



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

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Commission Meeting
April 19 – 20, 2017
Havana, FL
Minutes

*A digital recording of the entire meeting is available upon request. Please contact the Community Relations Office at (850) 488-4676 for additional information.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) held its regular meeting April 19 – 20, 2017, at the Florida Public Safety Institute located at 85 Academy Drive, Havana. Chairman Brian Yablonski called the meeting to order with the following members in attendance:

Ronald Bergeron, Fort Lauderdale
Chuck Roberts, Tallahassee
Bo Rivard, Panama City

Aliese Priddy, Immokalee
Robert Spottswood, Key West
Richard Hanas, Oviedo

Senior and Presenting Staff:

Nick Wiley	Executive Director
Eric Sutton	Assistant Executive Director
Jennifer Fitzwater	Chief of Staff
Emily Norton	Deputy General Counsel
Colonel Curtis Brown	Director, Division of Law Enforcement
Thomas Graef	Director, Southwest Region
Steve Shea	Director, Northwest Region
Shannon Wright	Director, Northeast Region
Chris Wynn	Director, North Central Region
Tom Reinert	Director, South Region
Diane Eggeman	Director, Division of Hunting and Game Management
Tom Champeau	Director, Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management
Jessica McCawley	Director, Division of Marine Fisheries Management
Gil McRae	Director, Fish and Wildlife Research Institute
Dr. Thomas Eason	Director, Division of Habitat and Species Conservation
Jessica Crawford	Director, Office of Legislative Affairs
Melissa Recks	Division of Marine Fisheries Management
Martha Guyas	Division of Marine Fisheries Management
Dan Ellinor	Division of Marine Fisheries Management
Wes Seitz	Division of Hunting and Game Management
Carol Knox	Division of Habitat and Species Conservation

There were 98 individuals registered to speak to the Commission during the two-day meeting.

Meeting Opening

Chairman Yablonski called the April 19 – 20, 2017, meeting to order at 8:34 a.m.

Invocation and Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag

Ms. Erin Rainey, Director of the Division of Licensing and Permitting, gave the invocation, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance led by Commissioner Roberts.

Special Announcement

Chairman Yablonski noted some wildlife success stories since the last meeting that he wanted to mention before beginning the meeting. He highlighted the increase in manatee population based on the most recent count. He also commented that the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) reclassified the manatee. Finally, he noted the recent discovery of multiple female panthers north of the Caloosahatchee River, which is a very positive success story for that species.

Adoption of Minutes

Upon a motion by Commissioner Spottswood, seconded by Vice Chairman Priddy and carried, the February 2017 minutes were approved as written.

Adoption of Meeting Agenda

Upon a motion by Commissioner Rivard, seconded by Commissioner Hanas and carried, the April 2017 Meeting agenda was approved.

Approval of Consent Agenda

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bergeron, seconded by Vice Chairman Priddy and carried, the April 2017 Consent Agenda items were approved.

Staff Reports

Upland Ecosystem Restoration Project (UERP)

Special Guest, Dr. Bill Palmer, President, CEO and Director of Research at Tall Timbers Research Station, presented an update on the Upland Ecosystem Restoration Project.

Chairman Yablonski thanked former Chairman Richard Corbett and his wife for their efforts related to this topic.

Chairman Yablonski then introduced Ms. Kelly Russel, Forest Supervisor with the United States Forest Service, and welcomed her to the meeting.

Next, Mr. Jim Karels, Director and State Forester with the Florida Forest Service (FFS), presented information on the importance of controlled burns on habitat throughout Florida. He also presented an update on the current wildfires occurring throughout the state and the efforts of multiple partner agencies to fight those wildfires.

Vice Chairman Priddy asked for clarification on data related to public compared to private land controlled burns.

Mr. Karels responded that the data he presented does not break down the specific private land numbers and noted that it is on a level plane, but at a higher percentage than public lands which have been increasing over the last several years.

Executive Director Wiley thanked everyone for the presentations on this topic. He noted the specific difference between wildfires and prescribed burns. He thanked Mr. Karels for his leadership on prescribed burning and wildfire suppression throughout the State of Florida.

Chairman Yablonski commented on the potential for future legislative session proposals regarding a budget partnership with FWC and FFS for additional funding for prescribed burning in the State of Florida.

Vice Chairman Priddy noted that a representative from the National Park Service would have benefited from this presentation because of the impact of wildfires on those lands throughout Florida.

Bear Management Update

Dr. Thomas Eason, Director of the Division of Habitat and Species Conservation, presented an update on bear management activities over the past year.

Commissioner Bergeron thanked the Waste Management companies in Florida who are working with FWC to address the issue of human-bear conflicts to improve safety for everyone involved. He noted that around 95% of the human-bear conflicts are addressed by managing waste management issues. He thanked staff for working on this important portion of bear management.

Chairman Yablonski echoed the positive comments for the Bear Management Team at FWC. He noted that the team is always very professional.

Executive Director Wiley commented on the staff perspective of any potential bear hunting in the future. He highlighted that the science is rock solid to support a sustainable bear hunt in some manner. He also noted that FWC has strong support for hunting many species in Florida. The goal is to take an approach to management which will be understood and supported by the general public. There is more work to do on elements of the bear management plan in an effort to improve future support for potential bear hunting as a population management tool.

Commissioner Discussion

Commissioner Roberts asked about increases in the bear population since 2012 and how it projects into future years. He noted that if the population growth follows the projection presented by staff, it could likely reach 8000 bears and FWC needs to think about how to proactively manage the growth of the species. He commented that positive proactive management can be more beneficial than the lack of management.

Dr. Eason responded that the population growth rate tends to slow down when the population reaches levels which are closer to capacity for the habitat. A key example would be the Ocala population with a growth rate on the lower end of 1 to 10% versus the other populations which have higher growth rates. He noted that all of the other factors of mortality play into these populations and it is important to continue discussions with Floridians about how each of these different bear populations have different impacts from those factors.

Vice Chairman Priddy asked about comparison of sustainable coexistence to carrying capacity. She noted that some of the Bear Management Units (BMUs) with low populations are still in the recovery management aspect of the bear management evolution.

Dr. Eason responded that many scientists have tried to identify a carrying capacity for bears, but it is not as simple to do this for bears as compared to other species. Scientifically, there currently is no specific number for carrying capacity for bears. He also noted that yes, those BMUs with lower population estimates have more actions from the bear management plan to improve the population numbers in each specific BMU.

Commissioner Rivard asked about references to public opinion about other states that currently allow hunting as a management tool.

Dr. Eason replied that for most states that allow bear hunting as a tool for management of the species have more support than that of the recent survey results for support in Florida.

Commissioner Bergeron thanked staff for all the hard work on this topic. He asked how much longer the plan has in place until it is scheduled to be completed. He noted that over the timeframe left in the current plan, there is a

lot of outreach and education that can take place. He asked if there are BMUs that would have any trouble supporting the current population of the species based on the food and habitat source.

Dr. Eason responded that FWC is five years into a 10-year plan. He added that there have been a lot of new activities in the last few years, so completing a revision to the plan would be important. He noted that there may be some localized areas in Florida that have trouble supporting bears during some periods of time, but not necessarily that bears would starve to death from lack of food source. Based on the higher densities of bears in many areas, the dynamic of dominant males preying on young cubs, like in Ocala National Forest, may become more prevalent. Also, more bears would continue to get killed by cars and cause other conflicts with people.

