sandhill sites located south of Keystone Road in the 1990’s. Given the similarity of this species with *Peromyscus gossypinus*, we suggest that additional information or vouchered specimens are required before the veracity of these accounts can be accepted for the locations north of Keystone Road.

Margeson e-letter, 5 September 2006:

- Ms. Margeson observed “a new Catesby’s Lily (*Lilium catesbaei*) patch ... they’ll be blooming shortly ... on the newly reopened trails close to the BCP ED Center.” From her vague description, we believe that this patch is a well-known and well-studied population just off a public trail from which we’ve recently removed all research flagging so as not to draw attention to this listed species.

- Ms. Margeson wrote that “we all just keep wondering why the lockdown on publicly paid for lands???” Later, she added, “Again, place under lockdown, so interested conservationists CAN’T EVEN GO IN TO CHECK ON WHAT COULD BE LEFT AND/OR SAVED.” The Brooker Creek Preserve opened on 1 September 2006 to the public from 7:00 am to ½ hour before sunset daily, 365 days per year including weekends and holidays. Thus, the hours of public access are considerably more than they have ever been! All members of the public are invited to hike our designated trails and enjoy the Brooker Creek Preserve Environmental Education Center during the posted hours. Of course, responsible stewardship mandates that the entire preserve cannot be opened to the public because of our professional concerns about species protection, ecosystem sensitivity, and human health and safety.

Huegel e-letter, 6 September 2006:

- “It was my understanding that the new blending facility under construction by the Utilities Department within Brooker Creek Preserve was to have been confined to approximately 40 acres south of Trinity Boulevard and nearly ¼ mile interior of the roadway.”
  - The original area designated for the blending facility was 200 acres, but was reduced to 69 acres, mainly because of restrictions by Southwest Florida Water Management District. The erroneously reported “40 acres” may be confused with the ball field site which is nearly 40 acres.
- “My initial concerns were primarily centered on the fact that this region was a primary nesting habitat for Eastern Meadowlarks and, more importantly, the only population center for a very rare terrestrial orchid.”
  - Eastern meadowlarks use grassland and agricultural fields for their nesting. They are also found within the privately owned Eldridge-Wilde wellfield with its large expanses of grazing land. The area designated for the blending facility is an old bahia-grass cattle pasture that was otherwise planned, as one of several restoration CIP projects, to be returned to a mesic flatwood!
  - Dr. Huegel may indeed have located in this area of the blending facility construction site a stand of the giant orchid (*Pteroglossaspis ecristata*), a species listed as threatened by the State of Florida. Unfortunately, this record was not documented with any recognized herbarium at the time or within the files of Environmental Lands and so went unrecorded with regard to local experts. Furthermore, this finding was not reported for inclusion in established and regularly-maintained lists of species for the Brooker Creek Preserve. We have no knowledge of communications that Dr. Huegel may have had with the on-site consultant (a wetlands biologist with Jones-Edwards) or with Utilities Department staff members about this species.
  - The environmental consultant found 5 individual giant orchids in 2003 within the original 200 acres designated for the blending facility. Two individuals were located within the 69-acre footprint of the blending facility. The other three plants fell outside the footprint. The entry road is

directly over the location of one plant and another just off to the east but still within the footprint of the facility. The consultant returned to move these two plants in 2005, but could not locate them.

- “Its population statewide has plummeted recently as development has gobbled up the well-drained sandy uplands in which it grows.”
  - While we do not dispute that Dr. Huegel located this species, the area designated for the blending facility is mainly Myakka soils found in mesic flatwoods. To be sure, areas of well-drained sandy soils exist north of Keystone Road; but they are found in small patches northeast and east of the facility site.
- “The berm could have been a wall or some other similar structure that would not have permanently marred land that was supposed to be preserved. The water holes could have been designed to create wildlife habitat with littoral shelves and nesting structure. “In their present form that are hideous and without any function...” that could benefit the Preserve. Many acres of preserve were lost that did not have to be and in such a way that no benefit at all was derived for the Preserve.”
  - The borrow pits were dug out to provide fill for the site. The Environmental Lands Division did recommend ponds with littoral zones to provide improved habitat; however, the total amount of fill needed for this effort would have impacted areas outside the facility’s site limits, including uplands and wetlands. Along with the rest of the blending facility, these ponds will be fenced off for security reasons. The berm was constructed to reduce the visual impact of the facility from the adjacent public road and, eventually, will be planted with native plants to blend it as much as possible with surrounding preserve vegetation.
- “After nearly 15 years, I would expect that a map would have been developed identifying the locations of the rarest species. These things were once well known. If this is no longer the case, I would urge all involved to develop such a map as quickly as possible. It is not possible to manage the natural resources of the Preserve in good faith without knowing what is present and where the critical habitat areas are located.”
  - Dr. Huegel certainly is correct in stating that knowledge of the locations of “the rarest species” is an important component of land management. Similarly, we would add that knowledge of the locations of exotic invasive species is also important so as to prevent establishment of these species. Division staff members have initiated regular site visits to document locations of exotic and rare species as well as to establish defensible lists of vascular flora for each Division property. This includes the careful recording of sightings and the vouchering of specimens where appropriate. Importantly, these site visits include all Division preserves and management areas, not solely the Brooker Creek Preserve.
  - Dr. Huegel states, that “These things [the locations of the rarest species] were once well known”. Some of these early sightings at the Brooker Creek Preserve were added to established lists, but to our knowledge, specimens were not documented, vouchered, or reported. To our

knowledge, a map of locations was never developed for rare or sensitive species at the Brooker Creek Preserve or any other Division property. One of the current strategic initiatives for the Division's research team is the full documentation of listed species of flora and fauna on all properties under the management of the Environmental Lands Division.