



## Lewis Ocean Bay Heritage Preserve, Horry County



Lewis Ocean Bay Heritage Preserve (LOBHP) is located just west of Myrtle Beach and is easily accessed from S.C. Highway 90 or S.C. Highway 31 via International Drive. Just over 10,000 acres, this natural area was dedicated as a heritage preserve given its unique assemblage of Carolina bays, which are elliptical or oval depressions unique to the Eastern Seaboard, longleaf pine forests, and rich biological diversity. In fact, this site hosts globally imperiled plant species like the Venus flytrap (*Dionea muscipula*) and Raven's primrose willow (*Ludwigia ravenii*), and federally endangered species like the red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*), and even large megafauna like the black bear (*Ursus americana*). The S.C. Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) maintains the pine savanna habitat through frequent prescribed fire (controlled burns). These fires are similar to natural fires ignited by lightning, and they maintain the habitat that is home to these imperiled and endangered plants and animals.

### The Pressure Is On

The area around the preserve has changed dramatically since the early 1990's when the Carolina Forest community was being planned. The preserve today is surrounded by four-lane highways, and neighborhoods bordering the preserve are growing. That makes it harder to conduct prescribed burns, which are necessary to maintain the habitat for rare species and reduce fuel loads for wildfires. Conway Medical Center (CMC) has added to this challenge by proposing a hospital across from LOBHP. And Horry County has proposed creating a mitigation bank—which is an area of wetland conservation set aside to offset the damage from building roads—that will also require prescribed burns to release credits for mitigation and in perpetuity to maintain the fire dependent habitat. Our county desperately needs these credits to make improvements to our existing roads to keep up with population growth! The 3,800 ac mitigation bank was once slated to become a part of LOBHP, but SCDNR backed out of this agreement given the complexities with carrying out prescribed burns adjacent to a hospital.

### Smoke-Sensitive Areas

Prescribed fires take a lot of planning and part of that planning requires fire managers to identify and avoid smoke-sensitive areas such as schools, retirement communities, roads, and hospitals. But none of the existing schools, medical facilities, or homes are behind the fire drop gates on International Drive like CMC is proposing. A hospital is one of the most sensitive because its purpose is to treat the ill. Smoke inhalation for someone already ill can be dangerous and life threatening. SCDNR must avoid smoke-sensitive areas, and that would include the new hospital, even if the hospital has an advanced filtration system. A hospital directly across the road from the preserve would further limit opportunities to burn.

The proposed site for the hospital is also prone to wildfire activity. For example, the Golden Triangle Fire burned just across from the proposed hospital site in 2016, and the devastating

Highway 31 fire jumped Highway 22 and burned over 70 homes in Barefoot Landing in 2009. Another issue is that International Drive is subject to closures for prescribed burns by state officials via drop gates. This also poses concerns about how personnel, ambulances, and patients would enter or leave the hospital during a planned prescribed burn. The gates cannot be moved as their location was strategic to allow for burn teams to traverse the road safely during a fire—at times in heavy smoke—without having to face oncoming traffic. Normal work week traffic also cannot navigate the road safely during residual smoke scenarios. International Drive stayed closed for three consecutive days during routine prescribed fires in 2020 due to smoldering. And smoke from wildfires can linger for months. Prescribed burns provide many benefits to communities. Typically, if the community can deal with short-term inconveniences, like closures of International Drive or light smoke in the area for just a few days, wildfire chances are significantly reduced. **McLeod Health's hospital is only 1.3 miles away on International Drive. CMC is moving 50 underutilized beds from their current campus, NOT creating 50 new beds with this proposal. There are other suitable locations for CMC to locate their hospital, but there is only one Lewis Ocean Bay. SCDNR has offered to purchase the parcel from CMC!**

## The Challenge of Fire

In addition to the smoke-sensitive area challenges, LOBHP and the proposed mitigation bank have other attributes that make for more challenging prescribed burns. Being located close to the ocean allows for sea breezes to sweep in from the east unexpectedly and cause a shift in smoke as well as fire behavior. The waxy evergreen (pocosin) vegetation also tends to release highly combustible oils just before ignition leading to flareups which can cause fire in unwanted terrain. The bays on site tend to hold water in the winter but are dry during the summer months. Burn managers must fit burns in when conditions are dry enough to burn but also allow the bay soils to have enough moisture to not ignite. If ignited, these peat soils can burn for months underground before potentially sparking another fire above ground.

The window of opportunity for burns is already constrained. Building the medical facility as proposed would further limit SCDNR's ability to manage LOBHP and the county's ability to manage the mitigation bank. Limiting prescribed burning also increases wildfire risk.



Unique places like Lewis Ocean Bay Heritage Preserve are part of what makes this region so special. Now more than ever, with the rapid growth along South Carolina's coast, we need to stand together to protect our natural resources and the resilience of our communities.

## What You Can Do

- Ask Horry County Council to deny the rezoning and development agreement for the Conway Medical Center hospital.
- Ask Conway Medical Center to find another site for the hospital and sell the property to SCDNR (SCDNR has ability and interest per their letters to county council and CMC).
- Contact [TrapperF@sccl.org](mailto:TrapperF@sccl.org) or [BeckyR@sccl.org](mailto:BeckyR@sccl.org) or call 843-725-2064 for ways to help!

