

MEMORANDUM



TO: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
FROM: Eric Sutton, Executive Director
DATE: February 2, 2018
SUBJECT: February 2018 Executive Director's Report

Events

Gasparilla Pirate Festival- On January 27 FWC officers participated in the Gasparilla Invasion, one of the largest waterborne events in the State of Florida, as part of the Gasparilla Pirate Festival that is held annually in Tampa. This year's event drew approximately 300,000 people to watch the festivities. FWC's Division of Law Enforcement provided 17 vessels and 1 helicopter as well as more than 75 officers and support staff for an all-day detail. Primary duties included protecting the flotilla's "invasion" while ensuring public safety through both water and land patrol. Our officers' dedication and excellent work ensured that the visitors and residents of Tampa safely enjoyed another great year at Gasparilla. In no small part to their efforts the weekend saw no serious or fatal boating accidents.

FWC hosts open house on Harris Chain of Lakes - FWC staff recently coordinated an open house event to allow stakeholders the opportunity to have in-depth discussions with FWC biologists, gather more information about FWC research projects, and meet subject matter experts on fisheries management of the Harris Chain of Lakes. More than 140 anglers, duck hunters, boaters, birders, community members, and lakefront property owners attended the event. Staff from the St. Johns River Water Management District and Lake County Water Authority were also on hand to discuss their work on the Harris Chain of Lakes. This event highlighted the partnerships between multiple agencies committed to conserving Florida's freshwater resources.

Partnerships

FWC partners to make Rish Park Pond ADA-Accessible - FWC is working in partnership with the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and the Florida Forest Service to renovate a freshwater fishing pond in Rish Park on the St. Joe Peninsula at Cape San Blas to ensure its accessibility to disabled anglers. This exciting renovation project provides the opportunity to expand freshwater fishing opportunities in Florida for disabled anglers. The pond is currently under renovation and should soon be completed and unveiled as part of the grand opening ribbon-cutting ceremony this spring.

In the News

Cold weather impacts on fish and wildlife – Cold weather throughout much of the state in January impacted multiple fish and wildlife species including sea turtles, snook, and manatees. More than 1,000 cold-stunned sea turtles were recovered statewide in early January. A majority of these rescues occurred in the Panhandle as St. Joe Bay was hit particularly hard. A January 4 Facebook live broadcast featuring staff rescuing cold-stunned sea turtles reached an audience of 580,000 people. On January 20, many of the rescued sea turtles were released back into the Gulf of Mexico. Many partners participated in these

rescues and associated releases including Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park in Fort Walton Beach, Gulf Marine Specimen Lab in Panacea, the U.S. Geological Survey, NASA, the Canaveral National Seashore, volunteers, and Gulf World Marine Park in Panama City Beach. The FWC Fishkill hotline received several reports of fish kills in multiple counties as a result of cold weather. The northern areas where the cold kills occurred are relatively new territory for snook as they moved into these areas over the past few years of warmer weather. Fish kills on this scale are not unusual or unexpected, and FWC does not anticipate any long-term impacts to the snook stock from this recent event. Five manatee rescues and 39 manatee mortalities are preliminarily being attributed to recent cold water temperatures.

Accomplishments

FWC staff member recognized by the Division of Risk Management – Bob Heagey, an assistant research scientist based out of St. Petersburg at FWRI, recently received the Interagency Advisory Council on Loss Prevention (IAC) Excellence Award for Occupational Safety and Loss Prevention. This award recognizes State of Florida employees, agents, and volunteers who make exceptional contributions to the reduction and control of employment-related accidents. Bob was nominated for initiating a hands-on trailer training for his coworkers at FWRI that includes a practical towing obstacle course to ensure that staff are as prepared as possible when towing vessels around the state. He also implemented a towing capacity label system that has remarkably increased the efficiency and safety for staff towing state vessels on roadways.

Updates

Panama City crayfish proposed for federal listing as threatened species – The Panama City crayfish, found only in Bay County and listed as a Florida Species of Special Concern in 1987, was reevaluated in 2006 and found to meet criteria for a State Threatened species. FWC worked with stakeholders to develop a draft management plan as required for any proposed listing change. The draft plan included many conservation management practices already being used by Bay County and staff worked with partners to address remaining permitting concerns prior to final approval. In January 2018, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) announced its proposal to list the Panama City crayfish as a Threatened Species under the Endangered Species Act. If the federal listing occurs, the crayfish will be removed from the State's Species of Special Concern List and added to the federally-designated Endangered and Threatened Species List. FWC will continue working with the USFWS and other partners to implement identified conservation actions for the crayfish.

Everglades high-water update - The Everglades Complex of Wildlife Management Areas (ECWMA) reopened after a prolonged closure that was implemented to protect wildlife and their habitats during the persistent high-water conditions experienced in 2017. Some areas of the Everglades were closed for more than 190 consecutive days, and thanks to staff efforts the Everglades and Francis S. Taylor WMAs were able to reopen before the holiday break and reinstate access to 671,831 acres of FWC managed lands. Water levels remain above the long-term average in many areas of the Everglades, but the managed recession combined with drier seasonal rainfall patterns have allowed water levels to recede and wildlife to resume normal behaviors.

Executive Order Number 17-319 – On December 12, 2017, Governor Rick Scott issued Executive Order number 17-319, Preventing Sexual Harassment in State Agencies. To ensure a work environment free from sexual harassment, the Order directed all agencies to adopt and implement certain practices regarding sexual harassment. The Order covered both training and procedures for investigating and resolving complaints. FWC is pleased to report that we are in full compliance with the Governor's Executive Order.