

MEMORANDUM



TO: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
FROM: Nick Wiley, Executive Director
DATE: July 3, 2017
SUBJECT: July 2017 Executive Director's Report

Emerging Issues

Everglades high water update - In June, record rainfall raised water levels in the Everglades Complex of Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs), prompting quick action by state and federal agencies. The sudden and dramatic increase in water levels, and associated wildlife concerns, necessitated area closures to protect wildlife and their habitats. Key leadership from state, federal, and tribal partners assembled quickly to assess the conditions and identify management strategies to help protect Florida's wildlife while providing flood protection for communities. FWC greatly appreciates the cooperation and willingness of our partners to support an emergency deviation from the water control plan that helps address these challenges.

In the News

Key deer case - In the early hours of July 2, FWC Officer Clayton Wagner was dispatched to Little Torch Key to assist Monroe County Sheriff Deputy Austin Hopp. Deputy Hopp performed a traffic stop on a vehicle and, on approach, observed multiple endangered Key deer bound and struggling in the back seat of the vehicle. FWC Officer Matthew Rubenstein arrived at the scene, and together with Officer Wagner and Deputy Hopp, removed two deer from the back seat of the car and one deer from the trunk of the vehicle. All three deer were hogtied and had injuries consistent with struggling in a confined space. USFWS Officer Jared Brierley arrived on the scene, confirmed the identity of the animals as endangered Key deer, and took hair and tissue samples for evidence and forensic species identification. Photographs were taken for evidence and the three deer were released back into the wild as quickly as possible. The two suspects were arrested on numerous charges including multiple third degree felonies and first degree misdemeanors for injuring an endangered species, take of deer out of season, and animal cruelty.

Operation Alligator Thief – On May 24, FWC officers arrested nine suspects for violations of Florida laws pertaining to possession of American alligator, alligator egg harvesting, interstate transport of alligator eggs and hatchlings, falsifying official records, dealing in stolen property, conspiracy to commit racketeering, racketeering and other wildlife violations. These charges are the result of a multi-year undercover operation initiated by FWC in 2015. FWC undercover officers managed to infiltrate the alligator farming community to gain information and evidence about poachers who were breaking the law in regards to the FWC's public and private lands alligator egg harvesting program and alligator farming. There are still aspects of this investigation that are ongoing.

Citizen-scientists join bioblitzes to survey species on WMAs - Bioblitzes are happening for the first time this year as part of the 75th anniversary celebration of Florida's WMA system. A Bioblitz is a kind of citizen science adventure where people get a chance to find, identify, and catalogue all the plants and

animals they see while exploring WMAs. Bioblitzes were held at Chassahowitzka WMA and Aucilla WMA - together producing over 200 species observations. More bioblitzes are coming, including September 23 at Watermelon Pond Wildlife and Environmental Area. The FWC has also asked participants to upload photos of the plants and animals they encounter in WMAs into the iNaturalist app, using a cellphone or other digital device. Biologists with iNaturalist identify the species, and sightings are gathered on the newly created iNaturalist platform known as the Florida Nature Trackers, where nearly 50,000 sightings already have been submitted.

FWC plants bald cypress trees to provide habitat for snail kites – FWC staff planted 50 bald cypress trees in a cove of Lake Kissimmee to provide habitat for snail kites. In the past decade, Lake Kissimmee has become a critical central Florida habitat for this endangered kite. The lake is mostly located in Osceola County, with a small part in Polk County. The bald cypress project, completed in May, will offer nesting and perching habitat for the snail kite, as well as other marsh birds. This project will be monitored to determine the best conditions for planting bald cypress trees to help conserve and restore Florida’s freshwater habitats.

Events

Spotted seatrout workshops – FWC staff are hosting a series of spotted seatrout workshops across the state during the last week of July and the first two weeks of August to gather public input on the status and management of the spotted seatrout fishery. Staff have heard concerns from anglers in some parts of the state about the fishery in recent years and the Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) is in the process of finalizing a seatrout stock assessment. Staff anticipates bringing a presentation on this topic to the upcoming Commission meeting.

