

# MEMORANDUM



**To:** Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners  
**From:** Eric Sutton, Executive Director  
**Date:** October 7, 2019  
**Subject:** Executive Director's Report

---

**Hurricane Sally Response** – Hurricane Sally made landfall September 16, 2020 at 9:45 AM between Gulf Shores, Alabama and Pensacola, Florida as a category 2 Hurricane with maximum sustained winds of 105 mph. Damaging winds, flooding from torrential rainfall, and storm surge were widespread but most acutely experienced in our 3 westernmost counties (Escambia, Santa Rosa, and Okaloosa), and preliminary damage totals have been estimated to surpass \$5 billion.

We activated the MyFWCAAlert system, the first time utilizing this new system for the agency during a live event, to stay informed and updated on the safety and welfare of staff and their families. All staff were safe and accounted for following the passage of Hurricane Sally, but some staff did experience damage to their homes and personal belongings. The Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida has acted quickly and stepped in to assist affected employees, offering financial assistance through its Employee Assistance Relief Fund. Assessments of damage to FWC facilities, as well as ecological impacts, are underway.

FWC Law Enforcement deployed 48 Officers, including 23 officers from the Northwest and North Central Special Operation Groups to counties in the Panhandle. Officers assisted local, state, and federal agencies with search and rescue operations, conducted evacuations, and provided security. With widespread river flooding, officers used their shallow water capability and provided force protection for swift-water incident response teams using 4x4 pick-up trucks and shallow draft vessels. As storm conditions subsided, officers from the Pensacola Field Office began conducting search and rescue operations and provided reconnaissance reports and damage assessments. Preliminary assessments for derelict vessels in the affected Florida counties show a total of 76 vessels. In past storms, FWC has seen an approximately 80% self-recovery rate, where either owners or insurance companies recover or pay for the removal of displaced vessels. Pensacola Field Office personnel will continue to support Hurricane Sally recovery efforts including derelict vessel identification and recovery, as well as providing maritime security for power crews working to restore electricity along waterways.

**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 grant from NOAA Fisheries in June 2019 to help fisheries-related businesses impacted by Hurricane Irma. So far, more than \$24.9 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 coordinated with affected stakeholders to develop a

spend plan to mitigate the fisheries-related damages caused by Hurricane Michael. After reviewing public comments, the proposed spend plan was submitted to NOAA in early September, which outlines methods and budgets to provide relief to commercial aquaculturists, fishermen, and wholesale dealers, as well as marinas and licensed charter businesses.

- *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 developed a spend plan to mitigate the COVID-19 financial impact to the Florida fishery. After reviewing public comments, the proposed spend plan was submitted to NOAA in early August, outlining methods and budgets to provide relief to commercial aquaculturists, fishermen, and wholesale dealers, as well as licensed charter businesses. FWC has received comments from NOAA for further information and/or clarification regarding the spend plan. FWC staff are addressing these comments and submitted the final proposal in mid-September. FWC staff are also gathering the necessary fishery-related data from each sector to prepare applications.
- *USDA Seafood Trade Relief Program*: U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue recently announced that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will be providing approximately \$530 million through the Seafood Trade Relief Program to support U.S. seafood industry and fishermen impacted by retaliatory tariffs from foreign governments. According to the USDA, commercial fishermen who sold any spiny lobster, flounder, or tuna may be eligible for relief. Fishermen can sign-up for relief from Sept. 14 to Dec. 14, 2020 through their local USDA Service Center. The application can be found at [www.farmers.gov/seafood](http://www.farmers.gov/seafood).

**Gulf Red Snapper Fall Season** – Governor DeSantis and FWC recently announced a fall red snapper season for private recreational anglers and state for-hire operations in the Gulf of Mexico that will be open on the following Saturdays and Sundays: Oct. 17, 18, 24, 25, 31 and Nov. 1.

Preliminary estimates indicate around 70% of the quota was harvested during the June and July season. Therefore, approximately 30% is available for a fall red snapper season. During this season, private recreational anglers may harvest red snapper in Gulf state and federal waters. However, state for-hire operations are limited to fishing for red snapper in Gulf state waters only.

These additional days would not be possible without the State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS). The State Reef Fish Survey was developed specifically to provide more robust data for management of red snapper and other important reef fish, and has allowed FWC the unprecedented opportunity to manage Gulf red snapper in state and federal waters. All anglers fishing from private recreational vessels must sign up as a State Reef Fish Angler to target red snapper and several other reef fish in state and federal waters, even if they are exempt from fishing license requirements. Sign up as a State Reef Fish Angler at no cost at [GoOutdoorsFlorida.com](http://GoOutdoorsFlorida.com) or by visiting any location you can purchase a license.