Public Comment

The following individuals addressed the Commission on this agenda item:

Mr. Newton Cook, Executive Director of United Waterfowlers of Florida, member of the Board of Directors for the Future of Hunting in Florida, member of the Deer Management Technical Advisory Group and the Waterfowl Technical Advisory Group, addressed the Commission. He thanked hunting and game management staff member, Wes Seitz, on coordination in opening additional lands for waterfowl hunting in the South Region of Florida. He commented that the number of people who oppose a bear hunt will not change based on any outreach by FWC. He mentioned the Senate Bill currently in committee suggesting a ban on bear hunting for ten years includes a ban on controlled burning.

Mr. Byron Maharrey addressed the Commission noting that additional data has been received since the 2015 hunt. He suggested that the Commission continue to look at the science behind the decision to move forward with a hunt or not. He suggested that political pressure should not drive this decision.

Mr. James Mew addressed the Commission with thanks to staff regarding opening more opportunities for small game which will be presented as the next agenda item. He then commented that it is almost impossible to educate the public who are opposed to hunting in general on the positive benefits of a managed harvest of a species for the benefit of that species.

Mr. Mike Elfenbein with the Everglades Coordinating Council (ECC) addressed the Commission. He also spoke on behalf of a friend who could not be in attendance at the meeting. The comments from this other individual voiced concern over the funding from the 2015 bear hunt permits not going to habitat management but towards waste management issues. Mr. Elfenbein then commented on his personal opinion that hunting in the State of Florida is not driven by whether or not the food of the species can sustain the population.

Mr. John Rosier, President of ECC, Fulltrack Conservation Club, Broward Airboat Club and member of the South BMU, addressed the Commission in support of science based management plans. He commented that the population size in the South Region could reach the habitat capacity sooner than the others.

Mr. Matt Spencer addressed the Commission noting that the science is strong in support of a managed bear hunt for population management.

Mr. Steven Meyers with Speak Up Wekiva addressed the Commission in opposition of a hunt. He commented on recent studies of mammals regarding emotions which register at a specific point of the brain.

Mr. Bill George addressed the Commission with a request for the Commission to approve a conservative quota since the bear hunt is currently in the rules. He asked the Commission to direct staff to find the right methodology for conducting a hunt in a manageable way.

Mr. Karl Ambrose addressed the Commission in support of the comments from Executive Director Wiley. He also thanked bear management staff for the efforts to coordinate with all stakeholders on this issue. He

commented on the state forests which are in poor shape. He commented that he does not believe the current scientific numbers presented by staff.

Ms. Linda Duever addressed the Commission with concerns that FWC does not have enough science behind management of the habitat and production of the main food sources for bears in Florida. She suggested taking things very slow and gathering additional information on habitat and food production before moving forward with a hunt. She suggested that more naturalists need to get out into the habitat and see firsthand what the species deals with in the specific habitat of Florida.

Mr. Luke Mosley, member of the North Central Florida Doghunter's Association, addressed the Commission.

Ms. Megan Sorbo addressed the Commission in opposition to a bear hunt in 2017.

Mr. Steve Gafford addressed the Commission in opposition to a bear hunt. He noted that species like the bear, panther, and manatee are more like mascots for the State of Florida and added that he may not ever think it would be appropriate to approve a hunt for this species. He thanked the Commission for the actions related to non-lethal means in managing this species in Florida.

Mr. Chuck O'Neal addressed the Commission with thanks to staff in working with stakeholders over the past year. He stated that he believes hunting is necessary and that hunting provides funding for the wonderful habitat that is preserved throughout Florida. He echoed the summation by Executive Director Wiley that science is not the only factor in the decision to approve a hunt for this species.

Ms. Shannon Geis with Bear Warriors United addressed the Commission in opposition to any bear hunt. She requested a three to five-year study on bear population trends because she doubts the data presented in relation to the increase in population estimates.

Ms. Katrina Shadix with Bear Warriors United, Speak Up Wekiva, and the Foundation for Florida Environmental Protection addressed the Commission. She thanked Dr. Eason for the presentation and provided an update on the ongoing education and outreach activities by the groups she is associated with. She requested that poaching numbers be included in the population estimates and has records of recent illegal take of this species.

Mr. Rusty McKeithen with Florida Dog Hunters and Sportsmen Association addressed the Commission. His comments appeared to support a bear hunt, noting he has witnessed increased encounters with problematic bears over the last several years and the support of the data to back up a hunt.

Mr. Allan Tucker addressed the Commission with praise to bear management staff. He requested the Commission approve a bear hunt and allow staff to analyze the populations throughout the different BMUs to determine the appropriate harvest objectives.

Mr. Dana Stetson addressed the Commission in opposition of bear hunting.

Ms. Alexandra McCormick addressed the Commission in opposition to the bear hunt.

Ms. Stephanie Contrada addressed the Commission in opposition of a bear hunt. She recommended the Commission create a save the bear permit to collect funds for this program.

Mr. Jim Casselman, President of United Hunters of Florida, addressed the Commission. He thanked Dr. Eason for the presentation and the bear management staff for their efforts. His comments appeared to be in support of a bear hunt noting increased bear populations. He added that science should be the basis for decisions of whether or not to move forward with a hunt.

Mr. John Fuller, Executive Director with the Future of Hunting in Florida, addressed the Commission. He noted unanimous support from his Board for moving forward with a hunt in 2017.

Ms. Tara Lester addressed the Commission in opposition to any bear hunt.
Dr. Briar Mitchell addressed the Commission in opposition to a bear hunt.

Ms. Kayla Leaming addressed the Commission in opposition to a bear hunt. She suggested the educational aspects of bear management be more of a priority.

Ms. Rilee Leaming addressed the Commission in opposition to a bear hunt.

Mr. Landon Leaming addressed the Commission in opposition to a bear hunt. He noted that he has not had any educational outreach at his school and suggested that now is the time for that education.

Mr. Mike Leaming addressed the Commission. He suggested that more wildlife education efforts be made in the schools in Florida. He also noted that new developments should require bear proof trash cans and other measures to replace any food sources that are taken away.

Mr. Tony Gurdak addressed the Commission with thanks to staff for the information presented on this topic. He commented on the Pittman Robertson Act and the funding that contributes to habitat and wildlife management. He noted that if the Commission does not move forward with a hunt that the bear population will get out of control.

Mr. Darrell Lowery with Florida Bowhunters Council addressed the Commission. He suggested that to finance the non-lethal programs for bear management there has to be a funding mechanism in place. He added that providing an opportunity for hunters to harvest a bear provides that funding mechanism.

Ms. Leslie Carlile addressed the Commission in opposition to the bear hunt.

Ms. Camille Caldwell addressed the Commission with concern that the presentation by staff did not include projections of future bear populations.

Ms. Jan Lucas addressed the Commission in opposition to a hunt.

Mr. Rock Meeks addressed the Commission with concern about the predicted population estimates in the Big Bend BMU. He added support for a bear hunt in the State of Florida based on the science which supports that.

