

# MEMORANDUM



**TO:** Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners

**FROM:** Nick Wiley, Executive Director

**DATE:** February 3, 2016

**SUBJECT:** February 2016 Executive Director's Report

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## Events

**2016 Python Challenge™ kicks off with Invasive Species Awareness Festival** - The public was invited to learn more about invasive fish and wildlife and what they can do to help protect Florida's natural resources at the 2016 Python Challenge™ Invasive Species Awareness Festival held in Miami in January. Commissioners Alligator Ron Bergeron and Liesa Priddy attended to support the event. At the free festival attendees watched experts demonstrate safe capture of a live Burmese python, learned to safely fillet invasive lionfish, and dined on dishes made using invasive species. Festival-goers also visited educational and vendor booths, participated in kids' activities, and learned from experts about the threats of invasive fish and wildlife and how to help prevent them. At noon on January 16, the 2016 Python Challenge™ python removal competition started. Registration is still open and additional participants are welcome to sign up and participate in this event. The 2016 Python Challenge™ python removal competition ends at 7:00 PM on Sunday, February 14. Commissioners will be provided up-to-date participant and capture numbers at the February Commission meeting.

## In the News

**USFWS proposes reclassifying manatee from endangered to threatened species** – On January 7, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) proposed to reclassify the manatee from an endangered species to a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. The USFWS proposal includes a 90-day public comment period. Significant growth of the manatee population as well as successful efforts to address threats have lead the Service to propose reclassification for the species from endangered to threatened. When aerial surveys began in 1991, 1,267 manatees were counted in Florida waters. The most recent synoptic survey conducted in 2015 recorded 6,063 manatees. The FWC credits the collaborative work of the agency, USFWS, many partners, and citizens over the years for the increase in the abundance and health of the Florida manatee population. The FWC supports the USFWS as it moves forward on the proposed reclassification and is committed to continue working with partners to manage the manatee population in Florida.

## Partnerships

**Pensacola Artificial Reef Deployment** – FWC, in coordination with Escambia County Marine Resources Division, partnered to sink an 87.6-foot long steel hulled tugboat called Ocean Wind on January 14<sup>th</sup>, ten nautical miles southeast of Pensacola Pass in State Gulf waters at a depth of 85 feet. This tugboat is Escambia County's newest artificial reef and is expected to be a popular offshore fishing and diving destination. FWC funded the cleaning, preparation, towing, and deployment costs for the project in addition to providing expertise on location and methods of deployment.

**Phi Beta Sigma Florida Conference at Tenoroc Fish Management Area** – FWC staff hosted 65 high school students and their mentors for archery, fishing, and conservation education at the Tenoroc Fish Management Area in Lakeland. This was part of the Florida State Conference for the fraternal organization Phi Beta Sigma (PBS). Together with the USFWS, FWC will continue to work with PBS chapters from around the state to engage high school and college members in agency programs and events.

**Waste Management Update** - On December 8, 2015, Seminole County Commissioners unanimously passed a “Bear-Wise” ordinance requiring all homes and businesses located in the western portion of the county to keep their trash secure until the day of garbage pickup. With its bear ordinance affecting more than 22,000 residences, Seminole County is leading the way in large-scale implementation of measures to reduce human-bear conflicts. Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) staff worked closely with county officials on this ordinance.

Across the state, FWC is working with local governments, communities, residents, businesses, and waste service companies to reduce human-bear conflicts. FWC is in the final stages of signing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Waste Pro franchise operating in the Florida panhandle. The MOU establishes the roles of FWC and Waste Pro in providing resolution to human-bear conflicts through access to affordable bear-resistant equipment for residences and businesses. Other recent waste management efforts include:

- Mexico Beach in Bay County has secured all commercial dumpsters from bears;
- Lanark Village in Franklin County is finalizing plans for a bear-resistant community dumpster to serve over 1,000 residents;
- Florida Gulf Coast University in Collier County is securing trash throughout the campus;
- Multiple businesses in Naples (Collier County) have agreed to cost-share to secure their dumpsters from bears;
- The Springs Homeowners Association (HOA) in Seminole County installed bear-resistant trash cans in all of their recreational areas;
- The Wingfield Reserve HOA in Seminole County bought bear-resistant trash cans for all residents.

## **Updates**

**Port Inspection Training** – On January 26, FWC law enforcement started Port Inspections training in Miami. This venue was chosen as it provides ample opportunity to conduct live inspections with USFWS in addition to classroom instruction. A FedEx law enforcement liaison attended to discuss their protocols for access and safety. This is phase two of the training and over the past several months, the newly assigned officers have been mentoring with FWC Investigator II Steve Wayne and FWC Port Investigator II Bill Stiffler. The class was limited to ten students to allow the proper amount of hands on instruction at the facility. A second class is scheduled to train more officers that will work port related inspections.

**Youth Donations from License Purchasers** - In 2007/2008, FWC started asking license purchasers if they would like to donate to youth programs. They answered that question with a resounding “Yes!” to the tune of over \$100,000 that year. Since then, donation totals have climbed as high as \$150,831 in a single year. As of December 2015 license purchasers have donated a cumulative total of over \$1,018,000 to support youth hunting and fishing programs in the State of Florida.

