



Lionfish Removal Outreach and Reward Program

Review and Discussion

April 13, 2016

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Division of Marine Fisheries Management

Version 1

This presentation is a review and discussion of the outcomes of the 2015 Special Lionfish Removal Opportunity and recommendations for improvements to the program for 2016. The presentation includes recommended improvements to the statewide program for 2016 as well as a proposed stakeholder-inspired pilot program aimed at motivating divers to harvest lionfish in the Panhandle.

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Report date: April 4, 2016

Recap: 2015 Special Lionfish Removal Opportunity

Purpose

- Raise lionfish awareness
- Introduce divers to the ease of harvesting lionfish
- Encourage the diving public to harvest lionfish on all dive trips

Concept

- During 2015 lobster sport season (mini-season), anyone who harvested 10 or more lionfish per day was allowed one lobster over the bag limit per day



The Commission is continually working to find new, innovative ways to address lionfish population control. At the June 2015 Commission meeting, the Commission approved a special lionfish removal opportunity associated with the lobster sport season (mini-season). The purpose of the opportunity was three-fold: raise awareness of the lionfish invasion in Florida, introduce divers to the ease of harvesting lionfish, and encourage divers to harvest lionfish whenever they are in the water, regardless of the reason for their dive. The Commission hoped that once a new lionfish hunter discovered the ease of harvesting lionfish, combined with the lack of a bag limit and the value of lionfish as a food fish, that they would continue harvesting lionfish during subsequent dives, even outside the scope of the special opportunity.

The 2015 opportunity allowed individuals who harvested at least 10 lionfish per day during lobster mini-season to harvest one lobster per day over the bag limit during mini-season.

2015 Special Opportunity Feedback

FWRI survey of recreational lobster harvesters

- 95% of mini-season survey respondents knew about opportunity
- 83% targeted lionfish during mini-season

Partner feedback

- Feedback from south Florida partners was generally positive, although reports indicated that few people successfully participated

Opportunity successful at encouraging divers to target lionfish while diving for other purposes



Staff received input and feedback about the 2015 opportunity through two methods. The first method was an annual survey of recreational lobster harvesters conducted by FWRI, which in 2015/2016 included questions related to the special opportunity. Questions were focused on gauging people's knowledge of the opportunity, participation in lionfish harvest during mini-season, and whether harvesters successfully took an additional lobster through the opportunity. More than 400 individuals that responded to the survey indicated that they harvested lobster during mini-season. Of those individuals, roughly 95% had knowledge of the special opportunity and nearly 85% targeted lionfish during that time. Although many of the survey respondents targeted lionfish during mini-season, only one respondent indicated that their group harvested an additional lobster. Reasons for this may be related to the already intense efforts of people in south Florida to remove lionfish resulting in some lobster harvesters having difficulty finding lionfish in the areas they dove during mini-season.

Another aspect of evaluating the 2015 opportunity was feedback from partners in south Florida. Although this opportunity had the potential to add a level of complexity to law enforcement activities during an already hectic time, FWC law enforcement in the region did not experience any issues related to the opportunity. Similarly, we did not receive negative feedback from south Florida partners, such as the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS) and Biscayne National Park (BNP). However, while completing their mini-season survey, BNP found that although many people interviewed knew of the special lionfish removal opportunity, few took advantage of it because they felt the extra lobster was not worth the effort of harvesting lionfish or because they did not encounter lionfish while harvesting lobster.

In summary, the 2015 special opportunity was successful at encouraging divers to target lionfish while diving for other purposes based on the results of FWRI's annual survey of recreational lobster harvesters.

Expanding the Opportunity

- 2015 opportunity was essentially limited to south Florida
- Stakeholders have expressed interest in:
 - Allowing credit for lionfish harvested prior to mini-season
 - Adding incentives that appeal to harvesters outside south Florida
 - Including additional incentive species
- Providing more non-resource incentives
- 2016: Two-part approach
 - 1) encourage lionfish removal statewide
 - 2) targeted removal in the Panhandle



While the 2015 opportunity was a great start, the Commission is working to improve the opportunity and move toward a possible long-term solution to motivate divers to regularly harvest lionfish. Based on the success we achieved in raising awareness last year, staff has been working on developing an expanded opportunity for 2016 that will increase actual lionfish removals and increase participation statewide. Because of the structure of mini-season, the 2015 opportunity essentially limited participation to south Florida. This is due to a 12-lobster bag limit for mini-season in all areas of the state except Monroe County and Biscayne National Park. The higher bag limit in the majority of the state coupled with generally lower abundances of lobster means that many harvesters do not harvest their full bag limit and therefore would not be able to harvest their extra lobster over the bag limit even if they were successful in harvesting 10 lionfish.

