

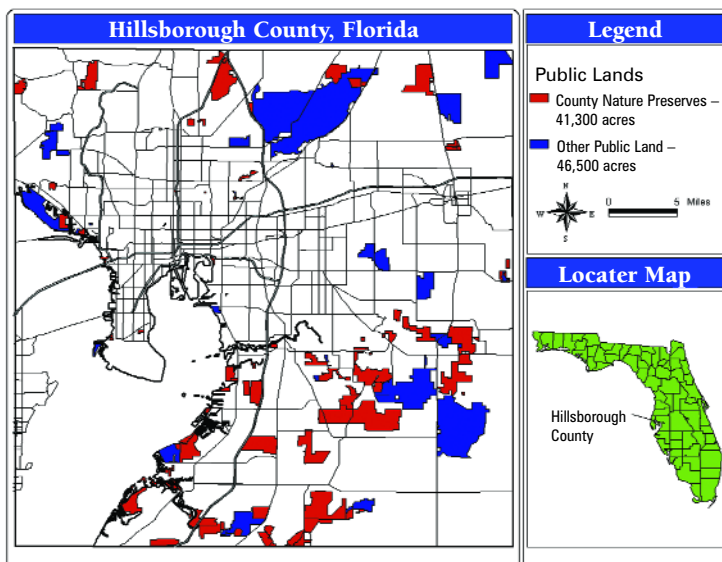
A Task Force is Born

A FLEPPC Education & Outreach Grant Sponsored Program

by Ross Dickerson, Parks, Recreation and Conservation Department

The Development

In May of 1999, Hillsborough County Commissioner Ronda Storms' office received a letter from a concerned resident and environmental activist in southern Hillsborough County, the late Barbara Waddell. The letter contained a number of requests/suggestions concerning environmental protection in the Ruskin area and the Cockroach Bay ecosystem, with particular focus on the control and eradication of invasive plant species such as Brazilian pepper (*Schinus terebinthifolius*), lead tree (*Leucaena leucocephala*), and Australian pine (*Casuarina* spp.). Suggestions concerning the control and eradication of invasive non-native plant species included: identification of one point of contact through which county eradication efforts could be coordinated; increased public outreach and staff education programs; improved coordination with state and federal exotic control efforts; contact with other counties to identify successful control tactics; and better coordination in the use of volunteers.



There are over 80,000 acres of public land in Hillsborough County

In response to these concerns, the County Administrator's office directed the formation of the Invasives Control Work Group to evaluate County efforts to control and eradicate non-native pest plant species. The work group consisted of individuals from numerous County departments, as well as interested citizens. Over a 12-month period, the group formulated recommendations and presented them in a report to the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners. Following the Board's approval on August 16, 2000, administrative staff from the Parks and Recreation Department and the Public Works Department met to implement the recommendations, with the Parks and Recreation Department in the lead role. In October of 2001, the Hillsborough County Invasive Species Task Force (ISTF) was born.

Who makes up the Invasive Species Task Force?

The Hillsborough County Invasive Species Task Force (ISTF) is made up of several Hillsborough County Departments, local and state government agencies, non-profit organizations, private organizations, and most notably, the citizens. These partners include:

Hillsborough County Departments

- Parks Recreation and Conservation
 - Conservation Services
 - Maintenance Services
 - Parks Services
- Planning and Growth Management
- Office of Neighborhood Relations
- Extension Service
- Public Works
 - Specialized Services
 - Mosquito Control
 - Stormwater Management
- Real Estate
- Solid Waste Management
- Environmental Protection Commission

Other Government Entities

- Cities of Tampa and Temple Terrace
- Southwest Florida Water Management District
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- Tampa Bay Estuary Program

Non-Profit Partners

- Tampa Bay Watch
- Wildlife Fellowship Inc.
- Mayor's Beautification Program
- The Florida Aquarium

Citizen and Other Partners

- Ruskin Community Development Foundation
- Tampa Electric Company

The four main goals of the Task Force are to: remove existing non-native invasive plants on public lands and stem their spread to other sites; facilitate citizen involvement and volunteerism with control and removal of invasive plants; create awareness and educate the public about the existence and harm of invasive plants to Florida's native plants and wildlife; and educate the public on invasive plant control, eradication techniques and the importance of native habitat.

