

# MEMORANDUM



**TO:** Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners  
**FROM:** Nick Wiley, Executive Director  
**DATE:** September 1, 2016  
**SUBJECT:** September 2016 Executive Director's Report

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## Updates

**Re-opening of Suwannee Lake Fish Management Area** - Suwannee Lake Fish Management Area (FMA) re-opened to the public on June 23, after closing for renovation in October 2013. During the renovation the lake was drained, 60,000 cubic yards of muck was removed, the south end of the lake was deepened, and several features such as an island, an underwater ridge, and log piles were created. Additionally, several large cypress stumps were unearthed and beneficial aquatic plants were planted around the lake. The lake was restocked with bluegill, redear sunfish, golden shiners, threadfin shad, and pure Florida largemouth bass in fall of 2014 and spring of 2015. The west shore was also cleared for bank fishing, a fishing pier was rebuilt and the roads and parking areas were improved. During the first month after Suwannee Lake re-opened, visitation and angler use multiplied as the northern fishing pier had approximately 834 visitors including 524 anglers, the southern fishing pier had 840 visitors including 570 anglers, and the boat ramp was used by more than 425 anglers fishing from 189 boats. Anglers reported good fishing on the lake, including catches of largemouth bass weighing up to four and a half pounds and high catch rates of bluegill.

**Lionfish Challenge and Panhandle Pilot Program** – More than 10,000 lionfish have been removed so far as part of the Lionfish Challenge and Panhandle Pilot Program. The Lionfish Challenge, which rewards divers for taking 50 or more lionfish, has more than 70 participants. The Lionfish Challenge ends September 30. At least 60 Lionfish Challenge participants qualified for the program prior to spiny lobster mini-season and were able to take an additional spiny lobster per day during the July 27-28 season. At least 25 raffle prizes have been awarded to participants as well. David Garrett of Volusia County is in the lead with more than 1,200 lionfish harvested with John McCain in second with more than 350. 34 dive shops across the State volunteered to act as check point locations to turn in lionfish. More than 20 people have also qualified for the Panhandle Pilot Program, which rewards divers for every 100 lionfish removed from Escambia through Franklin counties, where lionfish densities tend to be higher. 23 out of 130 red grouper and cobia tags have been issued so far as part of the program and two teams have qualified to name an artificial reef by removing 500 or more lionfish. Staff have been promoting the two programs via radio advertising, printed materials, the MyFWC.com and Reef Rangers websites, press releases, social media posts, and videos.

**Apalachicola Oyster Status** - Commercial harvest from summer reefs, which opened June 1, continue to be poor. According to recent population surveys, oyster reproduction appears to have been good in some areas of the Bay. However, there is concern that fresh water flows during the spring affected the survival of young and adult oysters in some areas. Results of FWC sampling of the winter bars indicate that the population of harvestable-sized oysters is poorer than last year. Based on FWC sampling results, harvest limits during the winter season (September 1, 2016-May 31, 2017) will be three bags per person per day for commercial harvest; one-half bag per person per day for recreational harvest; with harvest

closures on Saturdays and Sundays; and the closure of portions of the areas known as 1612 and 1622, south of Sheepshead Bayou. 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.

**Blue Ribbon Panel Legislation** - Two members of Congress, Representatives Don Young (Alaska) and Debbie Dingell (Michigan), have filed bipartisan legislation, HR 5650, that implements the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Panel. The panel was convened to bring high-level leaders from business, government, and conservation together to ensure the long-term funding of important fish and wildlife conservation efforts. To that end, the bill authorizes \$1.3 billion annually, from current mining and offshore oil revenues, to invest in the conservation needs of the full and diverse array of fish and wildlife species across the nation, many of which are declining. This investment will be focused on keeping species from being listed on the endangered species list – keeping common species common – and to provide more access to open spaces and recreational opportunities. The funding would be divided between the 50 states based on a formula, with Florida's share at around \$53 million, annually. This legislation would help Florida in many ways, with our efforts to push forward with the establishment and management of Critical Wildlife Areas and their long-term management as an excellent example of intended uses. It would also help us to more fully implement our state wildlife action plan, which would be an enormous boost for sustaining Florida's fish and wildlife diversity.

**H.R. 3094 (Gulf Red Snapper Management Authority Act)** - FWC has been supportive of the concept of state management for the Gulf red snapper fishery and H.R. 3094, which was proposed by Congressman Graves (LA) to transfer management of Gulf red snapper to the Gulf States. On June 15, the Congressional House Committee on Natural Resources marked up this legislation. The Committee amended H.R. 3094 to remove a provision that would have provided the states federal funds for management of the red snapper fishery under this bill. At this time, H.R. 3094 has not been scheduled for a hearing in the House of Representatives and lacks a companion bill in the Senate. Should this legislation become law, FWC would continue to work with NOAA Fisheries on data collection improvements and enforcement, and continue to invest in innovative ways to improve data collection and management of red snapper and our other Gulf fisheries. Staff recommends the Commission continue to support the concept of state management and stay engaged on this legislation.

### **Accomplishments**

**FWC and Waste Pro Inc. Sign Agreement to Help Reduce Human-Bear Conflicts** - The FWC and Waste Pro USA Inc. are working together to make bear-resistant garbage containers more widely available in Northwest Florida. On August 17, at a media event in Tallahassee, the FWC and Waste Pro announced they have signed a Memorandum of Understanding that will help reduce human-bear conflicts. The agreement establishes the waste service company's important role in making it easier for residents and businesses in Northwest Florida to secure their trash. By taking the BearWise action to properly secure trash, communities can reduce human-bear interactions and conflicts.

