

MEMORANDUM



TO: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners

FROM: Nick Wiley, Executive Director

DATE: November 11, 2015

SUBJECT: November 2015 Executive Director's Report

Events

Upcoming snook symposium – FWC staff will host a Snook Symposium on January 13, 2016, in Orlando. This symposium is open to the public and will focus on snook management and research 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.

FWC to host Annual Dove Technical Committee Meeting - FWC will host the annual Eastern Management Unit (EMU) Dove Technical Committee Meeting in Haines City from February 9-11, 2016. The Committee is comprised of representatives from states east of the Mississippi River and Louisiana, and meets annually to formulate recommendations to the Atlantic and Mississippi Flyway Councils for dove management policy in the United States. Because doves are a migratory species, management of their populations and allocation of hunting opportunities are responsibilities that are shared among the states and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

Great Outdoors Day - Osceola County and FWC celebrated Great Outdoors Day in Kissimmee on September 12 and approximately 100 people attended the event. The event educated the community about the importance and value of Osceola County's natural resources. Festivities included a Lake Toho clean-up, canoeing and kayaking, airboating, a fishing tournament, and a kids fishing derby. The kids fishing derby occurred at the Kissimmee Civic Center Pond, which FWC stocked with channel catfish from the Richloam Hatchery.

Partnerships

Dixie County recognizes FWC artificial reef program – In January 2016, the Dixie County Board of County Commissioners will dedicate a granite monument at the County Courthouse to recognize the partnership between FWC, Dixie County, and local volunteers toward construction of the Dixie County Horseshoe Reef Artificial Reef Site. Between 2012 and 2014, the FWC Artificial Reef Program provided a total of \$120,000 in grants in aid to Dixie County for construction of a total of 18 new patch reefs, popular fishing and SCUBA diving destinations for residents and visitors to rural Dixie County.

Restoring seagrass habitat in St. Andrew Bay – The first phase of a seagrass habitat restoration in St. Andrew Bay is complete. More than 300 volunteers helped create 14 oyster reefs covering about an acre of shallow, sandy bottom under FWC leadership. The restoration project was funded by a \$75,000 grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) with matching funding provided by the FWC. Project partners included AMIKids Panama City Marine Institute, St. Andrew Bay Resource Management Association, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (DACs), UF/IFAS Bay County Extension, and the USFWS. Phase two of the restoration will begin in 2016 and involve the placement of another 53 oyster reefs. It is being funded by an almost \$2 million grant from the NFWF Gulf Environmental Benefits Fund (GEBF).

Restoration of Grassy Flats in Lake Worth Lagoon finished -The planting of nearly 4,000 marsh grass plugs and 200 mangrove seedlings on August 22 marked the completion of a multi-year restoration project in a portion of the Lake Worth Lagoon. More than 50 volunteers from the West Palm Beach Fishing Club, the Marine Industries Association of Palm Beach County, and the Youth Environmental Alliance helped with the planting effort. This project restored critical marine habitats so wildlife will return to an area known as Grassy Flats, previously uninhabitable because of accumulated muck on the seafloor. Preliminary signs of the restoration's success are apparent. American oystercatchers and least terns began nesting on newly created islands upon completion of the project. This estuary restoration has received support from national, state and local levels, with FWC working with Palm Beach County as one of many partners on the project.

Sponge community restoration in South Florida - The sponge community in Florida Bay has degraded in recent decades due to a series of algae blooms that resulted in mass mortality of many species of sponges. The Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) recently started a collaborative three-year project with Bonefish and Tarpon Trust, Florida Keys Environmental Fund, The Nature Conservancy, Florida Sea Grant Extension Service in Monroe County, and scientists at Old Dominion University to undertake large-scale sponge restoration in Florida Bay. Sponge restoration in this area is critical as sponges maintain water chemistry and serve as crucial habitat for a wide range of sea life, including spiny lobster, stone crab, and juveniles of many fish species.

Emeralda Marsh Area 3 hydrological reconnection - The FWC is partnering with St. Johns Florida Water Management District on a project to reconnect Emeralda Marsh Conservation Area (EMCA) 3 to Lake Griffin and Yale canal in the Harris Chain of Lakes. Phase I will excavate internal levees and create rookery islands. Phase II includes breaching the outside levees in four locations and constructing a site for a future boat ramp and parking areas. Marshes located near EMCA 3 that previously were reconnected have evolved into high-quality bass fisheries and premium duck hunting habitat. Opening EMCA 3 to Lake Griffin will increase sustainable fishing and hunting opportunities.