**Operation Triple Play** – In January of 2019, an initial investigation began with an anonymous complaint about individuals in a pickup truck trapping flying squirrels in a Marion County subdivision. A flying squirrel smuggling enterprise was found to be taking place across state lines, and after 19 months the investigation has culminated with several arrests. Rodney Knox, owner of Knox Farm in Bushnell, FL, purchased trapped squirrels and sold them to a South Korean buyer, who would send a courier to deliver the squirrels to Georgia. Once in Georgia, a new courier would take them to Illinois for delivery to an international pet shipping company. Squirrels were exported, with falsified paperwork, and then shipped to a South Korean buyer to be sold as exotic pets.

The suspects indicated up to 10,000 traps were placed in Central Florida in order to catch flying squirrels and over 3600 squirrels were sent to South Korea from Knox. One South Korean company paid Knox \$213,800 for more than 2000 flying squirrels from November 20, 2017 to April 1, 2020. Of the 7 total suspects, there is 1 outstanding warrant and 25 total charges, including:

- Racketeering (F.S. 895.03(3) and Conspiracy to Commit Racketeering (F.S. 895.03(4))
- Money Laundering
- Scheme to Defraud (F.S. 817.034(4)(a)(1))
- Grand Theft (F.S. 812.014(2)(c)(3))
- Dealing in Stolen Property (F.S. 812.019 (1))
- Money Laundering (F.S. 896.101)
- Unlawful Possession of Freshwater Turtles (F.A.C. 68A-25.002)
- Unlawful Possession of Flying Squirrels (F.A.C. 68A-4.001)

This multi-faceted investigation could not have been successful without the work from our partner agencies. Attorney General Ashley Moody's office was instrumental in charging the suspects with the organized crime statutes, and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources served multiple search and arrest warrants. Illinois Conservation Police worked undercover monitoring the illegal shipments to Korea. California intercepted the turtle shipments at the Los Angeles airport, confirming that FL turtles were involved, and Homeland Security Investigations was instrumental in tying together the international connection.

**Gill Net Case in the Southwest Region** – A few months ago, officers and investigators from our Tampa Field Office began to notice suspicious activity of individuals fishing near Gandy Beach in Pinellas County. An anonymous tip via the FWC Wildlife Alert Hotline was also received. Personnel began to monitor the location from both land and water and discovered a gill net stretched out into the bay. The use of this type of fishing gear is not only illegal, but it is harmful to fish and wildlife by indiscriminately killing much of the fish and wildlife that become entangled in it. Officers and investigators donned waders and watched the individuals from concealed locations in the mangroves for three hours before apprehending them in the act. As a result, two individuals were arrested for the unlawful use of a monofilament entanglement net (gill net) to take several species of fish as well as a juvenile bottlenose dolphin. The combined size of the three gill nets in possession measured 3,125 square feet. The individuals were charged with multiple misdemeanors and felonies and Pinellas County State Attorney's Office will be prosecuting the case.

This case was the result of a combination of proactive law enforcement work and surveillance, along with a tip received from the public through FWC's Wildlife Alert Hotline. Our officers work hard to protect Florida's natural resources and egregious violations such as these are reminders of why our work is so important. It is also a reminder of how the public can help catch criminals when they see someone breaking the law. Report fish, wildlife, or boating violations to FWC's Wildlife Alert Reward Program. If your information results in an arrest or citation, you may be eligible for a reward of up to \$1,000.

**Biscayne Bay Fish Kills** – FWC's Fish Kill Hotline received the first report of a multi-species fish kill in Biscayne Bay on August 10, 2020, with a total number of 97 reports received. Citizens reported seeing dead snapper, needlefish, pufferfish, ballyhoo, seatrout, crabs, mojarra, stingrays, lobsters, eels and toadfish.

FWC worked with Miami-Dade County, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the South Florida Water Management District, the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration, and others in response. The fish kills were attributed to low dissolved oxygen conditions believed to be the result of several factors including high seasonal water temperatures, runoff, and decomposition of large mats of the macroalga *Sargassum*. There have been no new reports of dead fish in Biscayne Bay since August 20, 2020.

