

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
From: Eric Sutton, Executive Director
Date: July 22, 2020
Subject: Executive Director Report

Commission Updates

Fisheries-Related Disaster Funding – FWC staff have been moving forward with several fisheries-related disaster funding projects, including Hurricane Irma, Hurricane Michael, and CARES Act funding. Staff is working closely with Chairman Spottswood on details of the payout programs.

- Hurricane Irma: FWC received \$44.5 million in grant funding from NOAA Fisheries in June 2019 to help fisheries-related businesses impacted by Hurricane Irma. So far, more than \$23.9 million in direct payouts have been made to commercial fishers, wholesale dealers, and charter fishermen. Over the next year, \$3.4 million will be spent reimbursing wholesale dealers for facility upgrades or repair, and \$2.5 million is expected to be spent on marine debris in the Keys. Over the next 3-4 years, \$2.8 million will be spent on mitigating loss of coral due to the stony coral tissue loss disease, nearly \$5 million dollars will be spent on 4 habitat improvement projects, and \$5.5 million will be spent on fishing infrastructure projects.
- Hurricane Michael: In March of this year, FWC received notification of \$7,812,000 in funding to help those impacted by Hurricane Michael. Staff is coordinating with affected stakeholders and working on a spend plan to send to NOAA to mitigate the fisheries-related damages caused by Hurricane Michael.
- CARES Act: Public Law 116-136 created \$2 trillion of relief for Americans affected by COVID-19. One of its major provisions related to the fishing industry was \$300 million for fishery disaster assistance nationwide. Florida will be allocated \$23,636,600 and work through the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) to distribute the funding. FWC staff are working on a spend plan for these funds and will be gathering public input on that plan before submitting to NOAA for approval in August.

ICAST – Considering impacts due to COVID-19, the board of directors for the American Sportfish Association (ASA) made the decision to cancel the physical International Convention of Allied Sportfishing Trades (ICAST) Show that was scheduled for July 14 – 17, 2020, in Orlando. Instead, they decided to move forward with a virtual trade show, that will provide an opportunity for industry partners and members to connect, showcase new products, and share information.

Our FWC ICAST planning team coordinated with ASA to partner on virtual events and provide digital content for the online version of this year's tradeshow. With this new online format, FWC had a virtual booth where we provided digital content on the Sport Fish Restoration program, fishing and boating access, industry partnerships, economics, and conservation efforts. Staff were able to build an engaging page for people to interact with content that included links to an FWC "ICAST" page, containing additional

information on our programs. Staff will continue to engage with ASA's show director and industry partners to find creative ways to get the message out that Florida continues to be "Focused on Fishing."

In collaboration with ASA, FWC was planning to host a Sport Fish Restoration industry round table during ICAST 2020. After discussions with both teams, the decision was made to postpone the round table until later this fall. This topic will be placed on the agenda for the October commission meeting.

Lake Management Plans – Staff has created an internal webpage to communicate progress on our management plan efforts and have posted our management plan for Orange Lake as well as the newly finished plan for Lake Istokpoga. We are currently working on plans for Lake Okeechobee, the Harris Chain of Lakes, and the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes. Staff have altered the approach to stakeholder engagement for our Lake Management Planning efforts due to COVID-19. In lieu of in-person workshops and interviews, staff have utilized video conferencing software and phone interviews to engage with stakeholders. So far, eight stakeholder workshops have been conducted and over thirty one-on-one interviews were completed. Additional workshops and interviews will be scheduled through August.

Though the input phase of our planning effort is not complete, there are some key points worth highlighting. The first key point is that our interviews with Lake Okeechobee partner agencies and local business show a lack of consistency on what the main issues are for the lake. Lake Okeechobee is a very large and dynamic ecosystem and so is the management and regulatory apparatus that exists. To address this issue, we will need to prioritize coordination with local, state, and federal agencies to best manage the lake.

At the Harris Chain of Lakes, there is consensus on the main management issue, hydrilla management. The Harris Chain of Lakes has a very robust recreational boating community and based on workshops conducted so far, those stakeholders value access and open water, while also valuing fish and wildlife and their habitats. Anglers and waterfowl hunters value the presence of hydrilla with anglers showing a preference for hydrilla in offshore open water, while waterfowlers prefer it along undeveloped shorelines.