Mr. Chet Grimsley addressed the Commission with concerns of public safety on his property in Wakulla County because of the instances in seeing bears at times of the day when he typically does not see them. He added that the science provided by staff is all that is needed to move forward with a hunt.

Ms. Sandy Tedder addressed the Commission with thanks for the efforts on the education and waste management aspects of bear management. She spoke in opposition to a bear hunt.

Mr. Lex Thompson addressed the Commission in support of a bear hunt in the locations that have higher populations of bears. He suggested a quota system with a draw for permits on a limited basis and increases as needed if the populations need an increased harvest.

Ms. Rebecca Heintz addressed the Commission with thanks for not having a hunt in 2016 and the educational aspects of the bear management program.

Mr. Lee Day addressed the Commission regarding problems with nuisance bears and the fact that hunting does not address the nuisance issue. He noted that the public should boycott the Conserve Wildlife Tag and commented that he is planning a campaign against public support of that funding tool.

Ms. Jennifer Leon addressed the Commission with thanks for staff regarding the educational outreach and waste management aspects of bear management. She requested the Commission place more attention on the illegal harvest of this species.

Ms. Catalina Uruena addressed the Commission.

Ms. Viv Sharton addressed the Commission in opposition to a bear hunt.

Mr. Howard Knepper addressed the Commission in opposition to a bear hunt and asked the Commission to take in all the facts before making a decision.

Mr. Darryl Rutz, representing the Sierra Club, addressed the Commission. He commented in opposition to a bear hunt citing building development as a main problem causing more human-bear conflict. He requested the Commission spend more time on strategic planning and teaching the public how to live with bears.

Ms. Maritza Miranda addressed the Commission in opposition to a bear hunt. She had a letter to give to the Commission from the residents of Dade County who are also opposed to a bear hunt.

Ms. Elizabeth Fleming with Defenders of Wildlife addressed the Commission in opposition to a bear hunt.

Mr. Chuck Echinique addressed the Commission to voice his displeasure on feeling as though the bear hunt has become political and the Commission has done things they assured they would not do. He feels more efforts and money need to be spent on public education, not trash cans.

Mr. Todd Hallman with Florida Sportsman's Conservation Association addressed the Commission and commended Dr. Eason's presentation. He added support for a bear hunt based on the increase in bear populations and the scientific facts presented.

Ms. Maria Kazouris addressed the Commission.

Mr. Phil Walters with Tampa Bay Chapter Safari Club International addressed the Commission. He asked that the Commission staff review some of the editorials in print and provide corrections to any incorrect statements related to fish and wildlife statistics.

Ms. Carla Wilson addressed the Commission with thanks for the work over the last year in regards to bear management.

Mr. Bryan Wilson addressed the Commission in opposition of a bear hunt.

Ms. Sally Sanders addressed the Commission in opposition of a bear hunt.

Mr. Scott Williamson addressed the Commission in opposition of a bear hunt.

Ms. Laura Bevan with Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) addressed the Commission with thanks to staff for all of the efforts related to waste management and educational outreach. She requested the details on the study showing the public outlook on a bear hunt.

Mr. Whitey Markle, Chairman of the Suwannee/St. John Sierra Club, addressed the Commission. He added opposition to a bear hunt and feels that FWC needs to spend more money on educating the public on how to live with bears.

Mr. Mark Klutho addressed the Commission in opposition to a hunt.

Mr. Sean McCann with the South Florida Chapter of the Safari Club addressed the Commission. He noted that those who opposed the hunt in the past asked for the science and now they are opposed to the science that presented by staff.

Mr. Lane Stephens addressed the Commission in support of a bear hunt stating that the decision should be based on scientific facts.

Commission Discussion

Chairman Yablonski noted that bears in Florida are doing well and that FWC has a robust and comprehensive management plan that is continually evolving. He added that the 2015 hunt had a positive impact on nuisance bears but that nuisance bears have not been the focus of the management plan over the course of the past year. He noted that the Commission needed to discuss whether or not to have a hunt.

Commissioner Priddy made a motion that staff bring forward a recommendation for harvest objectives at the next Commission meeting.

Commissioner Roberts seconded that motion. He noted that FWC is the best professional organization in the State of Florida. Staff provide the science and details behind the hard decisions that the Commission is required to make. He added that the data has supported a bear hunt for the past few years and while there were no harvest objectives set for 2016 that the data supported a hunt. He requested that staff present the best recommendation based on science and if the harvest objectives come back as zero that the Commission would agree with staff.

Commissioner Bergeron thanked staff for all of the science provided on this topic. He believes in the culture of hunting and has personally experienced great memories hunting. He added that this is the most difficult decision that has been before the Commission in the ten years that he has served as a Commissioner. His concern relates to this iconic species and whether or not any of the BMUs have reached their respective carrying capacities. He stated he did not want any bear hunts until the current management plan is completed. He committed to working more with the waste management providers in the State of Florida to continue the progress that has been made over the last few years.

Commissioner Rivard thanked all the speakers on this topic. He added that this Commission has a positive and supportive relationship with the hunting community. He noted that the decisions made by the Commission today do not happen in a vacuum and that they may have potential ramifications if the Commission is not thoughtful when making these kinds of decisions. He applauded staff for presenting the science behind the population of this species. He noted that he could not support the motion to approve a hunt for 2017.

Commissioner Roberts clarified that the motion included the option for harvest objectives to be set at zero.

Vice Chairman Priddy stated that this presentation was an update by staff and there was no staff recommendation for this agenda item. She noted that the Commission delayed the hunt in 2016 based on the request to have additional data from staff. She noted concern that now that there is updated scientific data related to the populations of bears in each of Florida's BMUs that the Commission is hesitant to move forward with a hunt. She asked if the Commission will pick and choose when to use science or when to use human dimension statistics for basing decisions. She noted that FWC historically managed hunting quotas in a way that the species can sustain the population.

Commissioner Spottswood noted that the bear management team has done everything that the Commission has requested based on bringing the data and science forward for a decision. He commented that the decision today may have implications on hunting in future years. He noted he cannot support the motion for a hunt in 2017.

Commissioner Hanas commented that this is a very difficult decision. He commented that he does not want to see the heritage of hunting hurt by any decision made by the Commission. He added that gathering more information

or continuing the educational aspect is not going to make this decision any easier. He believes in the staff and Executive Director based on the high regard he has seen. He added support for the motion.

Chairman Yablonski noted his approach to this topic is thinking through the benefit to the agency for timing of approving a hunt. He provided data behind what the agency has done over the past ten years to improve hunting opportunities. He noted that Commissioners are policy makers and they utilize data related to the topics before them to make a decision. He asked if today's decision will bring any benefit to the nature of hunting and improve the conservation portion of hunting.

Commissioner Roberts asked staff to aggressively pursue the educational aspect of bear management. There will be a time for a future Commission to address this challenging issue.

Vice Chairman Priddy asked Dr. Eason to clarify some details related to the bear management plan. She asked if there was any benefit to revisiting the plan earlier rather than waiting for the full ten-year period to end.

Dr. Eason responded that it would be beneficial to update the plan because of the new details surrounding bear management in Florida. He recommended that this could take anywhere between two and five years.