**Harmful Algal Bloom/Red Tide Task Force**– The Harmful Algal Bloom (HAB) Task Force held six public meetings in the fiscal year 2019-2020 in-person, by telephone, and virtual conference. Meetings focused on adopting focal areas and setting initial priorities related to red tide. With input from various stakeholders, two key outputs resulted:

- January 13, 2020: A letter was sent to the Governor, Senate, and Speaker providing a progress update and recommendation: “The HAB Task Force endorses and supports the recommendations made in the Blue-Green Algae Task Force Consensus Document #1 that was released on 11 October, 2019.”
- January 31, 2020: The HAB Task Force issued its consensus document #1 “Initial Recommendations Regarding Red Tide (*Karenia brevis*) Blooms” to address some of the most pressing needs to improve our ability to manage red tide and its harmful effects. Twelve recommendations were identified in the areas of Public Health, Communications, Management and Response, and Research.

As a result of the initial recommendations of the HAB Task Force, a number of initiatives led by FWC have begun to address these priority actions including:

- initiation of an update to the 2009 FWC-DOH “Resource Guide for Public Health Response to Harmful Algal Blooms in Florida”;
- creation of an ad hoc working group to address statewide HAB public communication and education needs; and
- establishment of a HAB Grant Program to support projects that address priority recommendations of the HAB Task Force. The HAB Grant Program funded three external projects this fiscal year:
  1. Development of a red tide communications plan for Florida – Florida Sea Grant, University of Florida (Award: \$92,471, 1 year): The goal of this project is to advance red tide communications by aligning practitioner needs with end-user wants by developing a better social science understanding of preferred red tide information, formats and delivery modes.
  2. An in situ holographic imaging system for measuring distributions of *Karenia brevis* - Florida Atlantic University (Award: \$234,433, 1 year): This project will further develop a novel imaging technology system to improve real-time detection of *Karenia brevis* in water. The technology is expected to examine large bodies of water at faster rates and greater range of detection than current technologies, significantly enhancing current red tide monitoring efforts.
  3. Field deployable measurement of aerosolized brevetoxins from *Karenia brevis* using colorimetric immunoassay – University of Florida (Award: \$200,000, 1 year): In this project, a colorimetric immunoassay will be developed for measurement of brevetoxins in aerosolized *Karenia brevis* cultures, laying the foundation for future development of a field-deployable, competitive-type colorimetric enzyme immunoassay for monitoring of aerosolized brevetoxins during *K. brevis* blooms.

**Indian River Lagoon Nanoplankton Bloom** – A nanocyanobacterium bloom is currently occurring in the northern to central Indian River Lagoon (IRL). This alga was first documented in samples collected in late June and July 2020 and has since expanded. It was the dominant organism in recent routine monitoring samples (collected on September 10, 2020) from the Banana River and northern and central Indian River. Additional examination recognized pigments specific to cyanobacteria, and although the exact identity of the cyanobacterium is not yet known, further testing is ongoing. The toxic alga *Pyrodinium bahamense* typically blooms in the IRL during summer months, but abundances recently decreased to background levels.

To date, only small fish kills have been reported in these areas and some occurred before the unidentified nanoplankton became dominant. Given their location, most fish kills were attributed to low dissolved oxygen concentrations in shallow water and canals. The FWC, together with partners including the St. Johns

River Water Management District (SJRWMD), Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, IRL National Estuary Program, and partners (University of Florida, Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute, and others) continue to monitor the event through both routine and targeted sampling and are working towards identifying the species. Sensors deployed in the lagoon by the SJRWMD are enabling close monitoring of dissolved oxygen and relative chlorophyll concentrations.

**Fellsmere Reservoir/Headwaters Lake** – FWC has partnered with the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) to develop freshwater fishing opportunities that will rival the most fabled fisheries of the southeast. The Fellsmere Water Conservation Area is an area of reclaimed agriculture land that has been utilized to conserve water, increase water quality, and provide increased flood protection. Over the course of nearly a decade, FWC has partnered with the SJRWMD to enhance fisheries habitat and provide public access to increase quality outdoor recreational opportunities and create a world class largemouth bass fishery at what is now known as Headwaters Lake.

Beginning with the purchase of land by the SJRWMD from agriculture interests and subsequent building of levies, it has long been speculated that this reservoir held the potential of being a “once in a lifetime” fishery. FWC staff utilized 1.35 million dollars in Aquatic Habitat Restoration and Enhancement funding to design and implement habitat enhancements across 2,000 acres of the 10,000-acre reservoir prior to it being flooded. The habitat enhancement area included construction of artificial creek channels, ledges, islands, shoals, humps, and deep holes to allow for large expanses of submerged aquatic vegetation and to increase the usable edge for fish and other aquatic species. In addition to these bottom contouring efforts, ten quarter-acre gravel rock beds were created and 15,000 native trees were planted in the shoal and island areas. Upon the flooding of Headwaters Lake in early 2016, the Florida Bass Conservation Center stocked 1 million Florida largemouth bass fingerlings, 145,000 black crappie, 374,000 redear sunfish and 345,000 bluegill.