**Apalachicola Oyster Status** - Commercial oyster harvest from the winter reefs, which opened September 1, 2015, continues to be low. Based on FWC sampling and discussions with industry and community leaders, winter harvest limits remain set at four bags per person per day for commercial harvest; one-half bag per person per day for recreational harvest; with harvest closures on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays; the East Hole area is only open on Mondays; and the closure of portions of harvest areas known as 1612 and 1622. FWC implemented oyster monitoring stations, as described in the FWC oyster rule, to check all commercial fishers harvest on a daily basis for established size limit and bag limit compliance. Compliance has been high with a 98 percent compliance rate for undersized oysters from November 2, 2015, through January 14, 2016. As planned, FWC will discontinue oyster monitoring stations at the end of March 2016 and will focus enhanced compliance measures on water patrols and at the wholesale dealer level. FWC, Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and the University of Florida, with funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund are continuing a five-year oyster restoration research project to inform the design and management of future oyster reef restoration projects in the Apalachicola Bay System. Staff continue to provide expertise related to the lawsuit Florida filed against Georgia pertaining to harm to Florida's resources.

**Snook Symposium** – FWC staff hosted a Snook Symposium on January 13 in Orlando. About 150 people attended this public meeting that focused on snook research and management in Florida, including the results of the soon-to-be-released 2015 stock assessment, population recovery following the 2010 cold kill, and opportunities for improving snook management. Staff used this meeting to start gathering input about how people would like to see this iconic recreational fishery managed in the future. Staff are working to bring this public feedback to the Commission later this year within the context of existing snook regulations.

**2015 Fish Production at Blackwater Fisheries Center** - Last year, FWC's Blackwater Hatchery produced over 4.1 million fish (fry and fingerlings) for stocking in Florida's public lakes and rivers. FWC stocked these fish to support Florida Youth Conservation Centers Network related fishing derbies and to enhance public fisheries throughout the state. Species included largemouth bass, bluegill, gulf striped bass, hybrid striped bass, shad, and channel catfish. Currently, it is the sole producer of hybrid striped bass and gulf striped bass for stocking in state waters.

**FWC Public Service Announcements (PSAs) target youth** – FWC staff have been working on a series of fun and exciting PSAs geared toward youth. So far five videos have been created on topics including manatees, saltwater fishing, sea turtles, bird banding, and the Great Birding and Wildlife Trail. The videos are featured on the agency's YouTube channel MyFWC Social as well as Vimeo and they have been distributed to local TV stations across the state. The saltwater fishing video recently received prime viewership when it aired in Panama City on CBS affiliate WECP Sunday, January 24, during the American Football Conference championship pre-game show. The videos have also played in Tallahassee on Sinclair Broadcast Group NBC and we have heard reports of their broadcast in Ft. Lauderdale and Miami.

### **Emerging Issues**

**Barracuda and Anemone Workshops** – FWC staff are hosting three barracuda workshops and an anemone workshop in late February. The barracuda workshops will help gather public input and develop a better understanding of the public's view on management of barracuda, including discussing recent regulations that went into effect Nov. 1, 2015, and whether the public feels there is a need for any additional management changes. The barracuda workshops are slated for Key West on February 22, Islamorada on February 24, and Jupiter on February 25. The anemone workshop will focus on the

management of a variety of sea anemones including the giant Caribbean anemone (*Condylactis gigantea*), which was closed to harvest in 2012. The anemone workshop will be held on February 23 in Key Colony Beach.

### **Staff Recognition**

**Kaitlin Goode** – Kaitlin began working with FWC’s Bear Management Program as an intern and then work study student in 2008. Her career with FWC officially began after she finished her Master’s degree working with bears in Louisiana. Kaitlin was hired in 2013 as the Stakeholder Coordinator for the Bear Management Program. Once Kaitlin got the seven Bear Stakeholder Groups up and running across the state, she transitioned to the Area Bear Biologist based in East Point. In both roles, Kaitlin has demonstrated leadership and initiative to successfully manage key components of FWC’s Bear Management Program. From superior management and facilitation of Bear Stakeholder Groups, to leadership of the field response to the black bear attack in East Point, to excellent initiative in coordinating work with the City of Mexico Beach to become the first Bear Wise city in Florida – Kaitlin has demonstrated the impressive ability to seamlessly navigate the challenges and complexities of bear management issues.

**Officer Matt Cushing** – Officer Cushing began his career with FWC in 2003 and worked in the Florida Keys until 2007 when he moved to Tennessee. He came back to Florida and FWC in 2010 and currently works the offshore patrol boat program and operates a 32’ patrol vessel enforcing both state and federal fishery laws in Escambia County. Through motivation, training, and mentoring, Officer Cushing has worked to develop one of the most efficient and productive offshore patrol programs in the state. Officer Cushing’s leadership was shown during the March 11, 2015, search for the US Army Blackhawk helicopter that went down near Navarre Beach. With his knowledge and dedication, Officer Cushing and his crew were able to locate the downed helicopter and assist in the recovery of the helicopter and seven soldiers still onboard.

**Jim Stickle** - As the Assistant Deer Program Coordinator, Jim assists staff with deer management, research, and data collection efforts, and provides technical assistance to hunters, land owners, and hunting clubs. He holds a B.S. in Wildlife Science from the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry and a M.S. in Forest & Natural Resources Management from the University of Georgia. Jim is also a certified Associate Wildlife Biologist by The Wildlife Society, and a Deer Steward II by the Quality Deer Management Association.