

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners

From: Diane R. Eggeman, Director, Division of Hunting and Game Management

Date: December 7, 2017

Subject: Proposed Rule Changes for Hunting 2018 – 2019

Purpose:

Present draft rule amendments to revise select statewide hunting regulations, revise specific area regulations and conform hunting dates to calendar date changes on Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs), Wildlife and Environmental Areas (WEAs) and Miscellaneous Areas, and create a no-cost electronic SCUBA diving registration for Chassahowitzka WMA.

Summary:

Draft rule amendments for changes to WMAs, WEAs and Miscellaneous Areas are identified annually through interactions with stakeholders, cooperators and staff. Public ideas for change are submitted to staff online and via email or phone. During 2017, 205 requests for changes were received and evaluated and 141 of those were ultimately forwarded for consideration. Most of the rule proposals that are substantive were summarized and published online for public comments beginning September 23rd. Public notification through FWC's HuntFlorida Facebook page and the Hunting Hot Sheet was made and an email notice was sent to over 152,000 unique email addresses. To date over 14,000 responses have been received, with most of the comments generally supportive of most of the proposals. The significant proposals are summarized in the attached background document. Staff will continue to gather input on the proposed rule amendments via an online poll until the final public hearing on the amendments.

Staff is also proposing an amendment to rule 68A-15.061 that would prohibit SCUBA diving on Chassahowitzka WMA, except by individuals at least 18 years of age that have completed a no-cost electronic SCUBA diving registration with the Commission. Access to SCUBA/cave diving at the Eagle's Nest sink and other underwater cave and caverns located on Chassahowitzka wildlife management area is currently unregulated, except by the daily use permit. Since 1981 there have been 12 reported diving fatalities at Eagle's Nest, including a double tragedy in 2013. FWC worked extensively with cave diving training agency representatives, cave divers and the Department of Environmental Protection to develop the registration system proposed in this agenda item.

Staff Recommendation:

Approve the proposed rule amendments for advertising and direct staff to return in February 2018 for final adoption with the exception of the proposed creation of the Chassahowitzka SCUBA Diving Registration, which staff recommend approving for advertising and adoption as soon as possible if no additional public hearing is requested. Staff also appreciates any direction or guidance from the Commission as we continue working with the public.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

Paul Scharine, Public Hunting Areas Program Coordinator, Division of Hunting and Game Management