On August 10, 2020, Headwaters Lake Boat Ramp was opened to motorboats for the first time. This facility was built in cooperation between the SJRWMD and FWC’s Boating Improvement Fund, which is supported by Sportfish Restoration Funding. At a total project cost of \$842,548, split 50/50, this project provides a two-lane boat ramp, restroom facilities, and parking area for up to 40 vehicles and trailers. During the first three days after opening, the estimated effort was 2,267 hours of fishing and the catch rate was 2.65 bass per hour.

**Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA)** – This year was the 110<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, an organization that represents the conservation interests of states at a national level and convenes 32 committees and dozens of working groups. FWC is represented on 25 of these committees on topics ranging from ocean resources policy, law enforcement, invasive species, bird conservation and education, outreach and diversity. Our staff work throughout the year to stay well-informed of emerging or challenging conservation issues that impact Florida but may also have regional, national and global influence on policies and regulations. The 2020 AFWA meeting was held virtually over 5 days.

Each year AFWA recognizes an individual or family-run farm, ranch or forest land-operation that has incorporated proactive conservation and environmental practices and exhibits outstanding stewardship of fish and wildlife resources. This year, the AFWA Awards Committee selected one of our Florida landowners, Mr. Doug Moore and the South Prong Plantation as the recipient of the 2020 National Private Lands Fish & Wildlife Stewardship Award. South Prong Plantation is a working, multi-use, timberland operation actively managed by Mr. Moore and his family, neighbors and friends. Mr. Moore strives to be a steward of fish and wildlife and guides his management decisions to the benefit of these resources. Deer, fox squirrel, wild turkey, Northern bobwhite quail, and Florida black bear are known to frequent the property and Mr. Moore practices adaptive deer harvesting methods to maintain a healthy, high quality deer

herd. Mr. Moore works cooperatively with the FWC to provide tissue samples for monitoring the presence of Chronic Wasting Disease and to host 1-2 youth hunts per year. Mr. Moore is eager to share his passion regarding the conservation value of his property with others, and provide opportunities for field study and outdoor skills development to organizations that include the Boy Scouts of America, the University of Florida, and local 4H groups. This award could not have gone to a more deserving landowner and we're grateful for everything Mr. Moore contributes to conservation and our future generations.

**Python Update** – Progress on pythons continues. Despite the current pandemic, contractors have continued working and staff have continued to effectively use virtual check-ins of pythons. This limits in-person contact while still allowing for the mission to continue. Summertime is productive for python removal, when many of the nests are hatching and pythons are more active at night. This summer from June 1<sup>st</sup> – August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1,473 pythons were collectively removed by python contractors. In the first 8 months of this year, 1,968 pythons have been removed, more than the total of 1,525 for all of 2019.

The new fiscal year starting in July has seen the initiation of two new projects:

- The detection dog project is well under way and two dogs, Rudy and Truman, are being field tested. Both dogs are already able to positively find Burmese pythons during the testing periods. The intent of this project is to have FWC able to use these detection dogs in the field, particularly in areas of low density or at the edges of the known range where human detection may be lower.
- We are also supporting the development of vehicle mounted, near-infrared camera technology to detect pythons in the wild and are conducting mercury testing of pythons to look at consumptive use guidance.

Planning is underway for the 2021 Python Challenge. Expect to hear more soon about the upcoming competition dates and registration details.

**Florida Grasshopper Captive Release Program** – The FWC and partners are working together to save the Florida grasshopper sparrow, North America's most imperiled bird. The success of an ongoing captive breeding program represents a major step forward in the conservation of this species. Beginning in March 2019, the FWC and partners began releasing captive-bred birds on conservation lands in central Florida with the goal of stabilizing or growing the wild population of this critically endangered species. The 2020 breeding season has just concluded and was our first opportunity to determine whether releases were successful. Captive-bred birds released in 2019 and early 2020 survived and bred at rates consistent with our goal. To date, the FWC and partners have released more than 200 birds into the wild. When comparing 2019 to 2020, we observed:

- 36% increase in the number of breeding pairs
- 77% increase in the number of successful nests
- 71% increase in the number of young birds successfully leaving nests

In 2020, more than 45% of breeding adults at the release site were raised in captivity, and more than 66% of fledgling birds came from nests with at least one captive-bred adult. Despite this success, there are still just over 30 breeding pairs of Florida grasshopper sparrows in the wild, and many challenges lie ahead for identifying and addressing the causes of the population's steep decline. The FWC, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and partners including the Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the Department of Defense, Audubon Florida, White Oak Conservation, Archbold Biological Station, and others are working to identify long-term management solutions. FWC staff did a remarkable job tackling the logistical challenges associated with the transport, release, and tracking of captive birds.

