

MEMORANDUM



TO: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
FROM: Nick Wiley, Executive Director
DATE: April 6, 2016
SUBJECT: April 2016 Executive Director's Report

Accomplishments

FWC officers honored with numerous awards - At the March 24 State Law Enforcement Chiefs Association (SLECA) meeting in Tallahassee, four FWC officers were nominated for separate awards. SLECA annually honors the best and brightest in Florida's law enforcement community. Officer David Brady received the association's Medal of Valor for his actions in the line of duty, Officer Dustin Lightsey was nominated for the SLECA Officer of the Year Award, Lieutenant Barry Shaw won the Outstanding Trainer Award, and Investigator Steve Wayne won the Investigator of the Year Award. FWC officers won three of the seven awards presented at the meeting.

Officer receives medal of heroism from Governor - During the March 29 meeting of the Florida Cabinet, Governor Rick Scott recognized Officer David Brady with the Medal of Heroism with Chairman Yablonski in attendance. This medal is given to any law enforcement officer who has distinguished himself or herself by deliberately risking their life by engaging in perilous activities to preserve the lives of others with the knowledge that such activities might result in great personal harm. While on patrol in Bay County, Officer Brady responded to a disturbance call involving two men on a sailboat. After asking for identification, the two men opened fire and boarded Officer Brady's boat. Officer Brady jumped from his boat into the water and returned fire, striking one of the suspects in the hand. Officer Brady sustained gunshots in the collarbone and chest. Both suspects escaped on foot but were taken into custody within a few hours.

Events

TrophyCatch boat give-a-way - For the third consecutive year, the TrophyCatch program awarded a lucky registrant with a \$40,000 Phoenix Bass Boat, powered by Mercury Marine and equipped with a Power-Pole shallow-water anchoring system. The winner, who was randomly selected from among 11,230 individuals who registered for free at www.TrophyCatchFlorida.com, was Ed Prather, of Middleburg, Florida. The ceremony took place at Bartow Ford's Winter Wonderland Event.

Annual Fishing and Outdoor Expo Event - The Black Bass Conservation Center will host its 11th annual open house with the: "No Child Left Indoors" in April. This event draws over 800 children and family members for fishing tournament, hatchery tours, firearm and archery shooting instruction by FWC Hunter Education, wildlife and local law enforcement demonstrations along with a lunch and raffle. Sponsors include the local chapter of the Quail Forever Organization, Dicks Sporting Goods, Walmart, Ventura Ranch, Fish Florida, Pepsi and a host of local businesses.

Suncoast Youth Conservation Center Ribbon Cutting Ceremony – On April 12, FWC proudly opened the Suncoast Youth Conservation Center (SYCC), the first official building at the Florida Conservation and Technology Center (FCTC), with partners Tampa Electric and The Florida Aquarium. The SYCC is a 6,000-square-foot building with indoor and outdoor classroom space that will serve as the educational hub for the FCTC. Youth and family programs will provide saltwater fishing opportunities and kayaking excursions through the mangroves of Newman Branch Creek and into Tampa Bay. Marine and coastal education programs focused on science-based natural resource management will help youth discover the wild and wonderful side of Tampa Bay. Age-appropriate programs that meet Florida's educational standards will be available during the school year, and fun-filled summer day camps will showcase Tampa Bay's fish and fisheries and the science and research being conducted in the area.

In the News

Help beach-nesting shorebirds by giving them space - Shorebird nesting season is underway along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of Florida. FWC is reminding beachgoers to watch out for and avoid disturbing birds and their young. Shorebirds build shallow nests out of sand and shells on beaches in spring and summer, hatching chicks that are difficult to see. Shorebird nests, eggs, and chicks are well camouflaged and can easily be missed and even stepped on unless people know to look out for them. The snowy plover, least tern, black skimmer, American oystercatcher, and Wilson's plover are several of Florida's beach-nesting shorebird species that face conservation challenges.

Partnerships

FWC, Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida unveil memorial wall - On April 5, FWC and the Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida unveiled a memorial wall honoring 23 FWC staff members lost in the line of duty throughout the course of the agency's history. Family members of the fallen, dignitaries, agency retirees, Chairman Brian Yablonski, Commissioner Chuck Roberts, Foundation Chairman Rodney Barreto and former FWC Commissioners were in attendance. The wall was constructed at the FWC Bryant Building in Tallahassee and was supported with funds from the Foundation. It serves as a reminder of the sacrifices made by FWC staff while conserving Florida's valuable natural resources.

George H.W. Bush Vamos a Pescar Education Fund - Bass Pro Shops founder Johnny Morris established the George H. W. Bush *Vamos a Pescar* Education Fund to expand fishing participation among the Nation's Hispanic and minority citizens. The Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation (RBFF) administers the Fund and awarded the first grants to the FWC and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. FWC partnered with Miami-Dade County to expand its successful Fish Camp model, and this grant will allow for more opportunities for County youth to learn about fishing and boating. Miami-Dade also hosted the 2nd annual *Vamos a Pescar* family fishing event on April 3. To celebrate these initial grant awards, a ceremony will be held at the Bush Library in Houston on April 14. President Bush and Johnny Morris will kick off the fund with a fishing event. FWC is honored to receive this grant and be invited to participate in the celebration.

