

MEMORANDUM



TO: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
FROM: Nick Wiley, Executive Director
DATE: November 8, 2016
SUBJECT: November 2016 Executive Director's Report

Updates

BearWise funding – FWC partnered with one of the nation's leading bear scientists, Dr. Joseph D. Clark of the U.S. Geological Survey and the University of Tennessee, to release the final modeling results estimating Florida's black bear population. Data collected by FWC staff and partners in 2014 and 2015 and analyzed by Dr. Clark's team confirmed that Florida's bear population is robust and widespread. The final estimates indicate Florida's statewide bear population now stands at 4,030, up from a few hundred bears in the 1970s. This final population estimate indicates a bear population 48 percent larger than previous estimates done in the early 2000s. In addition, the current bear range is 45 percent larger than the range map from the early 2000s. This population growth and range expansion reflects how conservation measures have propelled the growth of Florida bear populations from the 1970s level of a few hundred bears to their abundant status today.

This fall, the FWC received 19 proposals totaling nearly \$2 million for the \$825,000 in available funding to help communities take a BearWise approach to reducing human-bear conflicts. Governor Rick Scott and the Florida Legislature approved \$500,000 of the funds, and the Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida provided an additional \$325,000 using proceeds from sales of the "Conserve Wildlife" license plate. Applicants for the bear-conflict reduction funding included: 13 counties (Bay, Collier, Franklin, Gulf, Lake, Leon, Marion, Orange, Putnam, Santa Rosa, Seminole, Volusia and Wakulla), three cities (Daytona Beach, DeBary and Carrabelle), and three communities (Farm Worker Village Neighborhood Association, NatureWalk Homeowner's Association and Springs Landing Homeowner's Association). A panel of FWC staff is currently evaluating the applications, with plans to announce which entities will receive funding in mid-December. Sixty percent of the \$500,000 from the Legislature must go to local governments that passed trash ordinances requiring residents and businesses to keep their trash secure until the morning of garbage pickup. This fall, Orange and Santa Rosa counties became the latest counties to approve such trash ordinances. The counties' efforts to keep trash secure should help reduce human-bear conflicts in neighborhoods. The FWC continues working with local governments and communities to adopt BearWise polices such as learning to coexist with bears, knowing when and how to report bear activity, and securing all potential food sources.

FWC's TrophyCatch program celebrates a successful fourth season - The TrophyCatch program approved its 5,000th catch as the program completed its fourth season and has begun its fifth season, which started on October 1, 2016. The 5,000th approved catch was caught on Lake Okeechobee. The TrophyCatch program is an incentive-based conservation program that has rewarded anglers for the catch and release of 5,191 largemouth bass weighing eight pounds or more in Florida, to date. The highest number of submissions during TrophyCatch's Season 4 are from the following five waterbodies: Lake Kissimmee (1), Rodman Reservoir (2), Lake Istokpoga (3), Lake Toho (4) and Lake

Okeechobee (5). A record number of trophy bass were approved during Season 4—approximately 2,269—with the largest weighing 14 pounds, 10 ounces from Jessamine Lake.

Florida Highway Patrol officer rescues injured bald eagle - When a bald eagle flew into a Jeep on the Florida Turnpike in October, Florida Highway Patrol Trooper Julio Velez arrived on scene. He carefully removed the bird and kept it with him in his patrol car while waiting for FWC officers to arrive. The driver was not injured, but the bird needed some extra care from the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey in Maitland and is expected to recover. This conscientious effort from a partner agency prompted positive eagle conservation messaging in news reports about the issue, including information about nesting pair numbers and listing status.

