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SR 65 project protects wildflowers

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Sometimes you have to go the extra mile to protect nature. And thanks to public involvement, that's just what state transportation officials did with State Road 65 through the Apalachicola National Forest.

The result will help protect 26 miles of wildflowers and wildlife — including four endangered/threatened plant and animal species.

"The DOT realized this is a pretty remarkable place," said Jeff Caster, a landscape architect with the Florida Department of Transportation. "We went through this habitat without destroying or impacting it."

The project is the resurfacing and reconstruction of two-lane State Road 65 from Telogia to Sumatra in [Liberty](#) County, a 26-mile section of a road that runs from Interstate 10 to Eastpoint in Franklin County. The \$9.3-million project began in January and is scheduled for completion in February 2012.

That portion of the national forest is considered one of the nation's most biologically diverse habitats. It is [home](#) to a cavalcade of native plants and animals, including Harper's Beauty, a federally protected type of wildflower found only in Franklin and Liberty counties.

The destruction of Harper's Beauty alongside SR 65 several years ago by DOT roadside mowers led to an agreement three years ago between state and federal officials to restrict mowing to six feet of either side of the road. The agreement occurred just as officials began designing the current resurfacing project and sparked involvement by local wildflower enthusiasts in the planning.

Members of the Tallahassee-based Magnolia chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society met with DOT officials and attended public meetings, seeking to minimize damage to the environment during construction.

"We were concerned because we've seen

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other (road) projects in which they cleared to the edge of the natural community," said Eleanor Dietrich, a Magnolia chapter board member. "We wanted to be proactive, rather than wait and scream (afterward), 'They've destroyed everything.'"

With input from the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) and U.S. Forest Service, the DOT crafted an ambitious plan to minimize construction damage.

Builders restricted their working area to 6 feet on either side of the road; confined all their [vehicle](#) turnarounds and equipment storage to a handful of designated sites; employed less machinery-intensive ways to reconstruct 63 culverts; and observed stringent soil replacement and machinery cleaning policies to prevent non-native grasses and plants from being introduced to the roadside.

While the extra-care construction plan was a departure from most DOT projects, it cost the state only a little extra in design costs and nothing extra in construction costs. And it was embraced by DOT engineers, consultants and road-building contractors, Anderson-Columbia and C.W. Roberts.

"At the DOT, we'll build anything the plans call for. But our guys will tell you they are 'sand and gravel' guys," Caster said. "This was far outside their comfort zone. But they were able to do it."

Such careful construction will pay economic dividends. State Road 65 is a popular eco-

tourism destination that draws naturalists from all over the nation. It is one of the Florida Wildflower Routes, designated by the Florida Wildlife Foundation.

That portion of the Apalachicola National Forest has dozens of wildflower species, native plants and sensitive wildlife. It is home to the federally endangered red cockaded woodpecker and the federally threatened frosted flatwoods salamander. It contains three-fourths of all the Harpers' Beauty found in the United States, as well as the state-endangered Godfrey's Butterwort.

Because of DOT's care in construction, the coming fall and spring wildflower seasons should produce their usual riot of color.

"The project potentially could have completely damaged what people come here to visit," said Keith McCarron, a planner with the Apalachee Regional Planning Council. "It was a win-win situation that satisfied the regulatory agencies and tourism."

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And it underlines the value of public involvement in transportation planning. Fritz Wettstein, president of the Magnolia chapter, said the project will be featured in the FNPS magazine and will be nominated for a state environmental award.

DIETRICH/Special to the Democrat

"It's important for us to document the success of this project and take this model to other communities," Wettstein said. "We want them to know that where you have scenic byways, you can go to the DOT and (help them) preserve the environment."



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ELEANOR DIETRICH/Special to the Democrat Careful planning is helping the Florida DOT widen and resurface State Road 65 through the Apalachicola National Forest without disturbing the wildflowers, such as this narrowleaf sunflower. / ELEANOR

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