Aquatic plant management is a concern on all systems. All stakeholders engaged to date have been appreciative of their involvement in this planning process and have a strong desire for more and continued communication on management activities.

Aquatic Plant Management Technical Assistance Group (TAG) – I was able to participate in a virtual Aquatic Plant Management Technical Assistance Group (TAG) meeting hosted by FWC on May 27th. The TAG is comprised of volunteer representatives from recreational and professional anglers, waterfowl hunters, water related businesses, riparian owners, stakeholder organizations, environmental NGOs, local government representatives, and state agencies that are directly involved in or affected by aquatic plant management in Florida.

At this virtual meeting, the agenda focused on priority issues that had been previously identified by the TAG. FWC provided a live demonstration on a real-time tracking system that monitors contractors and records precise locations of herbicide applications. This fleet tracker technology, similar to systems used by shipping and trucking companies is being tested on Lake Okeechobee, with the goal of making this type of technology a requirement of the new contracts for aquatic plant control contractors. Once installed, the trackers will show precise routes of all equipped vessels including the locations where herbicides were applied.

Staff from the Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) provided an update on the recent fish health screenings and monitoring efforts that have been implemented as part of the Long-Term Monitoring Program. Thanks to anglers raising concerns about finding some fish with lesions, FWRI has initiated a long-term fish health monitoring program as part of our ongoing sampling of fish populations.

TAG members provided positive feedback on both the technology to increase contractor accountability and the steps that FWC is taking to investigate fish health. They also provided priority areas to pursue additional research. Planning is underway for the next meeting that will be held in August.

Request for Information Update – FWC published a Request for Information (RFI) to solicit new ideas for managing aquatic plants without the use of herbicides in Florida waterbodies. The RFI closed on the 7th of January with nearly 60 replies. Of those replies, 20 responses were considered complete. Staff worked with outside partners and independent experts including the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), United States Army Corps of Engineers (USCOE), and others to review the complete responses. The external reviews were completed in late April, and an internal FWC team with staff from several divisions evaluated the external reviews in May using a ranking scale. Based on the evaluation of the external reviews, staff are pursuing additional information from 3 entities:

- ASBRO LLC
- Ridge Valley
- Solitude Lake Management

We have asked partners in the USCOE, SFWMD and DEP to participate in the next steps with these companies. Meetings with these partners are being scheduled for late July.

In a related endeavor, we are finalizing a draft Request for Proposal (RFP) to invite private environmental consulting companies to submit proposals that would both review our program and also review aquatic plant control ideas nationally and internationally to investigate if there are new, innovative, or alternative technologies that we could be implementing in our programs. We hope to have the draft RFP finalized in the next few months.

Python Program – Progress on python initiatives has been substantial over the last few months. Alignment of the FWC and South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) python contractor program has resulted in 100 contractors hired as of May 2020. Collectively, nearly 5,000 pythons have been removed by python contractors since spring 2017. Despite the current pandemic, contractors have continued working, and staff have developed “virtual check-ins” of pythons. These virtual interactions eliminate the need for direct contact between staff and contractors but allow for contractors to continue to submit the measurements of captured pythons. Access to additional lands has expanded as well over the last few months including some state parks in south Florida. SFWMD and FWC are collaboratively working with University of Florida to analyze contractor data to evaluate effectiveness of this program.

FWC is grateful for the progress that has been made possible by partnering with the SFWMD. A series of new projects will begin on July 1 including:

- Development of an operational python detection dog team.
- Development of infrared camera technology to detect pythons in the wild.
- Conduct mercury testing of pythons to look at consumptive use guidance.
- FWC will be advertising a Request for Proposals for Innovative Python Research to help detect and remove pythons from Florida within a few weeks. The intent of this RFP is to provide seed money to help private industry develop technology that will help in the python battle that both FWC and SFWMD will collaboratively evaluate and fund.

Finally, much progress has been made towards the development of an Interagency Python Management and Control Plan. An interagency team consisting of 15 land managing partner agencies, organizations, and Tribes is meeting regularly to draft the State’s first plan. Despite some meeting delays adjusting to COVID-

19, the team is on target to complete a draft before the end of 2020. This document will provide a unified voice for python management in the State and align management goals and strategies to optimize our efforts moving into the future.

