



Agencies, DOT find ways to lessen environmental impact of S.R. 65 road resurfacing

Plant Society and DOT work together to keep wildflowers thriving along construction area

by Teresa Eubanks, *Journal Editor*
 For many local drivers, the 26-mile stretch of S.R. 65 that leads through the Apalachicola National Forest from Telogia to Sumatra is just another road that rolls past acres of pine trees and palmettos, like many others in Liberty County.

But for members of the Magnolia Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society (FNPS) in Tallahassee, it's something special.

"There's no place in Florida with more biodiversity," says Eleanor Dietrich, a FNPS board member who is quick to name several plants and wildflowers that thrive here and nowhere else, including the federally-protected *Harper's Beauty*, found only in Liberty and Franklin counties. The *Blazing Star*, *Meadow Beauty*, *Sabatia* and *Yellow-Eyed Grass* are among a long list of wildflowers that bloom along the roadway.

That section of S.R. 65 is bordered by the 220-mile Big Bend Scenic Byway, which starts in Leon County, circles Wakulla County and follows the Franklin County coastline before turning north and ending at the Liberty County line. (Liberty County declined to participate in the Scenic Byway, but the Hwy. 65 area is still a big draw for those who seek out the unique flowers during their growing seasons.) In 2009, the byway was designated a National Scenic Byway, and since then it has been named one of the 51 most scenic drives in America by *USA Today*.

The area will be featured in a new brochure promoting eco-tourism, which is being produced by the Florida Wildflower Foundation. "There are true economic benefits for a scenic highway and tourist spots," said Dietrich.

When members of the FNPS learned that S.R. 65 would be widened and resurfaced, they were concerned that the construction

process could permanently damage the very thing that attracts visitors to this unique stretch of highway. "There were no limits unless we came in and participated in the design process," said Dietrich. "For years, the Department of Transportation (DOT) moved and uprooted plants and damaged habitat," she said. FNPS hoped to find a way to work with the DOT and they did.

After gathering information from the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, they met with DOT officials and gave their input on the plan to minimize the impact of construction on the area. By the time FNPS got involved, much of the design work had been done, Dietrich said, but they were able to provide additional comment. By the time they worked out the details, they were able to trim the cost of the project as well as the time it would take to complete, she said. Some of the changes incorporated include:

- Instead of building a two-lane detour road, they had several culvert sites permitted for full dirt road detours.

- Crews confine their work area to a six-foot-wide strip along both sides of the road and agreed to a seasonal mowing schedule. "The roadside right of ways will be mowed completely at the end of the growing season (usually early November) to cut down the sprouting trees and weedy growth, and to disperse ripe seeds from the flower bloom. This should greatly enhance the beauty of this special place," Dietrich explained.

- Color-coded stobs mark areas of special concern, such as the nesting area of the red-cockaded woodpecker, where work was curtailed near active nest trees during the April 1 - July 31 breeding season.

- Designated turnaround areas (pictured above) for construction

equipment were established to minimize the impact on the shoulders of the road.

- Construction equipment moved off site is inspected and cleaned before returning to prevent potential noxious weed contamination.

- The application of certified seed or sod application will be limited to disturbed areas by the new pavement and within culvert work areas.

"For years, we have been learning how to work effectively with the DOT," said Dietrich. "We understand how to do that better now." She pointed out that their collaboration reduced the disturbance to the wildflower areas by about half of what it would have been.

Dietrich noted, "There is a standard DOT way of carrying out road work, and *Harper's Beauty* made that impossible in this situation, which opened the doors to finding new ways to do this job."

She said DOT designers, with strong input from the Dept. of Environmental Protection, the U.S. Forest Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife, "Actually went the extra mile, so to speak, keeping the construction wheels confined to the 6 foot limit the whole extent of the construction, not just the portion with the *Harper's Beauty*."

She added, "I think what the DOT did in this process can be used as a good example of how environmental protection can be built into road construction design. They have set an example that will make it easier for other DOT construction projects to be designed and implemented in a new way, that is more protective of the environment."

LEFT: Pictured are some of the many wildflowers found in Liberty County. ABOVE: One of several turn around locations for heavy equipment being used along SR 65.



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