

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Commissioners

FROM: Kenneth D. Haddad, Executive Director

DATE: January 29, 2008

SUBJECT: February 2008 Executive Director's Report

The Commissioners asked FWC staff to review the current imperiled species listing process and provide ideas on how to overcome the polarization created by the process and how to improve the process itself. We chartered an internal team and the review has begun. We have targeted the June meeting for a response by staff to Commissioners but would appreciate the latitude to push that to September if the complexities of the review require more time.

At your direction, an FWC staff team made up of Col. Julie Jones, Mark Robson and Jim Antista briefed Commissioners Stephenson, Wright, and Bergeron on the history of the gill net issue in Florida. In addition, at the last meeting under Commission Exchange, Commissioner Barco suggested the possibility of a public discussion on the net issue. Staff was asked to provide input as to the efficacy of a new discussion on the issue. Staff discussed this issue and recognizes the benefit of having a detailed presentation and discussion on net issues to further understand this recurring complex topic. If the Commissioners would like to proceed we suggest either a Commissioner workshop or June meeting agenda item for in depth review, discussion, and public input after which the Commission can decide if they would like to readdress any parts of the net issue.

Discussions are ongoing with our sister agency in Georgia on the current Reciprocity Compact with them that allows freshwater fishermen and hunters 65 and over to be exempt from purchase of licenses in our respective states. This means a Georgia hunter 65 and over can hunt in Florida without a Florida license and vice versa. Georgia DNR asked that saltwater anglers also be included. Staff analysis revealed that this would remove approximately \$200,000 dollars from our revenues. We respectfully declined the request to include saltwater anglers. Georgia DNR, on the other hand, has seen a large increase in Florida hunters over 65 hunting in Georgia and a subsequent loss of revenue. Georgia DNR is debating the efficacy of continuing the Compact at all or perhaps requesting the exemption apply to just freshwater fishing. The issue is currently unresolved.

Staff continue to work with Commissioner Wright on innovative funding strategies to address FWC budget issues, particularly in light of the significant statewide budget trends currently being faced. We met with experts on bonds and state revenues to understand the types of vehicles within the state structure that could be sources of revenue. These are being evaluated and discussed. Clearly, there is no magic solution and the Florida Senate and House of Representatives do not see eye-to-eye on what types of solutions can even be considered. We will continue to work on strategies and look for suitable solutions within the legislative process.

### Office of the General Counsel (Legal)

- On January 3, 2008, FWC's Legal Office and the Division of Law Enforcement participated in the winter education program for the Conference of County Court Judges at Amelia Island. Alan Richard and Carla Oglo made presentations to the County Judges about boating law and the enhanced penalties for repeat violators of laws protecting fish and wildlife. Major Lee Beach coordinated the law enforcement exhibits and ride-alongs for the judges. FWC was invited to participate in this program after a very successful program in 2005. This year's presentation and exhibits were very well received. It is a great opportunity for FWC to inform judges about our agency and we gain valuable insights from the judges.

### Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management (DFFM)

- An evaluation by an outside contractor showed that the Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management Joe Budd Summer Fish Camp teaches children the importance of healthy fisheries and aquatic habitats. The study's findings are based on responses to a 19 question survey received from 260 (75.1%) campers who had participated in at least one week of Joe Budd Summer Fish Camp from 2000 through 2006. Two hundred fifty-eight children, from a school-based fishing program, were used as a comparison group. Those attending camp increased the number of days fishing each year thereafter. Additionally, campers rated awareness and importance of protecting aquatic resources much higher than the comparison group. The evaluation made it clear that attending the Joe Budd Summer Fish Camp puts a child on track to become a life-long angler and advocate for healthy aquatic resources.

### Division of Habitat and Species Conservation (DHSC)

- Blackwater Deer Cleaning Facilities—Since 2002, local staff collaborated with the Division of Forestry (DOF) to establish two deer-cleaning stations on the Blackwater Wildlife Management Area (WMA). This collaborative effort was in response to public concern about possible inappropriate deer carcass disposal. Several hundred deer a year are harvested in and around Blackwater WMA. Many hunters who harvest deer there or on private lands nearby clean their deer and deposit the remains on the area. Discarding deer remains had become a significant environmental concern and often the remains were dumped in area streams or strewn along the roadsides. Also, a local *ad hoc* water-quality group voiced unease about this issue. Poor public perception toward consumptive users on the WMA appeared to be building.

Fixed locations for deer-cleaning activities and a site for proper disposal of the remains were found. Moreover, providing such facilities also enabled us to provide sites that could be used to gather data from deer harvested on the area. Given Blackwater's size (nearly 200,000 acres with numerous access points); check stations were not a practical option for collecting biological

data. Cooperation between the two agencies produced very successful stations, and effectively and substantially decreased the number of deer carcasses strewn along waterways and roadsides.