Everglades Conditions – Last month we reported that the 2020 dry season was abnormally dry throughout the south Florida ecosystem with March being reported as the driest March in 89 years of record keeping. The rainfall deficit was evidenced throughout the ecosystem by widespread drought conditions, significant wildfires, and hypersaline conditions in Florida Bay.

The Florida rainy season officially started on May 15th, and the region experienced significantly above-normal rainfall which rapidly raised water levels and improved the salinity conditions in Florida Bay. Water levels in the Everglades and Francis S. Taylor Wildlife Management Area (EWMA) have approached, but not exceeded, our biologically based closure criteria and staff have observed increased terrestrial wildlife use of the area levees.

As we progress through the 2020 rainy season and continue to monitor the developing high-water condition in the EWMA, key state and federal projects are coming online that use completed restoration projects to provide relief for high-water conditions. The South Florida Water Management District will be completing construction on the S-333 North water control structure in August, which significantly increases the discharge capacity of the EWMA, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will be finalizing the Combined Operations Plan (COP), which is a new water control plan for the southern part of the system. Bringing these projects online will help manage late season water levels in the EWMA and improve the ability to send water south to Everglades National Park and Florida Bay.

Legislative and Budget Update – Several important pieces of legislation were recently approved by the Governor that went into effect July 1st. FWC’s agency bill, HB 549, creates a public records exemption to exempt site-specific location information for endangered and threatened species from public inspection and copying requirements. Through SB 1414, significant changes were made to Section. 379.372, Florida Statutes. This statute regulates certain high-risk nonnative invasive reptiles in Florida, particularly those listed as Conditional, Prohibited, Venomous, and Reptiles of Concern. The action taken by the Legislature was in recognition of the ecological, economic, and human health and safety concerns that stem from nonnative reptiles in Florida. On day two of this Commission meeting, staff will provide the Commission with a presentation that goes into the details of these Legislative changes, as well as proposed rule changes. The bill also broadens the prohibition on the harassment of hunters, trappers, or fishers. Lastly, the bill expands the number of free fishing days from 4 to 6. HB 659, authorizes the use of drones by a non-law enforcement employee of FWC for the purposes of managing and eradicating invasive exotic plants or animals on public lands. Finally, HB 327 was also approved, and increases the penalty for taking or possessing a freshly killed bear during the closed season to a Level Three violation (a first-degree misdemeanor for the first offense) and forfeits any other FWC license or permit for three years from the violation date.

Additionally, The FY 2020/2021 Budget (General Appropriations Act) was signed into law by Governor DeSantis on June 29, 2020. This budget package funds high priority conservation items like the state reef fish survey and conflict species management, and allows for continued work on red tide research and coral reef disease response and restoration. The budget also provides for ongoing marine fisheries disaster recovery programs and the expansion of our existing python removal program. Funding is also appropriated to support efforts to restore depleted oyster populations in Apalachicola Bay and to develop a harvest management system in Apalachicola Bay and Suwannee Sound.

We appreciate the work of Vice Chairman Sole, our Budget Liaison during the 2020 Legislative Session, and would like to thank the Governor and Legislature for their continued support of FWC.

Fish and Wildlife Foundation of Florida Board Meeting – On June 9, 2020, I participated as a member of the Board of Directors for the Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida, our principal citizens support organization, in the Foundation Board Meeting via teleconference.

The Foundation has postponed Night for Nature, its annual fundraising gala, due to the pandemic but were still able to close in the black on June 30th, 2020, as most of the fundraising for the event was completed prior to March 1st. Thanks in large part to the Foundation, funding has been secured for the next 12 months for the captive breeding of Florida grasshopper sparrows; 16 of 22 fledglings spotted in the wild this spring came from nests with at least one captive-reared parent, demonstrating the value of this FWC-U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)-White Oak Conservation effort to prevent the extinction of the sparrow. The Foundation has also been actively fundraising in support of the agency's stony coral rescue effort, and more than a third of all rescued corals are now in a facility co-funded by the Foundation. Additionally, the Foundation has made a \$200,000 grant to DEP to purchase a 587-acre addition to our Apalachicola WEA; which the Governor and the Cabinet recently approved. The lands will be open to hunting and other forms of outdoor recreation. Finally, the Foundation is close to having a final new design for the "Conserve Wildlife" (bear) specialty license plate, which provides FWC with supplemental funding for non-game species conservation.