Tracking permit in the Florida Keys - FWRI entered into a new partnership with Bonefish and Tarpon Trust to conduct a multi-year study on permit in the Florida Keys. This study will use acoustic telemetry to tag and track permit within the lower Florida Keys. This joint project will help in understanding how permit use the shallow-water habitats of the lower Florida Keys

and their seasonal movements to offshore spawning aggregation sites on the gulf side and Atlantic side of the Keys.

Mosaic Fish Management Area –The Mosaic Fish Management Area (FMA) in Polk and Hardee counties recently celebrated its 15th anniversary. The land and lakes in the FMA, totaling about 1,000 acres, are privately owned by Mosaic. Public access to these lakes for fishing is allowed from Fridays through Mondays. FWC biologists manage the aquatic habitat and fish in the lakes. Each year about 2,500 anglers fish for largemouth bass, channel catfish, bluegill, redear sunfish, and black crappie on the site.

Updates

Gulf reef fish survey update – FWC staff are using several outreach approaches to promote the Gulf Reef Fish Survey, a recreational harvest data collection tool approved by the Commission in June 2014 that is required for anglers targeting reef fish. This survey helps FWC identify the population of anglers that fish for Gulf reef fish like red snapper and obtain reef fish trip data directly from a subset of these anglers. This data will also increase knowledge on recreational harvest of other popular reef fish. Outreach efforts include articles in the Florida Saltwater Recreational Fishing Regulations publication, bait box stickers, rack cards, videos, meetings with anglers, and outreach to license vendors. More than 471,000 anglers have signed up to participate in the survey through FWC’s licensing system so far. While conducting fisheries inspections, FWC officers educate anglers about the purpose of the survey and explain the importance of having accurate data. FWRI continues to manage incoming data from questionnaires mailed to Gulf Reef Fish Anglers. Staff will provide the Commission with an update on the Gulf Reef Fish Survey, including stakeholder feedback, in 2016.

Apalachicola oyster status - Commercial oyster harvest from the winter reefs, which opened Sept. 1, 2015, is reported to be low. Based on FWC sampling and discussions with industry and community leaders, winter harvest limits are 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. Given the poor oyster population in Apalachicola Bay FWC is proposing to implement oyster monitoring stations, as described in the FWC oyster rule, to check all commercial harvest on a daily basis for established size limit and bag limit compliance as early as November 2015. Check stations were successfully implemented in Apalachicola Bay following Hurricane Elena in the mid 1980’s. FWC, DACS, and the University of Florida, with funding from the NFWF GEBF 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.

Plan to conserve Panama City crayfish goes to public for input – The FWC hosted four public meetings in October in Panama City and Lynn Haven to present the draft management plan for the Panama City crayfish. At the meetings, FWC staff provided information on the plan and gave the public an opportunity to comment. The Panama City crayfish lives only on the Bay County peninsula that includes Panama City and Lynn Haven. This small freshwater crustacean,

currently listed as a state Species of Special Concern, has been recommended by FWC staff to be listed as a state Threatened species, due to its limited geographical range.

Florida bass fishing – enhancing the Japanese connection - FWC staff hosted Japanese journalists in the Southwest region who were gathering material for print and video stories for Japan’s premier bass fishing magazine “Rod and Reel.” Pradco Outdoor Brands arranged to have editor Katsunori Yamamoto and videographer Hisanori Marubayashi meet with FWC. The journalists were taken on an electrofishing trip and to a bass fishing tournament. After fishing at Saddle Creek Park and Lake Kissimmee Fish Management Areas, they reported catching many fish including a trophy bass that will be entered into TrophyCatch.

Bear management update- The initial report on the bear hunt with overall results and statistics was released last week. The total number of bears taken was 304. Of the total, 59% were females and 78% were taken on private land. Hunter compliance with regulations was high, with a small number of warnings and citations. FWC’s division of law enforcement is continuing to investigate some possible violations. The hunt was successful in beginning to stabilize these large, growing bear populations.

