

MEMORANDUM



TO: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
FROM: Eric Sutton, Executive Director
DATE: September 19, 2018
SUBJECT: September 2018 Executive Director's Report

In the News

Red Tide – Florida is currently experiencing a severe red tide event in Southwest Florida. Red tides have been occurring along Florida's Gulf coast with documentation as far back as the 1840s. It is caused by a bloom of microscopic alga that lead to fish kills and respiratory irritation to humans and has no known practical or acceptable method of control. Since the last Commission meeting, FWC senior staff have continually engaged stakeholders, local officials, legislative delegations, and members of tourism councils in Lee, Charlotte, and Sarasota Counties to discuss the impacts of red tide and offer any assistance that could be helpful. With the support and guidance of the Governor and Chairman, we have taken numerous actions to aid in the recovery of the impacted fisheries and the community.

- FWC continues to work with partners and communities to provide support to dealing with the impacts of naturally occurring red tide, including helping to address and assess health impacts (DOH), provide clean up grants (DEP), tourism funding (VF), and business grants (DEO).
- FWC and DEP continue to provide expertise, funding and support to enhance research on addressing red tide and protect public health and wildlife.
- Although red tide is naturally occurring and has impacted Florida for years, the state is partnering with world renowned leaders, including Mote Marine Lab and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, to research red tide and study innovative techniques to combat red tide and protect Florida's communities.
- Over the past several weeks, the state of Florida has announced:
 - \$2.2 million to fund testing of potential mitigation strategies including specialized clay, enhanced ozonation treatment, the use of hydrogen peroxide and enzyme application.
 - \$13 million in grant funding to assist local communities impacted by red tide and blue-green algae.
 - \$1.2 million for FWC's Stock Enhancement Research Facility to enhance research and production of redfish.
 - \$100,000 for Mote Marie Laboratory's red tide response
 - \$500,000 for VISIT FLORIDA to create an emergency grant program to assist local tourism development boards in counties affected by the naturally-occurring red tide.
- In addition, our partners are also contributing to recovery efforts. CCA Florida and Duke Energy are partnering to release hatchery-reared red drum in Manatee through Collier counties. Mote Marine Laboratory and CCA Florida are partnering to release hatchery-reared snook through a two-year initiative beginning next April.
- Florida remains committed to working with local communities and leading experts to combat red tide and protect our communities.

Events

AFWA – The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) recently hosted its 108th annual meeting in Tampa from September 9-13. This annual event provides a forum for conservation leadership and brings together more than 700 leaders from fish and wildlife agencies and conservation groups from all 50 states, U.S. Territories, Canada and Mexico to discuss conservation policy, management issues, and accomplishments. FWC assisted AFWA in hosting this year’s meeting at the Tampa Marriott Waterside that began with a plenary session themed around thoughtful customer engagement and the future of state and provincial wildlife agencies. Chairman Rivard was the featured speaker at the plenary session to welcome the attendees to Florida.

ICAST – FWC staff played a major role in the 61st International Convention of Allied Sportfishing Trades (ICAST), the world’s largest sportfishing trade show, hosted by the American Sportfishing Association (ASA). Held July 10-13 in Orlando, ICAST is a well-known venue for launching new fishing products and setting industry trends. More than 15,000 industry leaders and visitors attended this year’s event. Vice Chairman Spottswood and Commissioners Kellam, Lester, and Rood attended ICAST’s where presentations were given on the state of the sportfishing industry. FWC’s booth showcased tanks featuring a largemouth bass and inshore saltwater sportfish, and two kiosks with information on artificial reefs and the agency’s boat ramp finder. FWC staff at the booth shared information with attendees on agency goals, R3, and the importance of Sport Fish Restoration. They also manned a GoOutdoorsFlorida.com kiosk featured in the 60 in 60 booth hosted by ASA and the Recreational Boating & Fishing Foundation. The TrophyCatch team promoted program registration and showcased replica mounts of the winning bass from previous seasons, as well as the Phoenix bass boat that each program registrant is eligible to win. FWC also hosted a public meeting at ICAST for attendees focused on innovative licensing tools, saltwater and freshwater angler recognition programs, and the agency’s boat ramp finder. The Fish and Wildlife Foundation of Florida also participated in ICAST and promoted several their supporting efforts.

Special Recognition

Bonefish and Tarpon Trust turns 20 – Founded in 1997 by six anglers concerned about the declining bonefish population in the Florida Keys, the Bonefish and Tarpon Trust is a valued partner in conservation for FWC. BTT focuses their efforts on research and policy advocacy in Florida and the Caribbean, and their scope of work has grown over the last 20 years to include research and conservation efforts for bonefish, tarpon, permit, and their habitats. BTT and FWC have worked together to revise and improve regulations in Florida for bonefish, tarpon, permit, and barracuda.

National Conservation Law Enforcement Award - Over the past two years, FWC worked diligently on Operation Thimblebrig to expose a criminal conspiracy involving the exploitation of the spiny lobster commercial fishery. Other agencies involved in this operation include the Department of Homeland Security, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, NOAA, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, the Monroe and Miami-Dade County Law Enforcement Agencies, and the Florida Office of Statewide Prosecution. This operation will result in charges covering more than 200 violations involving racketeering, money-laundering, and other white-collar crime centered around the South Florida commercial fishing industry. Those involved with Operation Thimblebrig were presented with the National Conservation Law Enforcement Award for 2018 from the AFWA during their annual meeting held earlier this month in Tampa. Lt. Jose Escabi, Lt. Jeremy Munkelt, and Investigator Danielle Munkelt accepted the award on behalf of the entire team.

Updates

Florida Reef Tract Disease event - FWC and partners are continuing work on intervention methodologies to address Scleractinian Tissue Loss Disease (STLD) that is affecting corals and was discussed at length during our last Commission meeting. These efforts include skeletal trenching, treatment with chlorine powder, and antibiotics. Additionally, FWC and partners are developing a comprehensive plan to rescue susceptible coral species and maintain these corals in aquaria like the Florida Aquarium and coral nurseries. This will preserve genetic and species diversity while propagating these corals for use in experiments and future outplanting onto degraded reefs once the disease is controlled. A pilot collection of 100 corals will occur this month. Previously collected tissue and mucus samples continue to be processed for histology by staff to determine the potential pathogen(s) associated with STLD. Senior staff from FWC and our partners will be meeting with a number of local and regional governments to provide information and engage them on research and recovery efforts.