Accomplishments

Over the past four years, the Task Force has accomplished several projects. Invasive removal workdays are held at least four



Work Day volunteers handing branches to County staff to be chipped



Volunteers cutting and dragging Brazilian pepper branches at Sun City Heritage Park, Ruskin

times per year and the number of volunteers increases each time. The ISTF has received over \$250,000 in grant funding to produce public outreach and education materials and remove invasive species from public lands. Many of the ISTF members provide outreach to the Tampa Bay area. The Tampa Electric Company (TECO) produced a bill insert explaining invasive plants and distributed it to cus-

tomers around Tampa Bay. They also funded the Task Force's display board that is presented at local events. The monthly newsletter produced by the Office of Neighborhood Relations contains an informative article showcasing a different invasive plant. The Task Force and Extension Service produced a homeowner seminar that educates people on invasive plants with hands-on experience. Task Force members are frequently asked to present this seminar at homeowner association meetings, master gardener meetings, environmental events, etc. These helpful and informative contributions by the ISTF were good, but something else was needed to educate Tampa Bay citizens on why these plants are bad and how to deal with them.



Due to the overwhelming number of requests for invasive species information, the Task Force produced "Identification and Control of Non-Native Invasive Plants in the Tampa Bay Area," a field guide for homeowners and professionals. This guide covers 20 of the most common invasive plants found in homeowners' yards in the Tampa Bay area. It assists the reader in identifying each plant by describing the species characteristics, habitat, and growth habits. The guide also explains control methods (cut-stump, basal bark, and foliar) and types and proper usage of herbicides, gives tips to eradicate

the pest plants, and offers suggestions for native plant replacements. To date, there have been thousands of field guides distributed throughout the Tampa Bay region and the State of Florida.

Other projects recently completed or in the final stages of completion are a field guide on CD that allows people to see larger images of the plants, and the "Wicked Weeds" video funded by the Tampa Bay Estuary Program. This video allows the viewer to see the plants and points out identification characteristics, and demonstrates control methods and safety measures such as proper personal protective equipment (PPE). Even though the Task Force has completed these projects, there is still much to do.

Future Endeavors

The Florida Aquarium in Tampa recently installed an invasive species exhibit describing both invasive plants and animals. The Task Force will be working with Aquarium staff on upgrading their exhibit as time goes on. The Tampa Electric Company (TECO) has a manatee-viewing center in south Hillsborough County, located near the Big Bend power plant in Apollo Beach, where people can see hundreds of manatees utilizing the warm water from the plant during the winter months. They also have Florida friendly gardens and information about native plants in the area. In the near future, the Task Force will produce an invasive species page on the TECO website.

Tampa Bay citizens have asked the Task Force to produce a brochure that not only has pictures of invasive plants, but also pictures of suggested native replacements. This brochure is currently in production and will include five Category I plants that are found for sale locally and five native or sterile plant substitutes. Most importantly, future goals include making changes to the Land Development Code of Hillsborough County, the development of a County Policy for landscaping, and the creation of the Invasive Species Strike Team.

The Strike Team will consist of dedicated volunteers who will attend a rigorous training class to educate them on plant identification, herbicide use, and safety. Then, under the direction of a licensed herbicide applicator, the volunteers will treat invasive plants in public areas. The implementation of the Strike Team will allow the Task Force to cover more area than ever before, and bring Hillsborough County one step closer to controlling pest plants.

Speak Up

Were it not for Barbara Waddell, a native to Michigan, and a "snowbird" to Ruskin, the Hillsborough Count Invasive Species Task Force might never have been formed. Barbara and the "Pepper Patrol" realized early on the problems that invasive exotic plants cause, and made it her mission to make everyone else realize the same. She made the right people aware of her concerns, raised local government awareness and, as a result, the Task Force was born.

For more information on the Hillsborough County Invasive Species Task Force or to obtain a copy of the "Identification and Control of Non-Native Invasive Plants in the Tampa Bay Area" field guide, contact Ross Dickerson, Invasive Species Task Force Coordinator at 813/671-7754, or by email at dickersonr@hillsboroughcounty.org