South Florida Fish Attracting Device - The Biscayne Channel light, also known as Bug Light, located approximately 2.4 miles southeast of Key Biscayne in Miami-Dade County served as an aid to navigation since 1929. While built as a navigational aid, Bug Light was also an important fish aggregating device that attracted various species of baitfish that supported South Florida's fishing industry. Bug Light was demolished pursuant to a July 3, 2014, contract between the U.S. Coast Guard and McKenna Heavy Construction. Local anglers relied on the baitfish caught at Bug Light and want it restored at its original location or a nearby area. FWC is supporting the installation of a new fish

attracting device in this area. Staff will work closely with Captain Bob Lewis Billfish Challenge, Inc. to secure funding to maintain a new structure.

Updates

FWC Budget for FY 2016/17 - The 2016 Legislative Session came to a close on March 11, 2016. Overall, FWC had a very favorable outcome with a total budget of \$378.7 million and 2,118.50 positions funded for FY 2016/17. Additional funding received in support of FWC Strategic Initiatives included \$15.4 million for land management activities, \$2.4 million for invasive species removal and control, \$500,000 for black bear conflict reduction, \$1.3 million for private landowner assistance, \$1.4 million for derelict vessel removal, and approximately \$300,000 for personal locator beacons for law enforcement officers. Operational support funding included a \$2.5 million fund shift from the Marine Resources Conservation Trust Fund to the General Revenue Fund, and funding for various fixed capital outlay improvements such as roof repairs at the Fish and Wildlife Research Institute, fire safety equipment replacement at the Bryant Building, and Americans with Disabilities Act enhancements at the Everglades Youth Camp. Finally, grant funding was authorized to continue gulf restoration activities associated with the Deepwater Horizon Incident, for the final phase of construction of the Palm Beach Shooting Park, for artificial reef construction, and for the Florida Boating Improvement Program.

Bear management update – A recently completed scientific estimate of the Florida black bear population indicates there are 4,350 adult bears in the state. The new results document a large and growing black bear population, and confirm Florida’s success in conserving its largest land mammal. The bear population update was announced in a March 24 news release and a conference call with reporters. Extensive field surveys by FWC’s bear management and research programs, as well as rigorous scientific analysis, showed strong growth in adult bear populations in all three of the bear management units (BMUs) studied in 2015. The three BMUs examined last year were: West Panhandle, East Panhandle, and South. Comparing the previous 2002 population estimates with new 2015 estimates, bear numbers have nearly doubled in the East Panhandle BMU to about 1,080 bears. In the South BMU, the population increased by 64 percent to more than 1,150 bears. In the West Panhandle BMU, numbers increased 75 percent to about 140 bears. Earlier survey work in 2014 also showed significant increases in bear populations in both the North and Central BMUs. These results show that reproduction and survival have outpaced mortality for bears in Florida. It is important to remember that an adult bear population of this size produces about 2,000 cubs each year and almost half of these cubs normally survive to adulthood. Florida has large, robust bear populations, and all Floridians should be proud of this conservation success story.

Also, the Florida Legislature approved \$500,000 to assist local governments in reducing human-bear conflicts during FY 2016-17. FWC is prioritizing use of these funds in the counties with the highest levels of human-bear conflicts. 60 percent of these funds must go to local governments with ordinances in place requiring residents and businesses to secure their trash. FWC staff has been in contact with all 14 high-priority counties, as well as municipalities within the counties, regarding how to best utilize these new funds.

In addition, FWC cost-shared with local governments and schools in the current year, using a Foundation grant generated by Conserve Wildlife license plate funds:

- Marion County offered bear-resistant trash cans to residents at one third of the retail cost. After initial sales, residents purchased so many cans that the county placed another order.
- Lake County provided multiple bear-resistant dumpsters for residents in rural areas to use as community drop-off sites at local fire stations.
- Seminole County Schools purchased bear-resistant dumpsters for all schools west of Interstate 4 within the county’s bear ordinance area.

- The City of DeBary in Volusia County was so successful in selling bear-resistant trashcans at half of the retail cost last year that they have requested additional funds to offer the cans for sale again this year.

Apalachicola Oyster Status - Commercial oyster harvest from the winter reefs, which opened September 1, 2015, continues to be low. According to surveys of the oyster population, recent oyster reproduction appears to be well. However, there is concern that high flows of fresh water over the past several months may affect the survival of young and adult oysters. 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 oyster monitoring stations were discontinued on March 31, 2016. Because of Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (DACS) food safety rules, the utility of check stations for the warmer months of the year is impractical. FWC staff continue to work with harvesters and dealers to minimize the harvest of under-sized oysters. FWC, DACS, 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.