Staff Recognition

Kipp Frohlich – Kipp began his career in 1985 as a manatee regional biologist in SW Florida, based in Port Charlotte, with the Florida Marine Research Institute in the Department of Natural Resources. In June 1989, he was promoted and moved to Tallahassee to work with the Division of Marine Resources, Bureau of Protected Species as an Environmental Administrator over the manatee program. He oversaw the expansion of this Bureau to include agency commenting, Manatee Protection Plan coordination, habitat conservation and rule development as part of the Florida Manatee Sanctuary Act, all under then Bureau Chief, Pat Rose. In 1999, Kipp moved with the merger of the Division of Marine Resources to what became the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. In 2003, he was promoted to Chief of Protected Species Management, which after a reorganization in 2006, became the Imperiled Species Management Section Leader. Kipp was promoted to Deputy Director of HSC in 2013 by then Division Director Thomas Eason.

In 2017, Kipp was awarded the Rodney Barreto Employee of the Year Award for his unprecedented effort to establish 13 new Critical Wildlife Areas (CWAs) and 5 re-establishments. CWAs are designed to protect concentrations of vulnerable shore and wading birds and other wildlife from human disturbance during critical life stages such as breeding, feeding or migration. Usually created one at a time and often years apart, this effort was unprecedented in its large scope, statewide scale, and ambitious timeline. Also, in 2017, Kipp was once again promoted, this time to HSC Division Director.

On September 30th, Kipp will be retiring after dedicating 35 years of service to the conservation of Florida's wildlife and native habitats. His contributions will benefit not only the resources, but also the citizens of Florida, for decades to come. Kipp is looking forward to being able to spend more time outdoors, enjoying the resources by kayaking and fishing, and visiting his daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter Heidi in Alaska.

Jon Fury – Jon Fury will be retiring on September 30th after a 35-year career with the FWC and predecessor agencies. He began working with the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission in August 1985 as a Freshwater Fisheries Biologist in the South Region working on the Everglades

Investigations project. Much of his early days were spent conducting one-acre block net sampling to do marsh fish collections.

Since Jon was nearly a foot taller than the other biologists, they always offered for him to get in the water first to check for alligators, water depth, and to see how far he would sink into the marsh bottom. We are happy to note he still has all his fingers and toes.

A few of Jon's experiences in the Everglades are chronicled in the book, *Everglades Lawmen: True Stories of Game Wardens in the Glades*. As we all know, there is an inherent risk in operating an air boat in the Everglades. The author highlighted two stories about Jon and how he "escaped two near-fatal airboat accidents in his fourteen years in the Glades." In one incident, he was carried out by helicopter after a collision with an obscured levee and in the second, a broken motor mount resulted in shrapnel cutting his back and arm. The author describes Jon as a "lanky and sardonic Pennsylvania native"; a moniker that Jon is proud to wear.

Jon's career led him through multiple steps from the Everglades to the South Region office and eventually to Tallahassee as the Director of the Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management. He has been shaping the Division throughout his career and has befriended, mentored, coached, and led many staff members along the way. He's received the "Mentor of the Year" award twice for being a steady hand and patient listener, and for providing feedback and teaching with a combination of knowledge, wisdom, and years of experience. Jon's leadership helped to develop staff both within and outside of his division, and there are many staff across the agency that are grateful for his guidance.

Jon's commitment to the Public Trust Doctrine and our role as Trust Managers forms the foundation of how he approaches management of our resources. Whether newly hired biologists or veteran staff, he reminds us that we are all tasked with managing Florida's resources for the benefit of people today and for future generations. This commitment to the Public Trust Doctrine and public engagement in resource management has become engrained in all who have worked with him. He has also spent countless hours over the years influencing our Agency Strategic Planning efforts, working hard to lay the groundwork for the future of our agency and resources by leaving his mark on our Lake Management Plans, Human Dimensions Initiatives, and work on watershed management.

Jon has been a mentor, supervisor, co-worker, and friend. His dependability, honesty, and guidance are going to be missed, but the lessons he's taught all of us will continue on in the work we do, in the public meetings we host, and the issues that we tackle. Thank you, Jon, for your commitment to the agency, the resources of Florida, and to the staff that consider you one of the most valuable assets to this agency.