Goliath grouper workshops – FWC is hosting several goliath grouper workshops across the state in August and October to gather input on the possibility of a limited harvest of goliath grouper in Florida state waters. Staff also plans to create a virtual workshop for stakeholders who cannot make an in-person meeting. By the end of June, staff received over 400 comments on goliath grouper via email and the online comment form at www.MyFWC.com/SaltwaterComments.

Partnerships

FWC and partner restore oyster reef habitat in Sarasota Bay – FWC staff collaborated with the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program to enhance and restore oyster habitat in Sarasota Bay in Manatee County. Volunteers filled 90 coconut-fiber twine bags with fossilized shell and a contractor used them to create the perimeter walls of four 20-foot diameter oyster reefs. The reefs were then filled with 34 tons of loose shell, creating over 1,250 square feet of new oyster reef habitat. The reefs, designed to mimic other nearby natural oyster reefs, were installed in late April to allow summertime colonization by larval oysters. The benefits of this aquatic restoration project include providing nursery and foraging habitat for a variety of wildlife such as juvenile red fish and mangrove snapper, blue crab, stone crab, and wading birds. The project will also improve water quality and clarity due to oyster filtration and enhance the local shoreline’s resiliency to storms.

FWC collaborates with Bass Pro Shops and the Boy Scouts of America to excite youth about fishing - FWC partnered with Bass Pro Shops Outdoor World in Orlando and the Boy Scouts of America to participate in an event that celebrated the “Lifecycle of an Angler.” This event highlighted the importance of experienced Florida anglers sharing their knowledge to teach kids how to fish. FWC staff released a tagged largemouth bass into the aquarium at Bass Pro Shops Orlando to promote our

bass tagging study currently underway to evaluate new statewide bass and TrophyCatch. Members with the Teen Sportfishing Association the Florida B.A.S.S. Nation also participated in the event.

FWC continues springs coast fish community assessment - In partnership with the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD), FWC is documenting fish population status in five first-magnitude spring-systems along the Gulf coast (Chassahowitzka, Homosassa, Kings Bay, Rainbow, and Weeki Wachee). Results will be published in scientific literature and applied to analysis used to develop and evaluate Minimum Flows and Levels.

Accomplishments

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) Officer of the Year - Lieutenant Bryan Lee was chosen as the SAFMC's 2017 Law Enforcement Officer of the Year for his exceptional work in enforcing fisheries regulations. He will be honored during the September SAFMC meeting in Charleston, South Carolina. Lt. Lee has been with the FWC for almost 15 years. He is the captain of the Offshore Patrol Vessel, *Sea Hawk* in the Northeast Region.

FWC biologist honored by Governor and Cabinet - Matthew Hortman, an FWC biologist working on the Apalachicola River Wildlife and Environmental Area (WEA), received the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's 2016 Resource Manager of the Year award at the June 14 Cabinet meeting. This award recognizes the outstanding dedication and achievements of people managing state lands to conserve their ecological value and biological diversity. Hortman has fostered innovative programs to help restore natural communities within the Apalachicola River WEA, which encompasses the river and its floodplains from Liberty County south to Apalachicola Bay in Franklin County. Hortman has reintroduced prescribed burning into previously fire-suppressed areas to improve habitat for wildlife, including the frosted flatwoods salamander. He also helped enhance recreational opportunities for visitors, who can paddle 100 miles on the Apalachicola River WEA Paddling Trail or go fishing, wildlife viewing, hunting, hiking, and camping.