Chairman Yablonski called the question on the motion made by Vice Chairman Priddy. Chairman Yablonski, Commissioner Spottswood, Commissioner Rivard, and Commissioner Bergeron opposed the motion and it did not pass.

Commissioner Rivard made a motion for staff to work on revisions to the bear management plan over the next three years to update it with everything that has changed in Florida and continue implementation through the end of the ten-year plan process.

Commissioner Spottswood seconded the motion.

Vice Chairman Priddy suggested that if the two-year time frame is amenable by staff for the updates to the plan, then over the following year there can be additional discussions at Commission meetings related to hunting as a management tool and in total that process could be the three-year timeframe that Commissioner Rivard noted in his motion.

Commissioner Rivard amended his motion to request staff complete the revisions and updates to the plan over the next two years and then bring the item back for discussion to the Commission at that time.

Commissioner Spottswood asked if the updates to the plan would incorporate the new data and the new ideas related to education, outreach, and waste management.

Executive Director Wiley noted that part of the planning process is coordinating with the bear management unit stakeholder groups for feedback on their specific areas. This feedback could provide more detail on potential hunting opportunities on a unit by unit basis.

Vice Chairman Priddy asked for additional information on the poaching issues from Law Enforcement.

Commissioner Bergeron asked if the two-year time period was enough time for staff to complete all of the processes.

Executive Director Wiley stated that the two-year timeframe would be adequate for staff to revise the plan, but not necessarily to come back to the Commission with a proposal for a bear hunt. A hunt would not be addressed until after the plan is brought back to the Commission.

Item Requiring Action

Draft Rule – Proposed Rule Changes for Expanded Small Game Opportunities 2017 – 2018.

Mr. Wes Seitz with the Division of Hunting and Game Management presented details on proposed rule changes for expanded small game opportunities in 2017 – 2018.

Chairman Yablonski asked about how quickly the details can be distributed to the public and if they would be included in the 2017-2018 hunt regulation publications.

Ms. Diane Eggeman, Director of the Division of Hunting and Game Management, responded that FWC would make every effort to get the word out and that FWC had been very successful in messaging to the hunting community about similar rule changes that fall outside the agency's normal publication schedule.

Commissioner Hanas asked if there were any concerns about farm raised birds having a negative impact on any wild northern bobwhite quail.

Mr. Seitz responded that those concerns were taken into consideration when developing these proposed rules. The requirement to purchase farm raised birds from licensed game farms as well as selecting areas which have low to non-existent wild northern bobwhite populations mitigates potential negative impact to wild birds.

Public Comment

The following individuals addressed the Commission on this agenda item:

Mr. James Mew addressed the Commission with thanks for this proposal and in support of staff recommendation.

Mr. John Rosier addressed the Commission in support of staff recommendation.

Mr. Bill George addressed the Commission in support of expanding opportunity. He requested Tenoroc be discussed for future expansion of opportunity for small game harvest.

Mr. Chuck Echenique addressed the Commission in support of staff proposal with the caveat regarding pen raised birds as long as they are tagged. He requested that the Commission direct staff to work with stakeholders on this request.

Ms. Eggeman responded that she would work with Mr. Echinique on his request to see if it is something that can be implemented in this proposed rule.

Mr. Todd Hallman addressed the Commission in support of staff recommendation. He added concern about removing public comment on items not on the agenda from both days. He suggested that if someone signs up for open public comment on day one then they would not be allowed to sign up for that topic on the second day.

Mr. Stephen Williamson with United Waterfowlers of Florida addressed the Commission in support of staff recommendation. He also commented on issues related to Lake Miccosukee and illegal activity in that area.

Ms. Karen Johnson addressed the Commission regarding poaching of wildlife and the need for ethics classes of those who are caught and convicted of poaching.

Commission Action

Upon a motion by Commissioner Roberts, seconded by Commissioner Rivard and carried, the Commission approved staff recommendation.

Staff Report

Legislative and Budget Update

Chairman Yablonski commented that because of current meetings at the Capitol, FWC's Legislative Affairs Director was unable to be there at that time, so this item was deferred.

Commissioner Exchange

Commissioner Bergeron noted the recent trips with the Irula tribe by both himself and Vice Chairman Priddy.

Commissioner Hanas thanked everyone for their candidness in today's discussion. He noted that he recently attended a Law Enforcement graduation and it was impressive.

Chairman Yablonski noted that he and Commissioner Hanas recently attended an event hosted by Coastal Conservation Association (CCA).

Commissioner Spottswood commented that he joined Law Enforcement officers in the Keys to honor some of the retiring officers. He added that there is a great team in the Keys, especially after watching the young officers interact with the more experienced officers.

Commissioner Roberts thanked staff for providing the information which guides the decisions of the Commission.

Chairman Yablonski thanked his fellow Commissioners for being involved and dedicated to conservation and for bringing their "A" game today.

Recess Wednesday's Portion of the Meeting

Chairman Yablonski recessed the meeting at 5:05 p.m. to reconvene at 8:30 a.m., Thursday, April 20, 2017.

Thursday, April 20 Reconvene

Chairman Yablonski reconvened the meeting at 8:35 a.m.

Award and Recognition

Colonel Curtis Brown, Director of the Division of Law Enforcement, along with representatives from the Shikar Safari International Club, presented Officer Jason Hutchinson with the Officer of the Year Award.

Chairman Yablonski highlighted some of Officer Hutchinson's experiences and accomplishments over the past several years since he joined the agency. He noted that Officer Hutchinson was the recipient of the Governor's Medal of Heroism at the April 2017 Cabinet meeting.

Commissioner Bergeron thanked Officer Hutchinson and all of the Law Enforcement officers for their dedication in such a dangerous field.

Fish and Wildlife Foundation of Florida Update

Mr. Andy Walker, CEO of the Fish and Wildlife Foundation of Florida (Foundation), provided an update on Foundation related activities.

Chairman Yablonski noted that Chairman Emeritus Richard Corbett is now the Chairman of the Foundation. He asked Executive Director Wiley to provide additional details on the multiple license plates that provide grant funding to the agency through the Foundation.

Executive Director Wiley commented that there were changes in the process that allows the Foundation Board to review grant applications and filter through to select appropriate projects which receive grant funds. He also provided additional information on the Nature of Americans project.

Mr. Walker noted that one of the next goals for the Foundation is to improve the marketing of the license plates to increase the potential funding opportunities of these grants.

Commissioner Bergeron thanked Mr. Walker and the Foundation Board members with a special thanks to Chairman Emeritus Corbett.

Chairman Yablonski commented that the good news is that there is an opportunity to discuss the Florida Youth Conservation Centers Network at the July Commission meeting and he invited Mr. Walker along with Chairman Emeritus Corbett to attend that meeting for this discussion.

Items Requiring Action

Draft Rule – Gulf Gag Grouper

Ms. Martha Guyas with the Division of Marine Fisheries presented details on a draft rule to modify the recreational season for gag grouper harvest in state waters off Franklin, Wakulla, Jefferson, and Taylor counties. The draft rule would expand the current April 1 through June 30 gag grouper season off these counties to include September 1 through December 31.