Hurricane Matthew's impact on Florida wildlife assessed and emergency response efforts - Hurricanes can reshape the habitats of shorebirds, seabirds, beach mice, and other species. Although some nesting and foraging sites may be lost, others can be formed through creation of new inlets, removal of vegetation from beaches and dunes, and movement of sand to new places. When Hurricane Matthew hit the Atlantic coast of Florida in early October, it was the end of sea turtle nesting season and many nests, especially those in southern counties, had already hatched. For example, only 10 to 15 percent of all loggerhead nests laid in the 2016 nesting season were still on the beach when Matthew came ashore. The hurricane washed out about half of the nests present at the time of the storm in Palm Beach and Martin counties, and nearly all nests from Indian River County north to the Florida/Georgia line. However sea turtles have a nesting strategy that accommodates natural events such as this. Each nesting female deposits several nests throughout the duration of the nesting season, essentially hedging their bets to make sure that even if a storm hits, there is a high probability at least a few of the nests will incubate successfully. We are grateful for the many concerned stakeholders who helped with the numerous young sea turtles washed back on east coast beaches because of the hurricane. Rescued sea turtles were taken to rehabilitation facilities and about 1,700 were released back into the wild in early November with the help of the U.S. Coast Guard and other partners. FWC is still monitoring wildlife populations impacted by Hurricane Matthew to determine if management actions are needed. Staff is also monitoring newly proposed and existing Critical Wildlife Areas, many of them nesting sites for shorebirds and seabirds, to assess how the storm impacted them.

FWC actively provided emergency assistance, emergency operations center support, and aviation support during Hurricane Matthew. The storm posed a threat to a large area of the state. At the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC), FWC worked a combined 23 shifts to maintain coverage and participation in the combined response effort. Two separate units, comprised of a total of 82 members, were deployed to two locations prior to the storm's passage. Incident commanders coordinated with special operations group members from other regions, National Guard personnel, regional law enforcement agencies, and in-place regional officers to provide comprehensive reconnaissance, relief, search and rescue, law enforcement, and public safety missions. A total of 13 missions were conducted by FWC members. The aviation unit provided numerous overflights of the vast area of coastline affected by the storm, coordinating with military airspace controllers and the FAA. Geo-tagged photographs taken by FWC aircrews captured the first aerial views of affected areas, which were uploaded to the SEOC.

Accomplishments

FWC land manager receives award from Cabinet - Tina Hannon, a biologist at FWC's Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area (WMA), received the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Resource Manager of the Year award at the September 20 Cabinet meeting. This award recognizes outstanding resource management achievements on state properties. Hannon joined the FWC in 2006 as

an assistant area biologist. Since then, she has excelled in the areas of prescribed burning, habitat enhancement and restoration, exotic plant removal and species monitoring. Her leadership in prescribed burning has resulted in exceptionally well-maintained, high-quality natural communities throughout this WMA in Osceola County, where a record 26,000 acres were burned in 2015.

Boating safety officers recognized - Major Richard Moore received the prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA) during their 57th annual meeting on September 11-14, in Seattle, Washington. Major Moore was recognized for his contributions to boating safety at both the state and national levels. Major Moore is retiring in March of 2017. FWC's Boating Officer of the Year, Jarrod Molnar, was also awarded the 2016 NASBLA National Boating Officer of the Year award at this meeting. Officer Molnar was recognized for his outstanding contributions to the field of boating law enforcement.

FWC officers receive medals of heroism – Six FWC Officers received the Governor's medal of heroism award at the October 25 Cabinet meeting. Recipients included Lt. Kevin Grover, Officer David Spradlin, Officer Robyn Bergwerff, Officer Dan Fagan, Officer Scott Peterson, Officer Justin Henry, and Officer Josh little. These officers helped conduct search and rescue missions in Hernando Beach and responded to many requests for assistance and evacuation during and immediately following Hurricane Hermine. Their brave actions helped rescue many Floridians, including a pregnant mother and child with water in their home.

Events

MarineQuest - The Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) held its 22nd annual open house, MarineQuest, from October 20-22 in St. Petersburg. During the School Daze program, held October 20 and 21, FWRI welcomed over 1,600 students grades four through eight. On Saturday, October 22, the general public open house welcomed a record-breaking 16,000 people. This event offers something for people of all ages, including hands-on activities that help younger visitors learn about the fascinating marine life in our oceans. Staff from FYCCN educated children on archery at their booth. Staff from St. Petersburg and other FWC offices came together to set up over 30 unique displays highlighting current statewide projects.

