

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
From: Jessica McCawley, Director, Marine Fisheries Management
Date: April 13, 2016
Subject: Review and Discussion – Lionfish Removal Outreach and Reward Program

Purpose:

To provide a summary of the outcomes of the special lionfish removal opportunity offered during the 2015 lobster sport season (mini-season) and detail a two-part plan for implementing an expanded opportunity aimed at engaging a wider range of stakeholders throughout the state in 2016.

Summary:

The Commission is continually working to find new, innovative ways to address lionfish population control and raise awareness on the lionfish issue. The 2015 special opportunity allowed individuals who harvested at least 10 lionfish per day to harvest one lobster per day over the bag limit during the 2015 mini-season. A survey of recreational lobster harvesters and feedback received through collaboration with partners indicate that the opportunity was successful at accomplishing our goals of raising awareness and encouraging divers to target lionfish while they are in the water for other reasons.

There has been significant interest in building on last year's success by finding additional ways to incentivize the harvest of lionfish and to offer opportunities that are appealing to stakeholders outside of south Florida. For 2016, staff is developing a new, expanded lionfish removal outreach and reward program with the goal of removing 25,000 lionfish statewide over the course of 12 months. The 2016 program would use a two-part approach: the first part intended to engage and reward lionfish harvesters statewide and the second part focused on the Panhandle where lionfish densities remain extremely high. Participants in the statewide program will be able to qualify by harvesting 50 lionfish during a qualifying tournament or by bringing their harvested lionfish to a designated checkpoint between the Lionfish Removal and Awareness Day (LRAD) kickoff in May and the beginning of mini-season in July. Everyone that gains membership into the reward program will receive documentation of their eligibility and a commemorative t-shirt, be able to harvest an extra lobster each day during mini-season, and be able to harvest an additional bag limit of scallops each day of Labor Day weekend. Qualifying harvesters will also be inducted into the FWC Lionfish Hall of Fame and entered into drawings for prizes such as fishing licenses and lionfish harvesting gear. Additionally, in order to promote continued lionfish removal throughout the summer diving season, the harvester who turns in the most lionfish to tournaments and/or lionfish checkpoints between May and September will be recognized at the November 2016 Commission meeting.

The second part of the 2016 program is a pilot program inspired by stakeholder suggestions, targeting the high densities of lionfish in the Panhandle. The pilot program will be available to harvesters in Escambia through Franklin counties. In these counties, divers who turn in 100 lionfish tails will receive a tag for harvest of a legal-sized red grouper or cobia over the bag limit. This program will be active until 100 red grouper tags and 30 cobia tags are awarded to divers. In addition to harvest tags, any diver or group of divers that turn in 500 lionfish during this time period will be allowed to name an artificial reef.

Staff Recommendation:

Authorize the Executive Director, in consultation with the Chairman, to establish the Lionfish Removal Outreach and Reward Program for 2016, as described, via an Executive Order.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

Melissa Recks, Section Leader, Division of Marine Fisheries Management