Commission Discussion

Vice Chairman Priddy asked if all of the gulf counties could have the same season in the near future.

Ms. Guyas responded that while it is possible to have a single Gulf-wide season, decisions about future Gulf gag grouper seasons would be better informed by the next stock assessment.

Chairman Yablonski commented that adding four months to the season for these four counties would create parity with the rest of the Gulf counties.

Public Comment

The following individuals addressed the Commission on this agenda item:

Mr. Otto B. Hough addressed the Commission with thanks to staff for the proposal.

Mr. Trip Aukeman with CCA Florida addressed the Commission in support of staff recommendation.

Mr. Billy Archer with the Charter Fisherman's Association (CFA) addressed the Commission in support of staff recommendation.

Commission Action

Upon a motion by Commissioner Roberts, seconded by Commissioner Spottswood and carried, the Commission approved staff recommendation.

Commissioner Roberts noted interest in considering a uniform Gulf gag grouper season that begins before June after the next stock assessment.

Final Rule – Gulf Red Snapper and Gray Triggerfish

Ms. Guyas presented details on a final rule to set the recreational Gulf red snapper state season and discussed options for a limited fall Gulf gray triggerfish state season. The proposed Gulf state waters red snapper season would be open Saturdays and Sundays starting the first Saturday in May, then open continuously starting the Saturday before Memorial Day through the Sunday following Independence Day, and open again for Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays in September and October, plus Labor Day. If October 31 falls on a Saturday, the last day of harvest would be Sunday, November 1. She also provided a review on Gulf Council discussions on red snapper and gray triggerfish.

Public Comment

The following individuals addressed the Commission on this agenda item:

Ms. Pam Anderson with Captain Anderson's Marina and the fishery representative on the Bay County Chamber of Commerce addressed the Commission to refute the overfishing status of Gulf gray triggerfish and red snapper. She informed the Commission about her request to NOAA Fisheries for data on Gulf red snapper biomass that has gone unanswered. She requested the Commission support H.R. 1382.

Mr. Chris Phillips addressed the Commission to thank Commissioners and staff and to support staff recommendation for the red snapper season.

Mr. James Zurbrick with Fish for America USA addressed the Commission in support of the proposed state red snapper season as an interim step. He recommended the Commission pursue regional management for the private recreational fishery through the Gulf Council.

Mr. Garrett Alberts addressed the Commission echoing Mr. Zurbrick's statement. He opposed a recreational fall season for gray triggerfish because the species is under a rebuilding plan.

Mr. Ritchie Landry addressed the Commission in support of the comments from the two previous speakers on regional management of red snapper. He requested additional law enforcement presence during the state red snapper season.

Mr. Kenneth Haddad with American Sportfishing Association (ASA) addressed the Commission in support of staff recommendations for both red snapper and gray triggerfish. He gave an overview of the Gulf Angler Focus Group report, highlighting potential options considered to improve the private recreational red snapper fishery, and requested that the Commissioners read the report.

Executive Director Wiley and Chairman Yablonski requested staff provide Commissioners copies of the Gulf Angler Focus Group report.

Mr. Trip Aukeman with CCA Florida addressed the Commission in support of staff recommendation. He also expressed support for the Commission's consideration of decompression devices.

Mr. Billy Archer, speaking on behalf of charter and commercial operators, addressed the Commission and requested that they review the Louisiana proposal for management of its recreational red snapper fishery in federal waters. He requested the state keep Gulf gray triggerfish closed in 2017. Noting a decline in the Gulf cobia fishery, he requested a ban on commercial harvest and sale of cobia in state waters and asked to take part in any discussions on cobia regulations. He also requested time on a future agenda to review Congressional bills to reauthorize the Magnuson-Stevens Act and allow public comment.

Commissioner Rivard asked if the perceived decline in cobia is Gulf-wide or only in particular areas off of Florida's coast.

Mr. Archer responded that these observations are Gulf-wide.

Mr. Andy McAlexander addressed the Commission in support of staff recommendation for the state red snapper season.

Mr. James Richard addressed the Commission in support of staff recommendation for the red snapper season.

Commission Discussion

Commissioner Roberts asked about Ms. Anderson's request to NOAA Fisheries.

Executive Director Wiley noted that the Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) staff was working with her to obtain this information. With Commissioner Roberts support, he requested staff prepare a letter for his signature to request this information be provided to Ms. Anderson.

Chairman Yablonski initiated a discussion on the motion at the Gulf Council meeting for Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama to manage red snapper in federal waters off their states.

Ms. Guyas explained that at this time it is just a concept and the details are unclear.

Executive Director Wiley noted his support for Ms. Guyas' decision to vote against these motions at the Council. He and Chairman Yablonski affirmed the Commission's position is to work with other states to develop a regional management model that works for Florida.

Commissioner Roberts noted concerns about the regional management allocations for red snapper and individual states acting independently.

Commissioner Bergeron asked about the cost versus benefit to the state for any future regional management of red snapper.

Executive Director Wiley commented that the cost of regional management would depend on the model. He stated that the costs would not be significant if federal funds continued to support the collaborative federal-state stock assessment system which FWC supports and would like to see improved.

Commissioner Spottswood asked if there is concern that red snapper management in federal waters could be a mix of federal and state management.

Executive Director Wiley responded that it is a major concern and FWC will continue to advocate for the states to work together and expressed that it would be inappropriate for a single state or group of states to act independently.

Chairman Yablonski asked for and Ms. McCawley provided information on the Congressional bills relating to Gulf red snapper.

Commissioner Spottswood asked for an update on federal funding for independent Gulf red snapper surveys.

Ms. McCawley and Mr. Gil McRae, Director of FWRI, noted that FWC is seeking funding for projects through this federal appropriation. Mr. McRae also highlighted FWRI's ongoing efforts to collect independent information on reef fish to improve stock assessments.

Commissioner Rivard suggested the new federal administration presents an opportunity to modify the federal fishery management framework to address Florida's concerns. He stated the Commission should take advantage of this opportunity and make it a priority.

Chairman Yablonski concurred that the new administration presents a good opportunity for change.

Commission Action

Upon a motion by Commissioner Roberts, seconded by Commissioner Spottswood and carried, the Commission approved staff recommendation.

Special Recognition

Chairman Yablonski recognized Mr. John Paul Fraites, Analyst with the Governor's Office of Policy and Budget, who was in attendance.

Final Rule – Collier County Manatee Protection Rule

Ms. Carol Knox with the Division of Habitat and Species Conservation presented a proposed final rule for Collier County Manatee Protection.

Public Comment

The following individuals addressed the Commission on this agenda item:

Mr. Chris Bryant representing Seagate Property Owners Association addressed the Commission in support of staff recommendation. He commented that the data supports staff recommendation and requested the Commission listen to that when making the decision on this proposed final rule.

Ms. Anne Harvey Holbrook with Save the Manatee Club addressed the Commission. She noted specific recommendations for Collier County and some general recommendations for the Local Rule Review Committee (LRRC) process for improvement. She noted that currently LRRC groups do not take boat tours on the waterways to review the areas under consideration. She asked the commission to consider implementing some zones as warm season only zones which are used in other counties, but not in Collier County.

