



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

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Big Cypress National Preserve News Release

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National Park Service releases Big Cypress National Preserve Backcountry Access Plan, Wilderness Study, Final EIS

OCHOPEE, FL – Big Cypress National Preserve today released the final Backcountry Access Plan/ Wilderness Study/ Environmental Impact Statement (Plan/EIS) after carefully considering all public comments on managing the preserve’s backcountry access and use. The plan evaluates options for managing the preserve’s backcountry access and use and is intended to provide new access to the preserve while protecting natural and cultural resources and providing for public enjoyment.

The plan will establish a secondary off-road vehicle (ORV) trail network providing reasonable access to destinations suitable for recreational activities, such as camping, photography and hiking; and would establish a permanent route for the Florida National Scenic Trail and other hiking opportunities. The plan also includes a wilderness study to determine what parts of the original preserve, if any, should be proposed for wilderness designation.

Little changed in the backcountry access portions of the preferred alternative presented in the Supplemental Draft Plan/EIS (Alternative 3, SDEIS) released for public comment in August 2022. While there were relatively few changes to the proposed backcountry trail system in the preferred alternative, Tribal feedback — and, to a lesser extent, management considerations — associated with wilderness proposals resulted in the development of a new preferred alternative in the Final Plan/EIS, which does not identify any wilderness to be proposed for designation. The wilderness eligibility assessment remains a component of the Final Plan/EIS, but the new preferred alternative presents no wilderness proposal from among the wilderness-eligible lands.

The Final Plan/EIS preferred Alternative 4:

- Includes increased access for both motorized and non-motorized users,
- Balances increased public access with resource preservation by identifying routes that can best withstand ORV use, and
- Responds to concerns received through public comments, expressed by the Miccosukee and Seminole Tribes during Tribal consultation, and those of other stakeholders.

Minor adjustments were made to some secondary ORV trails and one proposed primary ORV trail to accommodate interests of sportsmen, adding four destinations and short segments of secondary trails to reach them. Other trails, including proposed airboat trails, were realigned or not proposed to avoid impacts to endangered species and their habitat.

The final EIS is not a decision to take a particular action but evaluates the impacts of several alternatives. The National Park Service anticipates issuing a record of decision following a waiting period of no less than 30 days after the release of this final EIS. The final Plan/EIS is available on the NPS website https://parkplanning.nps.gov/BICY_BAP_FEIS.

Established as one of the first national preserves, Big Cypress represents a unique management concept where resource protection, public recreation, and specific uses stipulated within its enabling legislation are managed concurrently.

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