**Hurlburt Field** – Hurlburt Field in Okaloosa County, home of the Air Force’s 1<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Wing and one of our military partners, was recently recognized by the Secretary of Defense as the nation’s best Natural Resources Conservation Program among small installations. This well-deserved acclaim was based in part on successful collaborative efforts between FWC and Hurlburt Field. Staff with FWC and Hurlburt Field have worked to restore 3 breeding ponds of the federally endangered reticulated flatwoods salamander. The salamander is only found in Florida west of the Apalachicola River and depends on ephemeral wetlands within pine forests. Another significant collaboration was undertaken to stem human-bear conflict and create a BearWise Plan for the installation. As the bear population in the panhandle increased, Hurlburt Field began experiencing elevated human-bear conflicts on base. The FWC worked with Hurlburt staff to identify options to resolve the bear conflict issue. Hurlburt staff addressed all aspects of the conflicts, from eliminating human-provided food sources, to requiring compliance to keeping that food secure, and finally ensuring base personnel and security forces know how to respond to bears. Hurlburt purchased bear-resistant trash cans for all Base housing units and converted all dumpsters to keep bears out. Additionally, incoming personnel and their families are provided with training on proper use of the trash cans and educated about bears; what attracts bears and what to do if they see a bear. FWC trained Hurlburt Security Forces to respond to human-bear conflicts, including scaring bears with non-lethal methods. As a result of Hurlburt’s innovative efforts, human-bear conflicts on Base reduced by 70%. This example is one of many where our conservation efforts and partnerships help in small ways to support our nation’s military and its military readiness.

**Online Licensing System Update** – The Office of Licensing and Permitting recently awarded a new contract for the agency’s online licensing system, GoOutdoorsFlorida.com. This new contract requires that a new licensing system be up and running by October 3, 2021 to issue recreational hunting and fishing licenses. Additionally, many new items will be issued through GoOutdoorsFlorida.com, including commercial saltwater and freshwater business licenses, Captive Wildlife licenses and permits, and specialty permits for things like bass tournaments and military event exemptions. The new contract and system also allows for us to expand our marketing efforts, provide more real time data to officers in the field, and will consolidate many of our stakeholders under one umbrella account, so that we have a better understanding of how these users are interacting with the agency.

**New Hunts On The Youth Hunting Program Calendar** – The FWC has over 75 new hunts on the Youth Hunting Program calendar this fall for deer, wild hogs, small game, and more. These mentored hunts provide youth who have never hunted before with opportunities to learn about conservation and gain new outdoor skills.

The Youth Hunting Program offers youth between 12 and 17 years of age mentored hunting opportunities. To participate, youth must successfully complete a hunter safety course and be accompanied by a parent or guardian. Volunteers provide places to hunt, meals and mentoring at these family-oriented events. If you have a friend, family member, co-worker or neighbor who has a young person interested in hunting, we hope you’ll encourage them to check out FWC’s Youth Hunting Program.

**New Online Alligator Training and Orientation** – The FWC produced a new alligator harvest training and orientation video course. This training opportunity helps statewide alligator harvest participants learn rules and regulations, safety, and more.

Alligators are a conservation success story in Florida. The state’s alligator population - estimated at 1.3 million alligators of every size - has been stable for many years. Since 1988, Florida's statewide alligator harvest has been nationally and internationally recognized as a model program for the sustainable use of a renewable natural resource.

**FYCCN Summer Camps 2020** – FWC’s Florida Youth Conservation Centers Network aims to uphold Florida’s outdoor heritage by educating and empowering youth and educators with outdoor know-how and

conservation concepts. The FYCCN team recently designed a fresh new approach to summer camps and successfully and safely hosted over 300 youth and families at two of our conservation center locations.

Joe Budd Youth Conservation Center in northwest Florida piloted a family-based outdoor conservation experience, while Everglades Youth Conservation Center in south Florida offered limited summer day camp rather than their traditional overnight camp. Staff, families, and children adapted to the changes remarkably well and we've received a lot of positive feedback from parents.

FYCCN's success with summer camps during the pandemic has earned them an invitation to present at the upcoming American Camping Association Virtual Conference. The team is now looking at the fall and continuing to adapt their programming to the changing circumstances. They are exploring ideas like taking conservation education on the road, offering more family experience opportunities, and being open on school holidays. These adaptations allows us to support the most important role of conservation education: getting kids outdoors and creating the next generation of wildlife and outdoor recreation enthusiasts.