Munson Heritage Festival - FWC's Blackwater Fisheries Center hosted an informational and educational exhibit at the annual Munson Heritage Festival held in Munson, Florida on the weekend of October 8. Over 1,800 attendees visited the exhibit over the course of the two-day festival. The exhibits provided information to the public on the history and role of FWC as caretakers of Florida's vibrant natural resources and displayed the many projects FWC oversees in the Northwest region across all divisions. Exhibits and information on programs included everything from fresh and salt water fish, game and non-game animals, habitat and ecology, and law enforcement.

Saltwater Angler Recognition Programs – Two new Saltwater Angler Recognition Programs were rolled out October 19; Saltwater Fish Life List which challenges anglers to catch 71 different species, and Saltwater Reel Big Fish which rewards anglers for extraordinarily-sized catches. These programs are in addition to Saltwater Grand Slams and the Florida Saltwater Fishing Records Program. A new website, CatchaFloridaMemory.com, and a new Catch a Florida Memory Facebook page were also launched on the same date. One week after launching the new programs, three anglers submitted a Saltwater Reel Big Fish, five anglers submitted a Saltwater Grand Slam, seven anglers have submitted ten or more fish for their Saltwater Fish Life List, and 74 waterproof Saltwater Fish Life List brochures have been mailed. Saltwater Angler Recognition Programs encourage anglers to target a diversity of species, thereby decreasing fishing pressure on any given species as well as expanding fishing

experiences for seasoned anglers, cultivating an interest in saltwater fishing, and strengthening marine fisheries conservation ethics. Prizes vary by program but may include T-shirts, fishing gear, recognition in FWC publications and the website, kayaks, and more.

Partnerships

FWC partners to support high school fishing in over 46 schools - FWC partnered with the Fishing League Worldwide Foundation and The Bass Federation to promote participation in high school fishing teams and the establishment of new teams by offering up to a \$500 grant per team from the Recreational Boating & Fishing Foundation. This partnership provided grants to 46 schools for their fishing team or club, with nine applications still pending. Teams and clubs in approximately 24 counties were served, and of these, 10 of the 14 counties identified as key to reaching Hispanic students received grants. Grant applications indicate that 1,205 students are participating in the new or expanded high school fishing clubs that received funding, compared to the less than 500 participating students statewide when the grant program was introduced. Approximately 578 (37 percent) participating students are novice anglers.

New World Screwworm - On October 3, 2016, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced the presence of New World Screwworm in Big Pine Key, Florida. As of November 1st, per the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), screwworm has resulted in death or euthanasia in at least 127 Key deer on Big Pine Key and No Name Key since the infestation was first detected. FWC partnering with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), USDA, USFWS, the Florida Department of Health, the Cooperative Program for Screwworm Eradication with the government of Panama and others, are actively engaged in an eradication program to prevent the spread of this disease. This eradication program is fourfold. First, the USFWS has been working with wildlife veterinarians to evaluate and select treatments to prevent healthy Key deer from becoming infested by screwworm, and to treat deer in the early stages of infestation. Second, sterile insect release, a proven eradication method, began on October 11th on Big Pine Key. The release of the sterile flies was then expanded to include the following additional keys: Big Torch Key, Middle Torch Key, Little Torch Key, Cudjoe Key, Ramrod Key, No Name Key and Summerland Key. Third, FDACS established an animal health check point at mile marker 106. Travelers moving north with pets, small animals or livestock must stop to get a free check for signs of screwworm. Finally, in partnership with USDA, FDACS is working on enhanced surveillance in order to determine the spread of the New World Screwworm pest. In addition to these efforts, community outreach has been intensified to assist with identifying animals that may be infested with screwworm. Once the infestation was detected, swift action from FDACS, USDA, USFWS and other partners was crucial in addressing this potentially devastating infestation.

Emerging Issues

Bahamas/China fisheries partnership – The Bahamian government recently announced that it will pursue a possible agriculture and fisheries partnership with China. The proposed initiative would create 100 Bahamian companies that would partner with Chinese corporate entities. The companies would have 50/50 ownership. China would provide up to \$2.1 billion over 10-year period in the form of cash, agriculture and fisheries equipment and skilled expertise. The Bahamian government would lease up to 10,000 acres of land (100 acres per company) and would also grant fishing licenses to each company. It is anticipated that the products will be used for local consumption or be exported to China or the U.S.A. FWC staff is following the development of this issue.