FWC staff continue to make progress addressing waste management in the 14 counties that represent the vast majority of human-bear conflict. Staff attended a public workshop held by Seminole County to provide information about implementing bear-resistant trashcans in the part of the county located west of I-4, the area where most of the recent attacks happened. FWC is working with the county manager and staff as they draft an ordinance to require bear-resistant equipment in this part of Seminole County. Wingfield North and Wingfield Reserve, two home owners associations in Seminole County, adopted covenant restrictions requiring residents to use bear-resistant trashcans. Additionally, using funds from a Conserve Wildlife Tags (CWT) grant, the Bear Management Program bought the city of Mexico Beach dumpster lids for several unsecured dumpsters that attract bears. CWT funds also help support a \$60 discount to residents to get bear-resistant trashcans in Marion County, and helped Lake County set up bear-resistant dumpsters in several communities. FWC staff are in discussions with Franklin, Orange, and Highlands Counties as well as the city of Daytona Beach to identify actions on waste management that CWT funds can address. As well, Florida Gulf Coast University is working to become the first bear wise university in Florida and FWC is assisting in that effort.

Kissimmee Chain of Lakes habitat management - Coordination for upcoming hydrilla treatments on the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes (KCOL) is continuing. FWC conducted a public meeting to solicit stakeholder input to develop a Hydrilla Management Plan for winter 2015 and spring 2016. Lake Tohopekaliga (Toho) of the KCOL was the most difficult management plan to develop since a large array of lake-user groups are involved and it contains the most hydrilla. A split treatment plan is necessary to accommodate duck hunting and an upcoming B.A.S.S tournament.

Captive wildlife inspections – FWC captive wildlife staff inspect all venomous reptile permit holders’ facilities on an annual basis. With recent issues involving escapes, FWC staff is currently working on a focused effort to conduct inspections of all venomous reptile permit holders as soon as possible, regardless of how recent their last inspection was conducted. These

inspections will focus on proper caging and safety, documentation of inventory, and compliance with bio-security rules and regulations.

Staff Recognition

Officer Eric Fletcher started his career with the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission October 6, 2014. Eric graduated with FWC Class #26 and was the recipient of the “Roy Burnsed Award”. Eric is currently stationed as a uniformed officer in Franklin County. Born in Leon County Florida, Eric was raised here in the Florida Panhandle with the majority of his childhood years spent in Jefferson County. Eric takes great pride in protecting the natural resources, citizens, and visitors of the State of Florida which is evident in his strong work ethic.

Eric came to our agency after serving his country in the military. Eric served as a United States Marine serving three (3) tours of duty in Iraq between November 2003 and December 2008. During Eric’s second and third tours of duty he was wounded in action, thus receiving Purple Hearts for both incidents. We are honored to have Eric as a part of the Division of Law Enforcement and a member of the FWC family.

Charmaine Williams has worked for the Division of Freshwater Fisheries for 17 years. She currently serves as a Staff Assistant for Blackwater Fish Hatchery Research and Development Center. Charmaine not only provides administrative and budget support to the Blackwater Fish Hatchery, but as a part of the Regional Service Center, she also processes procurement card transactions for entire Northwest region consisting of 185 employees. She has been the recipient of the Division’s “Outstanding Service” and a NW Regional Service Center’s “Administrative Support Employee of the Year” awards.

Charmaine served two tours of duty with the U.S. Army and is a US Army Reserve and Alabama National Guard Veteran, serving honorably for 15 years.

Derek Fussell has worked in the Division of Habitat and Species Conservation for over ten years. His first eight years were with the Wildlife and Habitat Management Section and currently he is a Biological Scientist III with the Invasive Plant Management Section. Derek is responsible for overseeing plant management activities in public waterbodies and on public conservation lands from Escambia to Jefferson County. Derek has enjoyed hunting and fishing throughout his life and with a strong desire to share his love of the outdoors with those less fortunate, he created a non-profit organization called “Camo Dreams” that grants children with a physical disability or life threatening illness opportunities for an all-expenses paid hunt.

In the 11 years since its inception, Derek’s “Camo Dreams”, has provided once in a lifetime hunting trips to 23 terminally ill or disabled children including a recent trip to Oregon where a young boy with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, confined to a wheelchair, was able to shoot his first elk; a 7 by 7 bull that scored 332 and 5/8 inches.