Updates

National Hunting and Fishing Day Challenge - FWC is working with state and federal natural resource agencies, conservation organizations, outdoor trade associations, and companies within the outdoor industry to coordinate the launch of a national mentoring challenge campaign associated with National Hunting and Fishing (NHF) Day. NHF Day, held on September 23, is an annual celebration of the contributions to conservation made through hunting, fishing, and other outdoor activities. This special campaign, called the NHF Day Challenge, is expected to unite the outdoor industry in urging sportsmen and women to pledge to engage someone new to hunting, fishing, or target shooting. Richard Childress, NASCAR legend and NHF Day honorary chair, will be at the forefront of encouraging hunters and anglers to become mentors. Those who pledge to invest their time in getting someone else involved in hunting, fishing and target shooting can win a Richard Childress Racing VIP race weekend package. The NHF Day Challenge is expected to be a springboard to long-term efforts to recruit, retain, and reactivate (R3) hunters, anglers, and target shooters. This campaign will focus efforts in Florida and across the country to develop and enhance the kind of mentoring programs that will encourage participants to get involved in hunting, fishing, and target shooting. FWC will launch the NHF Day Challenge on July 12 at ICAST, the sportfishing industry's largest trade show. From that event to September 23, all NHF Day partners will communicate to hunters, anglers and target shooters about the Challenge via a variety of communications channels.

Descending device study – FWC staff began a three-month descending device citizen science study July 1, the goal of which is to evaluate barriers to descending device use by anglers. About 1,800 people took the original screening survey and more than 400 of the 600 selected to take the initial participation survey have currently done so. Descending devices will be sent to as many participating anglers across the state who qualified to participate in the study as possible, while several more participants qualified already owned a descending device and chose to use their own device to participate in this study. In September, a final follow-up survey will be given to those that participated to better determine what the barriers are to descending device use.

St. Joseph Bay scallops - FWRI completed its pre-season scallop abundance surveys in St. Joseph Bay. Both the distribution and density of adult scallops increased in the Bay compared to this time last year. Scallops were found at the majority of survey sites. While density levels were not as high as they were in the years prior to the 2015 red tide, there was a modest increase over last year, suggesting the population is recovering. Restoration efforts in the Bay are ongoing using both hatchery-raised and locally-caught scallops placed in cages to protect them from predation and maximize reproductive success. Restoration cages have been placed in a no-entry area during the open season to prevent them from being disturbed. These restoration efforts will continue through the season and at least into the spring of 2018. The modified scallop season in St. Joseph Bay opens July 25 and runs through September 10.

Python Removal Contractor makes major find - A contractor working for FWC as part of our new Python Removal Contractor Program captured a nearly 12-foot female Burmese python sitting on a clutch of 40 eggs, 32 of which were viable, in June in the Everglades and Francis S. Taylor WMA in South Florida. Removal of this python and its eggs is an example of how this program can benefit the Everglades ecosystem. The Python Removal Contractor Program pays people who are experienced in capturing pythons for their efforts to remove these invasive snakes from the wild. 21 contractors are enrolled in the program, who have to date spent 142 hours searching and have removed four pythons from the wild. Meanwhile, the agency's new Python Pickup Program is designed to encourage the public to remove and report pythons from the wild by rewarding participants with the chance to win valuable prizes.

Engaging public input for Black Crappie Management Plan - Black crappie attract tremendous fishing effort from both resident and visiting anglers. FWC assembled the Black Crappie Management Plan (BCMP) Team, which is an interagency group whose goal is to involve stakeholders in the development of priorities and strategies that maintain and enhance Black Crappie fisheries in Florida to meet the needs of current and future anglers. The BCMP team is currently working on the initial steps of plan development, including reviewing available science relevant to Black Crappie fisheries and management and formulating an extensive approach to outreach and engagement with crappie anglers.

FWC hatcheries stock 3.5 million fish - FWC's two freshwater hatcheries, the Blackwater Fisheries Center and the Florida Bass Conservation Center (FBCC), produced over 3.5 million fingerling and sub-adult sportfish for stocking into more than 130 public water bodies throughout the state during FY 2016-17. More than 1.2 million largemouth bass fingerlings and sub-adults were stocked, including 430,000 produced at FBCC and stocked in Lake Apopka using innovative spawning technology. Additionally, the Blackwater Fisheries Center produced and stocked more than 335,000 Gulf Striped Bass fingerlings in Panhandle coastal rivers in a partnership between FWC, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and the states of Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. This partnership was developed to address declining stocks of Gulf strain Striped Bass along the Gulf Coast. Fish were also stocked into Florida Youth Conservation Centers Network sites that are hosting Fish Camps this summer.