The Florida Bay Plan - In July 2016 the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) began implementing an innovative plan to deliver additional fresh water to Florida Bay. The “Florida Bay

Plan” is a suite of engineering, construction, and operational changes that can be quickly implemented by the local water management district, once all the necessary authorities are received. When fully implemented, in an average year, the Florida Bay Plan can deliver approximately 6.5 billion gallons of additional fresh water to Florida Bay through Taylor Slough. Taylor Slough is a primary pathway that delivers water to eastern and central Florida Bay. Computer modeling suggests the components effectively double the volume of water entering the slough and that these water deliveries can be sustained through drought years, when the water may be most beneficial to Florida Bay. In drought years, Florida Bay has suffered hypersaline conditions that negatively impacted the seagrass and marine communities. Additional fresh water deliveries help maintain ecologically beneficial salinities. The proposed plan is an incremental step that works with the existing restoration projects, accelerates the implementation of key restoration components, and complements the longer term restoration goals.

Staff Recognition

Melody Kilborn - Melody has worked with FWC for three years in the Southwest Regional Office as the TrophyCatch Program Assistant. FWC’s TrophyCatch program is a citizen-science conservation effort to document and release trophy largemouth bass in Florida. Some of Melody’s recent accomplishments include helping obtain a VISIT FLORIDA advertising grant for TrophyCatch and securing a high priority domain name for the program. Melody earned her Bachelor of Science degree in environmental science and policy from the University of South Florida. Prior to working with FWC, Melody interned with Mote Marine Laboratory in Sarasota and Florida Sea Grant in St. Petersburg. Outside of work, Melody enjoys diving, fishing, kayaking, traveling, and spending time with her husband and 2-year-old son.

Officer Felix Collazo - After graduating high school, Officer Collazo began a career in the fire and EMS field. However, after six years in this field, he decided to pursue his passion for the outdoors and his lifelong dream to help protect Florida’s natural resources. In 1999 he attend the 25th Wildlife Officer Training Academy with the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission. His professional accomplishments include being selected to attend the first FWC K-9 Academy, working in the FWC K-9 unit for over 13 years, and serving as the South Operations K-9 Trainer. Officer Collazo is a Field Training Officer and certified Hunter Education Instructor. He enjoys attending public outreach events to promote FWC’s mission and the K-9 Program. Officer Collazo is committed to protecting Florida’s natural resources and is a great example and mentor for other officers to follow. Officer Collazo was recognized as the Southwest Region’s Officer of the Year in 2016.

Steve Brinkley - Steve received his bachelors of science degree in wildlife and fisheries science in 2002 from the University of Tennessee. For the next seven years Steve participated in a northern bobwhite quail research study at Babcock-Webb WMA with FWC and he used data collected from this survey for his Master’s thesis, whereby he earned a masters of science degree from University of Tennessee in 2011. Steve then began his career with FWC as a Biological Scientist II at Chassahowitzka WMA. He received a promotion in 2015 to become the Lead Area Biologist at Chassahowitzka WMA. His management focus there is the restoration and enhancement of sandhill habitat.

Jessica Pernell - Jessica is a graphics consultant with the outreach coordination group at FWRI. She began her career as an intern with the manatee group 17 years ago and has since served in multiple roles focused on communicating the importance of science to the public. She has been instrumental in the production of FWRI’s quarterly newsletter (Field Notes) and the annual FWRI programs document. She led the redesign to move to a web-based format for these publications to reduce cost, facilitate distribution, and widen FWC’s and FWRI’s audience. The FWRI Field Notes newsletter was recognized with a first place award by the Association for Conservation Information this past summer. For over 15

years, Jessica has assumed the responsibility of coordinating FWRI's annual MarineQuest open house event. To make this event a continued success she has to effectively manage multiple moving parts, hundreds of staff, committees, volunteers, and partners.