**Lake Trafford's restoration draws attention** - FWC's successful efforts to restore Lake Trafford as a premier largemouth bass fishing lake has put this Southwest Florida lake on the map as a great place to go fishing. *Bassmaster*, the magazine of the Bass Anglers Sportsman Society, recently focused on the restoration of this 1,500-acre Collier County lake. The magazine's July/August issue noted how the combined efforts of citizens and government agencies brought back a lake once suffering from fish kills to its status today as prime habitat for fish and wildlife. FWC and the South Florida Water Management District provided close to \$20 million for dredging muck from the lake. The FWC also stocked the lake

after the dredging with 500,000 largemouth bass fingerlings and planted 98,500 bulrush plants. In early August, both the Naples Herald and Fort Myers News-Press had articles on the comeback of Lake Trafford and FWC's role in that transformation.

## **Events**

**Palm Beach County Shooting Sports Park Groundbreaking Ceremony** - The groundbreaking ceremony for the Palm Beach County Shooting Sports Park was held on September 1. This new FWC public facility, located across from the main entrance to the Corbett Wildlife Management Area, will offer target shooting enthusiasts a new place to gain skill and knowledge for safe, responsible shooting. With five rifle and pistol ranges, five Olympic trap fields, six American trap fields, nine skeet fields, and a 12-station sporting clays course, the Palm Beach County Shooting Sports Park will be the largest shooting sports facility on the Gold Coast.

**ICAST** – FWC staff attended the 59th International Convention of Allied Sportfishing Trades (ICAST), the world's largest sportfishing trade show hosted by the American Sportfishing Association (ASA), July 12-15, in Orlando. About 900 industry leaders and visitors came by FWC's booth, which was located in "Conservation Corner" along with other state and federal agencies. Staff talked about agency goals and the importance of Sport Fish Restoration. Governor Rick Scott and Lt. Governor Carlos Lopez-Cantera also visited the FWC booth and while at the Costa booth, signed a proclamation declaring July "Fishing Month." The TrophyCatch team was on-site promoting program registration and showcasing replica mounts of the winning bass from previous seasons, as well as the Phoenix bass boat that each program registrant is eligible to win. Several staff participated in the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership's two-day saltwater media summit, where they discussed saltwater fisheries management and the Everglades with the media. Many visitors participated in an ice cream social hosted by the Fish and Wildlife Foundation of Florida. The Foundation promoted the "I DO" licensing campaign at their booth and the campaign was endorsed by ASA President and CEO Mike Nussman at the State of the Industry breakfast.

**2016 Atlantic Flyway Council Meeting** - FWC is hosting the 2016 Atlantic Flyway Council (AFC) Meeting October 2 -7 in Jacksonville. The AFC is comprised of 17 eastern states from Maine to Florida, seven Canadian territories/provinces, and the U.S. territories of Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands. The Council and its technical committees will be discussing and collaborating on actions required for sound migratory game bird management and will provide the resulting recommendations to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for consideration.

**Bay County Shooting Range Sporting Clays Course Grand Opening** - The grand opening of the Bay County Shooting Range's 18-station sporting clays course is scheduled for Saturday, November 19. By adding shotgun shooting opportunities to the already popular pistol and rifle ranges, FWC in partnership with Bay County, is providing a complete shooting sports experience for the Panama City area.

## **Partnerships**

**Workshops give local governments ways to conserve gopher tortoises** - The FWC held seven regional workshops this past summer to present information on opportunities for local governments to help conserve gopher tortoises in Florida. The goal of these workshops was to identify ways cities and counties can participate in protecting one of Florida's threatened species. At the July 19 Citrus County workshop in Lecanto, 26 participants attended, including staff from Citrus, Hernando and Sumter counties, concerned citizens, environmental consultants, and partner agencies. Attendees were

encouraged to participate in gopher tortoise conservation and provided with resources and incentives for managing land that will increase or improve habitat for the gopher tortoise.

**FWC Partners Support High School Fishing** - FWC is partnering with the Fishing League Worldwide Foundation and The Bass Federation to promote participation on high school fishing teams and the establishment of new teams by offering a \$500 grant per team from the Recreational Boating & Fishing Foundation. This grant program was promoted through press releases, news articles, and contact with school administrators, resulting in approximately ten to 20 interested schools from across the State.

### **Staff Recognition**

**Jeff Beal** – Jeff has been with FWC for 12 years and is the marine aquatic habitat restoration and enhancement biologist covering the Indian River Lagoon (IRL) and associated nearshore waters. Jeff received a bachelor's degree in marine biology from Jacksonville University and a master's degree in Marine Biology from the Florida Institute of Technology. He has spent his career working with the State of Florida on the IRL aquatic preserve.

**Jim Sweatman** – Jim holds a bachelor's degree from Kings College in New York State, a master's degree from Southern Illinois, and has served the State of Florida since 1985. Jim has been responsible for the Fish Orlando! Project since 1999 where his infectious enthusiasm for freshwater angling has been an asset to the agency. He has been integral in developing partners with local municipalities and Bass Pro Shops in support of FWC's TrophyCatch Program.

**Jessica Crawford** - Jessica will serve as our new Legislative Affairs Director starting this winter. She was born in St. Petersburg and grew up in Ft. Myers. She has a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science from Florida State University. Prior to joining the FWC team, Jessica was an aide to Senator Alan Hays for three years. Before working for the Senator, Jessica was the Legislative Specialist for four years in the Department of Business and Professional Regulation's Legislative Affairs Office. In all of these positions she has developed a strong understanding of the Legislative process, and the importance of working with staff, both internal and external, in a professional and responsive manner.