Mr. Bill Moss, City Manager for Naples, addressed the Commission. He noted the history of the local ordinances which originally protected manatees in this area. He requested that the Commission implement a slow speed zone in the Doctors Pass /Moorings Bay area, which had support from the majority the LRRC. He thanked FWC staff for review of the Collier County Manatee Protection Plan.

Vice Chairman Priddy asked if the City of Naples has a position on the Clam Bay issue.

Mr. Moss responded that the City of Naples does not have an official position on the issue.

Mr. Trip Aukeman addressed the Commission in support of staff recommendation.

Mr. John Chandler addressed the Commission with a request for a slow speed zone in the lower portion of Clam Bay. This would provide a compromise for what the LRRC suggested and what FWC staff presented.

Ms. Mary Johnson addressed the Commission in support of adding a manatee protection zone in Clam Bay. She commented that the local ordinances regulating the zone at slow speed were initially for manatee protection, not boating safety.

Ms. Linda Roth addressed the Commission regarding the importance of the LRRC recommendations in regards to this process. She commented that there is overall support from many of the stakeholders who attended all of the meetings associated with this process.

Ms. Susan O'Brien addressed the Commission requesting that Outer Clam Bay be designated a slow speed zone for manatee protection. She noted action from the April 5, 2017, meeting of the Pelican Bay Services Division Board of Collier County who are responsible for maintenance of Clam Bay and advising on maintenance of Clam Pass. The Board unanimously supports the addition of a slow speed zone in Outer Clam Bay. She added that law enforcement at the County level could be utilized to enforce any new zones added. She requested that the Commission add zones in Clam Bay.

Ms. Annice Gregerson addressed the Commission in support of adding a manatee protection zone in Clam Bay. She noted concern for manatee safety in Clam Bay if no zone is added in this area.

Mr. Tim Hall addressed the Commission regarding his role in monitoring Clam Bay annually since 1998. He noted personal observations of manatees in the system and commented that the waterways do put manatees at risk.

Vice Chairman Priddy asked Mr. Hall about episodic closings of the pass. She also noted that there is a ten-year permit for dredging and asked who determines when that dredging takes place. She asked if there was a depth measurement at low tide near the opening of the channel.

Mr. Hall responded that the Pass has only closed once since the 1998 permit was issued. The Pass had a full closure in 2012. He commented that there are a number of metrics that go into an analysis to determine when the pass should be dredged. He commented that there are two places that could be restricting at low tide with depths of less than three feet.

Mr. Peter Duggan, President of the Mangrove Action Group, addressed the Commission.

Mr. Robert Diffenderfer with Pelican Bay Foundation addressed the Commission with a request to add a slow speed zone in Clam Bay.

Ms. Bonnie Basham, with Boat US and also representing the National Marine Manufacturers Association and the Marine Industries Association, addressed the Commission. She commented that her perspective from listening to the other speakers is that stakeholders want resource protection and boating safety zones, not manatee zones. She added support of staff recommendation. She referenced protections that were put in place last year related to Critical Wildlife Areas where the wildlife and resources needed protection, and some instances when the protection was not necessary.

Ms. Elizabeth Fleming with Defenders of Wildlife addressed the Commission in support of staff recommendation.

Commission Discussion

Chairman Yablonski thanked all the stakeholders for being engaged on this issue.

Commissioner Roberts asked for an explanation of the difference between the 25 mile per hour zones and 30 mile per hour zones. He asked if the goal was to be consistent with reducing the multiple options.

Ms. Knox responded that this rule is an older rule and over time various speeds have been used for marked channels. This rule used an earlier zone configuration of 30 MPH in marked channels and 20 MPH outside. However more recently staff have used 25 MPH in the channel because most boats used in Florida can get on plane at that speed. This older rule also includes more idle speed areas; in more recent years, slow speed zones are used more often to allow for a better balance between manatee protection and waterway users.

Commissioner Rivard thanked the stakeholders who traveled to speak on this item. He asked for Ms. Knox to provide a brief history on her work with this topic.

Ms. Knox responded that she has worked with manatees since 1991. She noted her work at all levels of the manatee program within FWC and the progress made towards manatee recovery during that time.

Commissioner Spottswood thanked Ms. Knox for her work on this. He noted that there may be some confusion about the density of manatees in Clam Bay compared to some of the other areas which are being recommended.

Ms. Knox walked through several data points and comparisons of two other areas and showed an overall perspective for manatee use throughout Collier County.

Chairman Yablonski noted the LRRC is a great process for local residents to present recommendations to FWC staff. He noted that LRRCs provide recommendations but staff have to evaluate those in light of the data available and the authorities and guidance given statutes. For example, the LRRC in Sarasota County presented 20 recommendations and FWC staff disagreed with six. He added examples of other county LRRC recommendations showing the level of staff concurrence with LRRC majority recommendations.

Commissioner Bergeron commented that what Ms. Basham noted about manatee zones being required when the data shows it is necessary is the important factor. He added support of staff recommendation.

Vice Chairman Priddy noted her specific interest in this because of her residence in Collier County. She reviewed everything and spoke with General Counsel to make sure the commission was meeting the requirements of the statutes.

Ms. Emily Norton, Deputy General Counsel, provided the exact information from Florida Statutes which guides FWC staff on this process.

Vice Chairman Priddy asked what the current speed zones are in Moorings Bay and Wiggins Pass.

Ms. Knox noted there is a slow zone in Wiggins Pass now and Moorings Bay is currently unregulated but the proposed rule adds a slow zone.

Vice Chairman Priddy asked about a specific comment that a stakeholder made regarding extraordinary law enforcement. She asked for clarification on this type of law enforcement and whether it could address any of the issues for this area.

Colonel Brown responded that he was not familiar with the term extraordinary law enforcement, but currently there are no zones to enforce in Clam Bay. He then added that there have been no boating accidents in that area since 2012 with only three citations written. Two of the citations for boating safety equipment and one was for a boating safety identification card.

Commissioner Bergeron asked if the area would be open to any sort of boating safety zones.

Colonel Brown noted that his discussions with law enforcement staff indicate that it is a shallow area so fewer fast moving boats utilize this area. Most of the use is from non-motorized vessels. Law enforcement can dedicate staff to monitor the inlet more often.

Chairman Yablonski noted concerns about setting a precedent. He stated that if adjustments were made in this case, there may be other areas that would request to add manatee zones. He also noted that the issues with this particular area seem to be more of a boating safety issue and not a manatee issue so it is not appropriate to use the manatee authority for that purpose.

Commission Action

Upon a motion by Commissioner Rivard, seconded by Commissioner Hanas and carried, the Commission approved staff recommendation.

Bald Eagle Status Update and Rule Revision

Dr. Brad Gruver with the Division of Habitat and Species Conservation presented an update on the biological status of eagles in Florida and recent revisions to the federal Bald and Golden Eagle Act. Staff also presented a recommendation of revisions to the state bald eagle rule, 68A-16.002.

Commission Discussion

Commissioner Spottswood asked if there is still coordination with the federal government if the state rules are changed. He asked if it would be sufficient if it is limited.

Dr. Gruver responded that the interaction between the federal and state agencies would be reduced but would still take place.