While many lobster harvesters were not able to take advantage of the 2015 opportunity, many stakeholders have expressed interest in expansion of the program for 2016 and beyond. Specifically, stakeholders have suggested allowing the qualifying harvest of lionfish to occur prior to mini-season, adding incentives that are appealing to more harvesters outside of south Florida, and potentially including species other than lobster as incentives in the program.

Although non-resource incentives such as T-shirts, Zookeeper lionfish containment units, and fishing license giveaways were part of the 2015 opportunity, more non-resource incentives could be included in 2016 depending on available funding and staff's ability to garner donations or event sponsors.

As part of the process of finding the best possible solution for motivating harvesters, staff would like to expand on the 2015 opportunity. The proposed 2016 opportunity would include a two-part approach that 1) encourages lionfish removal statewide and 2) includes a special focus on Panhandle removal efforts.

Bigger and Better for 2016

Goals

- Remove 25,000 lionfish statewide from May 2016 to May 2017
- Encourage further public involvement in lionfish removal efforts
- Reward the most successful lionfish hunters around the state

Two-part approach

1. Statewide outreach and reward program
2. Lionfish removal pilot program in the Panhandle



Like in 2015, there are several goals for the proposed 2016 opportunity. Goals for 2016 include harvesting at least 25,000 lionfish statewide during a one-year period beginning in May 2016, encouraging further involvement by the public in lionfish removal, and rewarding successful lionfish hunters around the state. To accomplish these goals, the proposed 2016 opportunity has a two-part approach. The first part of the program is an enhanced version of the 2015 special statewide lionfish removal opportunity with a wider-reaching approach. The second part of the proposed program is a targeted removal campaign in the form of a pilot program focused in the Panhandle, an area where lionfish densities are extremely high. Both portions of the 2016 opportunity will be discussed in more detail on the following slides.

Part 1: Statewide Initiative

Expanding on 2015: encourage further involvement in lionfish removal and reward the efforts of successful lionfish hunters statewide

- Membership in a reward program awarded to anyone who harvests at least 50 qualifying lionfish
 - Commemorative coin
 - Event T-shirt
- Qualifying lionfish could be harvested reported prior to mini-season, beginning Lionfish Removal and Awareness Day (LRAD)
 - Tournaments around the state
 - Lionfish checkpoints



With the 2016 opportunity, staff would like to encourage more involvement in lionfish removal and reward the efforts of lionfish harvesters around the state. In 2016, any person that harvests at least 50 lionfish during the qualifying period (defined below) would be granted membership into the reward program. All members of the program would receive a commemorative coin to mark their membership in the reward program and an event T-shirt, in addition to other incentives.

The 2015 opportunity had limitations which the proposed program for 2016 would remove: qualifying lionfish harvest was limited to mini-season, participation was effectively limited to lobster dive sites, and the motivation for removing lionfish was limited to the two days of mini-season. As part of the proposed program for 2016, harvesters would be able to harvest and report qualifying lionfish prior to mini-season, beginning with LRAD (May 14, 2016). Staff would work with tournaments to ensure that lionfish harvested during FWC-sponsored tournaments throughout the state would count toward qualification for the program. Harvesters would also have the option of taking their catch to one of a series of lionfish checkpoints. In order to make checking in lionfish as easy for program participants as possible, Division of Marine Fisheries Management staff would work with FWC field labs as well as dive-related businesses and other entities to establish at least one checkpoint in each coastal county, with the potential for more if resources allow.

Part 1: Statewide Program Rewards

Program members will be eligible for a variety of rewards

- Additional lobster during mini-season
- Additional scallops during Labor Day weekend
- Drawings and giveaways
 - Fishing licenses
 - Lionfish harvesting equipment
 - Fuel cards
 - Dive tank refills
- Entry in the FWC Lionfish Hall of Fame



In addition to allowing harvest of qualifying lionfish prior to mini-season, there would be a variety of other improvements to the program for 2016, including offering more rewards for participation. Like in 2015, people who harvest the qualifying number of lionfish will be able to harvest an additional lobster per day during mini-season (July 27-28, 2016). New for 2016, participants in the program would be given the opportunity to harvest an additional bag limit of bay scallops each day during Labor Day weekend (Sept. 3-5, 2016). Labor Day weekend occurs toward the end of the bay scallop season when scallops are larger. Since the bag limit for bay scallops is a measure of volume instead of a specific number of bay scallops, when the scallops are larger the daily bag limit consists of fewer scallops. Labor Day weekend is one of the last big weekends of the season so the extra harvest is anticipated to have little impact on the success rates of other harvesters.

Drawings and giveaways will also be expanded in 2016. Examples of potential drawing/giveaway items include annual saltwater fishing licenses with a lobster permit; pole spears and lionfish containment units to aid in the harvesters future lionfish removals; and fuel cards and dive tank refills to help offset the costs of harvesting lionfish in the future.

