

MEMORANDUM

TO: Commissioners

FROM: Kenneth D. Haddad, Executive Director

DATE: August 29, 2008

SUBJECT: September 2008 Executive Director's Report

Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management (DFFM)

Richloam State Fish Hatchery

The staff at the Florida Bass Conservation Center and Richloam State Fish Hatchery was recently recognized for their work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to gain U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval for two potential drugs for use in aquaculture. The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies recognized Mr. Michael Matthews, Justin Elkins and Josh Sakmar for their efforts in conducting field efficacy trials to expand the labeled use for 35% Perox Aid ® (hydrogen peroxide) and chloramine-T, two very important drugs developed to help control bacterial infections in cool- and warm water finfish. The field trials were conducted in collaboration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Aquatic Animal Drug Approval Partnership Program. The FBCC has also agreed to continue clinical field trials for other important drugs, including Reward ® (diquat dibromide) and Aquaflor ® (florfenicol) to control flavobacteriosis in warm water fish.

Division of Marine Fisheries Management (MFM)

The *Hoyt Vandenberg* artificial reef project for Key West got much needed support from the Florida Legislature this spring with the passage of an additional \$1 million for the completion of the project. This funding, designed as a reimbursable grant to the City of Key West administered by the FWC's artificial reef program, is in addition to a \$1.3 million loan to the city for the project. The combined funds will cover the remaining deficit and allow the project to proceed to completion. If all goes according to plan, the schedule is now to sink the ship off Key West in the early part of December 2008, after hurricane season.

Division of Habitat and Species Conservation (HSC)

Terrestrial Habitat Conservation and Restoration—The Royce Unit of the Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area completed Phase 1 of a large-scale hydrologic restoration project known as the Peace Pond project. This \$750,000 project will restore a 200-acre freshwater marsh, five seasonal ponds, and the flow of water to 700 acres of cutthroat grass. Currently, the marsh is filling up and already attracting scores of wading birds. The completed project will draw more

wildlife and provide for the continued existence of a threatened wetland community.

As part of FWC's statewide initiative, groundcover restoration work continues in the South Region. OK Slough WMA began pasture restoration in 2003 and currently has 300 acres planted with native seed collected from Three Lakes and Babcock-Webb WMAs. Staff is beginning two new 100-acre restoration projects on Dinner Island Ranch and on Spirit of the Wild WMAs where the wildlife observed includes quail, turkey, sparrows, and deer. Florida panthers also leave tracks around the plots. The Statewide Groundcover Restoration Team currently monitors wildlife species in these restoration areas.

From May to June 2008, 1,300 individual native trees and shrubs were planted on tree islands in the Everglades and Francis S. Taylor WMA. Species included red maple, dahoon holly, firebush, elderberry, pond apple, and Carolina willow, among others. These were planted on 12 tree islands in various stages of restoration in the northwestern portion of Everglades WMA. These tree islands had been adversely affected by muck fires, unfavorable water regimes, and exotic plant invasions. Exotic species, primarily Brazilian pepper, dominated prior to the ongoing restoration. Tree islands provide critical habitat for a variety of Everglades wildlife, and contribute to the native plant diversity characteristic of this ecosystem.

Florida's Wildlife Legacy Initiative—The Commission and its partners have worked with Florida's Wildlife Legacy Initiative to identify five goals for the next three years. One goal is the Cooperative Conservation Blueprint. This is a GIS application providing users a tool to efficiently and effectively focus resources and management on priority natural areas, working landscapes, and freshwater resources. A key element of the effort is building consensus among developers/builders, agricultural interests, land-use planners, landowners, state agencies, local governments, scientists, and conservationists. There is growing momentum and enthusiasm by these partners for a well-planned and unified approach to effecting meaningful conservation of natural and working landscapes in Florida.

We are building awareness and soliciting support for the *Critical Lands & Waters Identification Project (CLIP)*, a statewide database and prioritization of landscapes, biodiversity, and fresh water. Outreach is growing among large private landowners and their representatives, conservationists, and state agencies and expanding to include Regional Planning Councils, county and local governments, key legislators, business owners, and business organizations.

BABCOCK RANCH PRESERVE SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES

Babcock Ranch Preserve (BRP) was purchased by the State of Florida and Lee County in 2006. The 72,239-acre property in Charlotte and Lee counties is the single largest purchase of conservation land in the State's history. BRP was established to protect and preserve the environmental, agricultural, scientific, scenic, geologic, watershed, fish, wildlife, historic, cultural, and recreational values

and provide for multiple use and sustained yield of the renewable surface resources and with a goal of sustaining the ecological and economic integrity of the property while allowing the business of the ranch to operate and prosper.

The legislation that created BRP named Division of Forestry (DOF) and Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) as the managing agencies. As managing agencies, DOF and FWC only involvement in ranch management is to provide technical assistance to Babcock Ranch Management, LLC. Neither agency receives management funding or staffing for on the ground activities.

The legislation also called for development of a management plan for BRP by July, 2008. DOF and FWC contracted with a private vendor to develop the management plan for BRP. The management plan is not an annual work plan or a detailed business/operational plan, but provides general guidance for management of BRP for the next ten years. The management plan has been approved by Lee County, Babcock Ranch Board of Trustees, Inc., Acquisition and Restoration Council, Cabinet Aides and the Board of Trustees approved the plan on July 29, 2008 which is within the mandated deadline for completion.

Other tasks that have been completed or initiated include:

1. Public hunting has been a big issue on BRP and we have some good news on that front. FWC staff recently met with BRP staff to develop recommendations for FWC-administered public hog hunts to be conducted beginning in the fall of 2008 on a 16,600-acre piece of BRP.