Public Comment

The following individual addressed the Commission on this agenda item:

Ms. Julie Wraithmell, Deputy Executive Director with Audubon Florida, addressed the Commission. She noted concern that the federal system has not been fully implemented and she questioned whether or not this federal management would view management of the species for the benefit of the species specifically in Florida. She also noted that she would hope that the funding for aerial surveys and law enforcement is in place in regards to changing the protection and rules at the state level.

Commission Discussion

Chairman Yablonski asked Dr. Gruver if he would like to address any of the concerns raised by Ms. Wraithmell.

Dr. Gruver noted that many of the concerns raised will be handled through the Species Action Plan when it is developed with stakeholder and partner coordination.

Commission Action

Upon a motion by Commissioner Hanas, seconded by Vice Chairman Priddy and carried, the Commission approved staff recommendation.

Legislative and Budget Update

Ms. Jessica Crawford, Legislative Affairs Director, along with Ms. Charlotte Jerrett, Chief Financial Officer, provided an update on Legislative and Budget Issues currently ongoing this Session.

Commission Discussion

Commissioner Bergeron asked what the proposed officer pay raise was.

Chairman Yablonski responded and Ms. Jerrett confirmed that the proposal was 5%.

Public Comment

The following individual addressed the Commission on this agenda item:

Mr. Bill George addressed the Commission regarding fees for alligator eggs collected on state lands.

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) Report

Ms. McCawley presented a report on actions and discussions from the SAFMC's March 6-10, 2017, meeting in Jekyll Island, GA. She also showed two videos highlighting descending devices and presented a proposal for an FWC citizen science project and outreach on these devices in Florida.

Public Comment

The following individuals addressed the Commission on this agenda item:

Mr. Kenneth Haddad with the ASA addressed the Commission regarding Atlantic red snapper management options, noting support for most of the SAFMC's options and opposition to bottom-fishing closures. He stated opposition to limited entry for charter-for-hire permits, which he said is tied to sector separation.

Mr. Trip Aukeman with CCA Florida addressed the Commission echoing the comments of Mr. Haddad. He thanked the Commission for their letter opposing the pelagic longline Exempted Fishing Permit application.

Commission Discussion

Commissioner Spottswood asked about the possible bottom-fishing closures and the timeline for potential implementation. He asked if the Commission has taken any position on this topic.

Ms. McCawley noted that decisions on red snapper management might be finalized at the SAFMC's December 2017 meeting, and if a closure was approved it would not go into place until early 2018. She responded that the Commission has not taken a formal position on the bottom-fishing closure because the specifics were not available until the March 2017 meeting. She noted that she went on record stating that the proposal would not likely work for Florida.

Executive Director Wiley noted Ms. McCawley has been monitoring this and voicing opposition to closures. He asked Ms. McCawley to inform the Commission if it appears the SAFMC may approve a closure so that the Commission and stakeholders can be engaged to respond.

The Commission stated their opposition to any bottom-fishing closure in the Atlantic. Chairman Yablonski, with the consent of the other Commissioners, asked staff to consult with himself and the Executive Director on closures if needed in between meetings.

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (GMFMC) Report

Ms. Martha Guyas with the Division of Marine Fisheries Management presented a report on actions from the GMFMC's April 3-6, 2017 meeting. She requested direction on consistency with a recent federal waters closure for recreational harvest of Gulf greater amberjack for the remainder of 2017.

Public Comment

The following individuals addressed the Commission on this agenda item:

Ms. Pam Anderson addressed the Commission detailing of how unanticipated federal closures, especially the 2017 amberjack closure, have a negative economic impact on charter businesses and marinas. She cautioned that such closures are a means to force the charter industry into catch shares. She expressed concern about proposed closed areas and electronic monitoring of charter vessels.

Chairman Yablonski asked Ms. Anderson for her view on closing recreational harvest of amberjack in state waters.

Ms. Anderson responded that the Commission should do what is best for the state of Florida.

Mr. James Zurbrick with Fish for America USA addressed the Commission to comment that there is no easy solution for the private recreational fishery which, unlike the commercial and for-hire sectors, does not have mandatory reporting or effort caps.

Mr. Garrett Alberts addressed the Commission in support of the previous speaker's comments.

Mr. Ritchie Landry addressed the Commission to address the need for accurate data on recreational harvest.

Mr. Trip Aukeman with CCA Florida addressed the Commission in support of staff recommendation to close state waters for amberjack.

Commission Action

Upon a motion by Commissioner Roberts, seconded by Commissioner Spottswood and carried, the Commission approved staff recommendation.

Commission Roberts noted that although amberjack are not commonly caught in state waters the Commission should critically evaluate if regulatory changes, such as decreasing the size limit, are necessary to prevent future closures.

Commissioner Rivard noted the sympathy for those businesses that received late notice of the federal amberjack closure.

Staff Reports

Marine Fisheries Workplan

Ms. McCawley presented the proposed 2017-2018 workplan for the Division of Marine Fisheries Management.

Public Comment

The following individuals addressed the Commission on this agenda item:

Ms. Janie Thomas with the Shrimp Producers Association addressed the Commission to thank staff for categorizing shrimp issues as a high priority item on the 2017-2018 Workplan.

Mr. Jonathan Eddy with Beacon Fisheries addressed the Commission regarding importation size limits, for hogfish in particular.

Mr. Scott Robson addressed the Commission regarding concerns for Cobia in the Gulf of Mexico and requested they be managed under a slot limit with a reduced vessel limit.

Mr. Justin Brantley addressed the Commission regarding Gulf Cobia and echoed the comments from Mr. Robson.

Mr. Tommy Holmes with Outcast Bait and Tackle addressed the Commission requesting stricter Cobia regulations.

Mr. Tony Davis addressed the Commission with concerns regarding Gulf Cobia.

Mr. Ben Fairey addressed the Commission to request Cobia be designated catch and release only.

Mr. Chris Philips addressed the Commission to request a temporary closure of Cobia.

Mr. Trip Aukeman addressed the Commission regarding cobia to support the agency's research efforts.

Commission Discussion

Chairman Yablonski asked about moving Cobia to the high priority list and when the stock assessment would be available.

Ms. McCawley responded that the stock assessments on each coast are coming out in 2019 and 2020, but that staff can have some information to present at the July Commission meeting.

Chairman Yablonski suggested that staff move cobia up in priority on the Workplan.

Ms. McCawley responded that staff can move cobia to the high category.

Commissioner Roberts noted that Florida has an opportunity to take a leadership position among the Gulf States in addressing this issue.

Commissioner Spottswood asked what feedback staff has heard about cobia in the southern portions of the state.

Ms. McCawley responded that we have not heard much from South Florida but there are complicated issues with cobia north of Florida on the east coast.

Commissioner Rivard commented closures in other fisheries are likely contributing to this problem and stressed the importance of getting ahead of any problems with Florida serving as a leader on this issue.

Chairman Yablonski requested the assistance of the stakeholders who are present today to get participation at a potential workshop to discuss this topic.

Commissioner Roberts noted that the cobia season is already underway for 2017. Having any rule changes finalized by the end of 2017 would result in them being in place before the spring cobia run in 2018.

Commissioner Bergeron commented that there has been a decrease in cobia off Southwest Florida and agreed that the Commission needs to move forward on this.