Finally, all harvesters that check in 50 or more lionfish will have their name listed in the FWC Lionfish Hall of Fame, a webpage to recognize the conservation efforts of lionfish hunters.

Part 1: Crowning Florida's Lionfish King/Queen

To promote continued lionfish removal throughout the summer, FWC will host a summer-long contest

- The person who "checks in" the most lionfish between the LRAD kick-off and the end of Sept.
- Prizes
 - Lifetime Saltwater Fishing License
 - Featured photo on cover of FWC's January 2017 saltwater regulations
 - Biography featured in FWC's Lionfish Hall of Fame



*Would be recognized at Nov. 2016
Commission meeting*

In order to further promote continued lionfish harvest throughout the summer months, FWC would host a summer-long contest to crown Florida's Lionfish King or Queen. The title of Lionfish King or Queen would be awarded to the person who checks in the most lionfish at either tournaments or lionfish checkpoints between the LRAD kick-off event May 14 and the end of September. The winner of this contest would win a lifetime saltwater fishing license, have their photo featured on the cover of FWC's January 2017 saltwater fishing regulations publication, and have their bio featured on the FWC Lionfish Hall of Fame webpage. The winner would be announced and recognized with a trophy/plaque commemorating their contribution to lionfish removal at the November 2016 Commission meeting in St. Petersburg.

Part 2: Panhandle Pilot Program

Goal: remove 12,500 lionfish from Panhandle waters in 1 year

- Inspired by Emerald Coast Reef Association proposal
- Includes Escambia through Franklin counties
- Between May 2016 and May 2017, divers that harvest 100 lionfish from the waters off of these counties would receive a tag to harvest an extra legal-sized red grouper or cobia
 - 100 red grouper tags and 30 cobia tags available
- Divers (or groups) that harvest at least 500 lionfish would be allowed to name an artificial reef
- Other efforts to focus removals in this area



In an effort to promote concentrated lionfish removals in an area that has extremely high densities of lionfish, the second part of the 2016 proposed opportunity is a one-year pilot program to be implemented in the Panhandle. The goal of the proposed pilot program is to remove 12,500 lionfish within one year from a seven county region in the Panhandle. This pilot program was inspired by a proposal from the Emerald Coast Reef Association (ECRA).

The seven counties involved in the pilot program would be Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton, Bay, Gulf, and Franklin counties. Between May 2016 and May 2017, divers that harvest 100 lionfish from the waters off of these counties would be eligible to receive a tag to harvest either a red grouper or a cobia over the bag limit (while tags remain available) from state waters. One hundred red grouper and 30 cobia tags would be available for successful participants in the pilot program and all size limits and seasons would still apply.

In addition to tags for a red grouper or cobia, any person or group that harvests 500 or more lionfish from this region during the one-year period would be given the opportunity to name an artificial reef. While FWC already helps sponsor lionfish tournaments around the state, we would direct additional tournament sponsorship efforts in the Panhandle in order to focus removal efforts in that region. Staff would also increase marketing of the Reef Ranger program in the Panhandle.

Although all aspects of ECRA's plan have not been included in staff's proposal, staff believes that the current proposal would meet ECRA's goal of removing 12,500 lionfish in a single year.

Staff Recommendation

Encourage the public to harvest lionfish by authorizing a new and improved, two-part lionfish removal outreach and reward program

- Allow a person harvesting 50 or more lionfish during the qualifying period to:
 - Gain membership into the lionfish removal reward program
 - Harvest an additional lobster per day during 2016 mini-season and an additional bag limit of scallops during the 2016 Labor Day weekend
 - Be entered into drawings for prizes
- Create a summer-long contest and crown Florida's Lionfish King/Queen
- Implement a lionfish removal pilot program in the Panhandle



If approved and directed, the Executive Director would establish this program through Executive Order

Staff recommends authorizing the Executive Director, in consultation with the Chairman, to establish the proposed lionfish removal outreach and reward program, allowing divers who harvest at least 50 lionfish during the qualifying period to gain entrance into the program and earn benefits as defined through the program, including the ability to harvest an additional lobster per day during the 2016 mini-season and additional scallops each day during Labor Day weekend 2016, and to gain entry into drawings for a suite of prizes. Staff also recommends establishing a summer-long contest, the winner of which will be crowned the Florida Lionfish King or Queen. Finally, staff recommends implementing a pilot program to promote targeted lionfish removal from a seven county region in the Panhandle.

If authorized, the Executive Director, in consultation with the Chairman, would establish the Lionfish Removal Outreach and Reward Program for 2016 through issuance of an Executive Order.