Because long term funding is not available to manage public hunts, it is important to establish fee-based hunts to generate revenues. For this reason, staff are initially proposing special-opportunity hog hunts where hunters would pay \$5 to apply and \$150 for each 3-day hog hunt. These fees are currently authorized under existing Commission rules. The proposal includes six, 3-day hunts from November through January which provides opportunity for 180 total hunters.

Staff also are working with BRP to provide youth hunts this season under the Youth Hunting Program of Florida in partnership with the Future of Hunting in Florida, Inc.

2. Developed signage and posted the perimeter of the area.
3. Law enforcement officers in the Southwest Region continue to patrol BRP on a regular basis. Since acquisition, officers have conducted 3,381 hours of regular patrol and 2,032 hours of overtime patrol for a total of 5,413 hours. Four all-terrain vehicles, night vision goggles and a specially equipped Jeep patrol vehicle were purchased to enhance patrol capabilities.

4. FWC contracted with the Florida Natural Areas Inventory to accomplish the following tasks. Many of these tasks were essential in developing the management plan and all tasks have been completed.
 - Natural plant community mapping and ecological characterization
 - Historic vegetation analysis
 - Rare plant survey
 - Exotic invasive plant inventory
 - Rare animal survey
 - Red-cockaded woodpecker management plan
5. FWC designed the Bermont Crossing day use area which included parking area, kiosk and trails. Also, maps were developed for the trails.

Community Relations (CR)

Eight FWC communications efforts from 2007 have been recognized for excellence by the Association for Conservation Information (ACI), a national organization of conservation communications professionals. This represents the most Communication awards the FWC has received in a single year. The presentation took place in July at the ACI's conference in Nashville.

The launch event accompanying the unveiling of the redesigned Manatee License Plate and a special 8-page "wrapper" supplement for an issue of "Florida Fishing Weekly" magazine won first place in the "Communications Campaign" and "Big Idea, Small Budget" categories, respectively.

Also earning awards were both the Freshwater Fishing and Saltwater Fishing handbooks; a pair of news releases about the rescue of the "Bugaboo Fire" bears; a news release about FWC's K-9 officers; the FWC Style Guide manual; and a video about the grand opening of the Florida Bass Conservation Center.

In addition, Bob Wattendorf (Freshwater Fisheries Management, Policy & Stakeholder Coordination) received the Outdoor Ethics Communication Award from the Izaak Walton League for a Fish Busters' Bulletin column on ethical fishing.

The award-winning products are the result of cooperative efforts between Community Relations, FWRI, Hunting & Game Management, Marine and Freshwater Fisheries and LE.

Also at the conference, Scott Ball was elected Secretary of the organization for 2009.

Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI)

Dave Palandro/SCUBAnauts

SCUBAnauts, a Tampa Bay-based youth organization that teaches teenagers about science and scuba diving, recently received the President's Volunteer Service Award. Fish and Wildlife Research Institute staff have collaborated with SCUBAnauts since 2001, lending their professional experience to the real-world training the young men and women receive through the program.

FWC researcher Dr. David Palandro attended the event and was recognized for his mentoring efforts during the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation dinner held in Washington, D.C. The SCUBAnauts learn from mentors as they apply what they learn in real-life experiences.

ACI Award

FWRI's outreach and media efforts to launch the redesign of the manatee license plate were recognized for excellence by the Association for Conservation Information (ACI), a national organization of conservation communications professionals. The launch event that unveiled the redesigned plate won first place in the "Communications Campaign" category.

Dry Tortugas Research

The FWC/FWRI Dry Tortugas Research Team has completed the first round of data collection for our Dry Tortugas National Park Research Natural Area (RNA) studies. This project is examining several of the high priority performance topics in the joint FWC/National Park Service science plan. The research team completed fish trap and hook and line surveys at 45 sites, and externally tagged more than 300 fish. The external tags encourage fishers to report tagged fish on our fish tag hotline, which yields valuable data on survival, growth and movement. We also have tagged 37 fish inside the RNA and at Riley's Hump with internal sonic tags. These tags will be detected on a continuous basis by a network of 66 underwater receivers now in place and will yield valuable information about fish habitat use and movements in a broad geographic area.

Bird Mortality Event

A bird mortality event affecting Eurasian Collared Doves, a non-native, non-migratory species was first reported on June 11, 2008 by on-line submission (myfwc.com/bird) with additional dove mortalities being reported through June 29. Approximately 40-50 birds were known to have died in this event, and mortalities occurred from Plantation Key to Marathon, primarily in the Islamorada area of Monroe County. On June 30, FWRI/Fish and Wildlife Health staffer, Dr. Dan Wolf,

visited Islamorada to investigate the event, talk with local bird rehabilitators, and to collect bird carcasses. Necropsies were performed at the Wildlife Research Laboratory in Gainesville and whole bird carcasses were sent to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Kissimmee Animal Diagnostic Lab. Mortalities were attributed to Pigeon Paramyxovirus (Avian Paramyxovirus Type 1). Most of the deaths occurred in clusters around bird feeders where birds congregate, thus enhancing transmission of the disease. We recommended removal of bird feeders and bird baths for two weeks to minimize crowding and to allow the disease to run its course. Avian Paramyxovirus is primarily a respiratory type disease transmitted from bird to bird via aerosolized viral particles through inhalation. Paramyxovirus in Eurasian collared doves has previously been documented in Florida in 2001 in Monroe, Bay, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa, and Pinellas counties.

FWC Shining Stars

Officer Troy Starling – Florida Wildlife Federation Officer of the Year

Valerie Sparling – Land Conservationist of the Year

Darrell Land – Wildlife Conservationist of the Year