#### Division of Hunting and Game Management (DHGM)

- Beau Turner built a facility to assist the FWC with our youth hunting and fishing programs. The *FWC Beau Turner Youth Conservation Center*, located just minutes from Tallahassee in Jefferson County, consists of archery, rifle and shotgun ranges, a fishing pond, and meeting facilities. The center will be a great asset in introducing youth to, and getting them involved in, the great outdoors. Beau Turner is the son of Ted Turner. The Turner's and the Turner Foundation are the largest private landowner in the United States and the largest private landowner in Jefferson County, FL. Beau's desire is to help youth become involved in the outdoors and he is unselfishly using his personal funds and land to assist the FWC in this endeavor. The entire facility was built, outfitted for use, and leased to the FWC at no cost.

#### Division of Marine Fisheries Management (DMFM)

- A stock assessment of the Florida blue crab was completed in 2007. The assessment concluded that the current status of blue crab stock remains uncertain, but most information that was evaluated suggested the stock is either not being overfished or, if it is, it is sufficiently resilient to sustain its abundance at the current level of overfishing. The assessment noted that more information is needed regarding commercial discard mortality, landings by the recreational fishery, and the age structure of the blue crab population before a more accurate assessment of the stock can be undertaken. Fish and Wildlife Research Institute researchers have begun addressing some of these information needs by initiating a study that will eventually allow the age of blue crabs to be evaluated more accurately.
- In 2007, the FWC entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the National Park Service (NPS) regarding each agency's role in assessing the effectiveness of the newly implemented Research Natural Area (RNA) in Dry Tortugas National Park. As part of the MOU, the FWC and the NPS developed

a research and monitoring plan establishing research objectives. The plan will be used to assess the RNA performance effectiveness. The goal is to protect near pristine, shallow-water marine habitat, ensure species diversity, and enhance the productivity and sustainability of exploited fish populations. A document detailing the plan was completed in November 2007.

- The Division of Marine Fisheries Management recently filled a full-time position in Cedar Key to conduct outreach and education activities in a geographic region from Citrus County to the Big Bend area. DMFM outreach and education activities focus on the conservation of marine fisheries stocks and essential fisheries habitats. The new employee, Melissa Jackson, will work in partnership with interested parties in Cedar Key as well as staff of the Department of Environmental Protection's Aquatic Preserves, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Wildlife Refuges, Florida Sea Grant, and the Citrus County Marine Science Center to design and implement projects to meet the needs of that region.
- The Governor's office received a request from representatives of the commercial shark-fishing industry in Florida for assistance in gaining federal relief. Under provisions of the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the Governor may request relief for a commercial fishery failure. This failure may be due to natural or undetermined causes, or by man-made causes that could include regulatory restrictions. The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Commerce ultimately must determine whether there is a failure, and is empowered to make money available. The recent request to the Governor asks for relief because over 50% of federal permits issued for commercial fishing in the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic coast are from Florida. Additionally, several of the largest shark dealers reside in Florida. The fishery has been affected by increasingly stringent regulations which have been put in place in response to declining populations of economically important species. Staff concur that this request appears to meet the criteria for consideration as fishery disaster relief. However, if the Secretary of Commerce were to declare such a disaster, it is not clear when federal dollars could be appropriated. Further, the federal law requires a 25% match from Florida or the fishing community, and a number of important details about the program and how it would be administered need to be ironed out. Because this federal program may have other applications to Florida fishing industries, it warrants specific review and consideration by the Commission. Division of Marine Fisheries Management staff will be providing background information during the federal issues report.

## South Florida Drought

- February is the fourth month of what is considered the dry season in southern Florida. This season has been unusually dry with water levels at or near record lows for the region. Lake Okeechobee's water level is currently near 10' and is expected to reach a record low. On January 15, 2008, the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board declared an extreme District-wide water shortage and adopted a groundbreaking Modified Phase III water shortage order, instituting a one-day-a-week watering schedule for residential landscape irrigation to conserve regional water. For most communities, one-day-per-week restrictions now apply, and year-round conservation requirements are being considered. As lake levels recede, lake bottom is being exposed, which promotes the growth of needed vegetation. FWC law enforcement is proactively working with local law enforcement to prevent off-road mudding from taking place on the exposed lake bottom and destroying this growth. The lower lake levels have not yet resulted in the water clearing as expected. Due to Lake Okeechobee's low level, the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries have not received any discharges. This time of year, water levels in the Everglades Wildlife Management Area typically continue to drop as a result of decreased rainfall and increased evaporation/transpiration rates. Currently, recession rates have been increasing dramatically throughout the area. At the current rate, we will recommend closure of the Holey Land WMA to public access near the beginning of February and closure of the northern portion of the Everglades and Francis S. Taylor WMA near the middle of February. Water levels at those times will have reached the point at which muck fires may be possible as a result of wildfires.