Chairman Yablonski asked for a motion that would approve the Workplan, with an amendment that would fast-track cobia, move it up in the process and have Ms. McCawley bring something back to the Commission in July.

Commission Action

Upon a motion by Commissioner Hanas, seconded by Commissioner Bergeron and carried, the Commission approved staff recommendation.

Invasive Species – 2017 Lionfish Challenge

Mr. Dan Ellinor with the Division of Marine Fisheries Management presented details on the 2016 Lionfish Challenge and the agency's other lionfish removal efforts during 2016, along with proposed changes to the programs for 2017.

Commission Discussion

Chairman Yablonski asked if the recreational goal for last year was met. He commented on an idea to promote restaurants who serve lionfish on the FWC website. He mentioned speaking with the President of the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association, Ms. Carol Dover, in an effort to increase participation in eliminating this invasive species. He agreed that staff would coordinate with Ms. Dover after this meeting.

Commissioner Spottswood asked about what could be done to promote the commercial fishery for lionfish.

Mr. Ellinor responded that supply is the limiting factor for the commercial fishery.

Commissioner Spottswood asked about the potential to fish for lionfish with traps year-round under current rules.

Ms. McCawley commented that there currently is no trap specifically for lionfish, but noted that a number of people are testing various lionfish trap designs in the Gulf and South Atlantic.

Commissioner Roberts commented that awareness is key and potentially highlighting how good lionfish taste would help to develop the market.

Chairman Yablonski asked to get Ms. Dover plugged into the Diving Equipment and Marketing Association event at the Capitol.

Commission Action

Upon a motion by Commissioner Spottswood, seconded by Commissioner Rivard and carried, the Commission approved staff recommendation.

Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) Update

Executive Director Wiley provided an update on AFWA activities.

Public Comment on Items not on the Agenda

The following individuals registered to speak on items not listed on the agenda:

Ms. Jennifer Leon addressed the Commission regarding captive wildlife and requested that the Commission restrict public interaction with Class I cats in Florida.

Mr. Bill George addressed the Commission with concern for only having public comment on one day of the meeting. He requested a staff report on alligator egg farming at the July Commission Meeting. He also added comments regarding license requirements for harvesting and serving lionfish.

Mr. Dixie Hollins addressed the Commission regarding use of air bows for hunting by any individual with a disabled permit during archery season. He also noted concern for the antlerless deer permit for youth.

Chairman Yablonski confirmed that FWC is reviewing the topic of air bows and staff will be reviewing how it could possibly be used for hunting.

Mr. Allen Register, owner and operator of Gatorama, Florida Alligator Marketing and Education Committee Chair, and Chair of the Aquaculture Review Council, addressed the Commission. He noted that FWC has done a wonderful job in coordinating the alligator egg collection program.

Mr. Lane Stephens addressed the Commission. He requested any public records related to Commissioners or staff in reference to the topic of food distribution at the Florida Public Safety Institute (FPSI).

Ms. Bonnie Basham addressed the Commission with thanks to the Commissioners and FWC staff during this legislative session regarding the vessel bill.

Mr. Justin Leake with the Panhandle Guides Association addressed the Commission regarding collapse of the Cobia fishery and requested that the Commission be proactive in management of sheepshead, spotted seatrout, and other recreationally important inshore species.

Chairman Yablonski commented about the Commission's "gold standard" management goals for some of these fisheries and acknowledged the helpfulness of citizen observations.

Commissioner Roberts asked about the trends with Sheepshead. He asked if staff would be willing to conduct a workshop on all inshore fishing, not just a single species, to see if there are trends to get ahead of potential fishery declines.

Mr. Leake responded that a couple commercial and charter boat operators that historically participated in the fishery in the panhandle have stopped fishing for sheepshead because they cannot catch them anymore – it is in bad shape.

Chairman Yablonski noted that the first step is communicating with staff on any issues that the stakeholders are seeing out on the water.

Mr. Leake responded by thanking the Commission and staff for keeping communications open and acknowledged the importance of both scientific studies and anglers' observations.

Executive Director Wiley noted the importance of a Workplan to stage and prioritize issues. He acknowledged the need to continue communications between staff and stakeholders.

Ms. McCawley commented that staff have been gathering public input on several of these species and intend to bring a draft rule for sheepshead and tripletail to the July Commission meeting.

Mr. Matt Smith addressed the Commission with thanks to the Commission for reduction in the redfish bag limit and asked the Commission to consider regulatory changes for spotted seatrout, sheepshead, and flounder in a timely manner that is proactive instead of reactive.

Mr. Ronald Crum addressed the Commission regarding the two-inch mesh net regulations.

Mr. Jonathan Eddy addressed the Commission regarding regulations in Florida related to imported marine fisheries products.

Future Agenda Items

Mr. Eric Sutton, Assistant Executive Director, provided an update to the Commission on future agenda items

Vice Chairman Priddy asked for consideration on hearing an update on importation rules in Florida. She also asked for details on the alligator farming and egg collection process.

Chairman Yablonski asked for a large-scale briefing on Florida Bay at a future meeting on behalf of Commissioner Spottswood.

Executive Directors Report

Executive Director Wiley highlighted the following topics;

- BTYCC Outdoor Adventure Day Saturday, April 29th.
- Governor's Proclamation on 75th Anniversary of the Wildlife Management Areas.
- Python tracking with the Irula tribe with Commissioner Bergeron and Vice Chair Priddy.
- Invasive Species such as pythons and tegus.
- Signing of the Candidate Conservation Agreement at Camp Blanding.
- TrophyCatch Program boat give-away.

Special Recognition

Chairman Yablonski recognized Executive Director Wiley for receiving the Department of Biology Alumni Award from Georgia Southern University's Alumni Association.

Commissioner Exchange

Chairman Yablonski then opened the floor for Commissioner Exchange.

Commissioner Hanas thanked the staff and law enforcement for making sure this meeting went well. He appreciated all the input from stakeholders.

Commissioner Roberts echoed the comments from Commissioner Hanas and also thanked Regional Director Steve Shea.

Commissioner Rivard thanked the Commissioners for having the healthy discussion on the tough issues. He commented that 7 years ago today was the BP oil spill. Finally, he thanked the Governor for his efforts to improve the Everglades and the original water flow.

Vice Chairman Priddy thanked the public for their input because it is very valuable. She noted that more importance is placed on this input on the marine fisheries side of things and that some of the terrestrial issues should get the same level of attention when thinking about all of the issues before this Commission.

Chairman Yablonski noted the major recoveries of species like the Florida black bear, manatees, and panthers that are happening in the State of Florida. He wanted to congratulate Florida on this Earth Day because these success stories should be celebrated as we move into new aspects of species management. He then thanked FPSI staff and FWC staff for coordinating another successful meeting.

Commission Administrative Matters

The next regularly scheduled Commission meeting is set for July 10 – 11, 2017, in Orlando, commencing at 8:30 am each day.

Adjournment

Chairman Yablonski adjourned the meeting at 4:43 p.m.

Brian Yablonski
Chairman

Nick Wiley
Executive Director

Respectfully submitted:

Lisa Zullo
Commission Assistant