Record rainfall in South Florida impacts water levels, wildlife - The highest rainfall on record for South Florida in January occurred in 2016. This is typically the dry season in South Florida. All areas of South Florida were inundated, restricting the ability to safely move water to mitigate the effects of extreme high water levels. Very strong El Niño conditions are forecasted to continue for the rest of the dry season, with additional rainfall likely to follow in the wet season. FWC staff led by Commissioner Bergeron has closely coordinated efforts with Governor Scott, partner agencies, and affected landowners and businesses to mitigate the high water effects throughout the region and to facilitate water movement south from Lake Okeechobee. Emergency measures were enacted to allow for increased flows from the water conservation areas south through Everglades National Park and in to Florida Bay. These emergency measures will lessen the negative impacts to wildlife and habitat within the water conservation areas and could eventually help reduce high water releases to the estuaries. Moving water south through Everglades National Park also has the added ecological benefit of improving salinity conditions within Florida Bay. FWC staff continue to monitor water levels and the status of wildlife in the affected Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs). In addition, FWC staff worked closely with South Florida Water Management District staff to monitor and mitigate the impacts to affected landowners and businesses. Water levels in all affected WMAs continued to recede during March. If the recession trends continue, conditions should improve prior to onset of the wet season.

Emerging Issues

Algal Bloom and Fish Kills in the Indian River Lagoon and Banana River – Large scale fish kills were reported in late March 2016 from the Banana River and Northern Indian River Lagoon (IRL). These fish kills were the result of low dissolved oxygen conditions associated with a brown algae bloom. The current bloom started approximately three months ago. This particular algae is nontoxic and occurs commonly in the IRL and occasionally forms dense blooms. Low dissolved oxygen conditions are a result of the bloom dying and decaying which removes oxygen from the water. Researchers from FWC and partners from the St. Johns River Water Management District are continuing to monitor this bloom. As of late March, the bloom appeared to be dissipating and reports of fish kills declined substantially.

Boca Grande Boundary Shift – Earlier this year, several buoys marking Boca Grande Channel were moved by the U.S. Coast Guard to better align with the shifting channel. One buoy specifically (Flashing Red Buoy #12) was a reference point marking the boundaries of Boca Grande Pass for the purposes of specific gear restrictions. Red buoy #12 was removed and replaced with a new buoy (Charlotte Harbor Channel LB 6). This new buoy is about a quarter mile East-Southeast of the old buoy. This change required that the boundaries of the Boca Grande Pass gear restriction area be updated to incorporate the location of the new buoy. An Executive Order was issued to ensure that the boundaries were updated before the gear restrictions took effect, April 1, 2016. Staff is planning to bring a draft rule proposal to the June 2016 Commission meeting to permanently correct the name and location of the new buoy.

Staff Recognition

James Erskine – James is FWC’s new Everglades Coordinator and he is coming to FWC from the Miccosukee Tribe where he most recently served as the acting director for the Department of Water Resources. In conjunction with this role, James was appointed by the Secretary of the Interior to serve as the Tribal representative on the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force. He also represented the Tribe’s interests as a part of the South Florida Water Management District’s Water Resources Advisory Commission. Prior to the summer of 2011, James worked for the Tribe as a water quality manager where he spent 12 years contributing to Everglades restoration projects and developed resource protection and conservation initiatives. James received his Master of Science degree in Biological Sciences from Florida Atlantic University. James will be stationed primarily at our West Palm Beach office, and will officially begin his journey with FWC on April 18th.

Andrea Dominguez - Andrea has worked with FWC for one year as a resource biologist responsible for working on issues concerning Lake Okeechobee. Andrea works with stakeholders, local governments, and the communities surrounding the lake on topics like water levels and releases, aquatic habitat quality, and the economic importance of recreational fishing. She is also oversees Lake Okeechobee’s commercial haul seine program. Andrea received her master’s degree in Conservation Ecology from the University of Michigan. Prior to that, Andrea proudly served in the Peace Corps where she traveled to rural communities in the Dominican Republic, and developed and implemented programs in water and energy conservation, waste management, and environmental stewardship.

Officer Bradley Toby – Officer Toby graduated from the academy in July of 2014 and is currently assigned to Lake Okeechobee on the Lake Crew Squad. Officer Toby is known for his loyalty, dedication, and hard work. He has participated in eleven Search and Rescue (SAR) operations. His knowledge, calm demeanor, and strong work ethic make him a valuable asset to our agency; regardless of time of day or what the situation might be, Officer Toby is ready and willing to get the job done. In addition to SARs, Officer Toby is regularly enforcing the law. One of his notable cases was a violation of the Marine Turtle Protection Act involving green sea turtles which resulted in two arrests, five charges and all twenty-nine turtles being returned to their habitat.

Caroline Gorga – Caroline is a Wildlife Legacy Biologist with Florida’s Wildlife Legacy Initiative, which is the program that stewards the State Wildlife Action Plan, State Wildlife Grant Program, and Florida’s Teaming With Wildlife Coalition along with other partnership development efforts. Her primary focus is to develop, streamline, and enhance Florida’s species and habitat monitoring efforts, and she recently completed a state detail in Washington D.C. with the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, assisting with the Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America’s Diverse Fish & Wildlife Resources. Caroline received her B.S. in Biology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

and her Master's degree in Fish and Wildlife Biology from Clemson University, studying the ecology of the coastal American mink population.