

MEMORANDUM

TO: Commissioners
FROM: Nick Wiley, Executive Director
DATE: January 27, 2012
SUBJECT: February 2012 **Executive Director's Report**

Awards and Accomplishments

Officer of the Year -- The South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council named FWC Officer Clay McDonough its first ever Officer of the Year last month at a meeting in Raleigh, N.C. McDonough, whose primary patrol area is coastal Volusia County, was selected for his outstanding efforts in fisheries enforcement. He is the assigned operator in **charge of the squad's 10-meter Boston Whaler**, which is specially designed for offshore use and is funded by a Joint Enforcement Agreement. The boat and its crew focus on enforcing state and federal fisheries regulations that help protect the highly valued commercial fishing industry.

McDonough stood out for his work partnering with local, state and federal agencies. He is considered a subject matter expert in fish identification and regulations, and is often called upon to train officers from the FWC and other agencies.

In addition to this latest honor, his superior work also has been recognized by the United States Department of Commerce and by the Coastal Conservation Association, which has honored him twice as Officer of the Year.

Nature Viewing along the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail

application -- The Office of Public Access and Wildlife Viewing Services, in partnership with the Florida Museum of Natural History and the University of Florida IFAS Department of Entomology and Nematology, has released an I-phone application, "**Nature Viewing along the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail**". This app, created with support grants from the Florida Wildflower Foundation and Florida Museum Associates, is designed with non-experts in mind and is a perfect tool for young or novice nature lovers, visitors to Florida and more seasoned explorers. Child-friendly icons lead the user to beautiful color photographs and basic descriptions of each species. Special features of the app include information on 200 birds, 106 butterflies and 247 wildflowers, the 491 sites along the **Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Viewing Trail and Florida's unique habitats and current conservation concerns**. The android and I-Pad versions will be released in February.

In the News

Student Videos Teach Floridians to be 'Bear Smart' -- Florida students rose to the occasion recently and produced 17 'bear smart' videos for FWC's Florida Black Bear Public Service Announcement (PSA) contest. The challenge to high school students was unusual: Produce a one-minute video encouraging people to conserve Florida black bears and take appropriate precautions when living around bears. The response was enthusiastic: Individuals and media classes from 10 high schools applied their creative thinking to the conservation of Florida black bears, which have made a comeback from about 300 in the 1970s to about 3,000 today.

The grand prize winner of the PSA contest was Justin Burt, a student at Lawton Chiles High School in Tallahassee, who was also the Northwest Region winner. His "Be Bear Aware" video and the four other regional winners of the PSA contest can be viewed at www.youtube.com/MyFWCsocial.

The students and classes will receive prizes for their winning PSA entries. FWC staff from across the state judged the videos based on their professional quality, accuracy of information and appeal to viewers.

Ban on Importation and Interstate Transportation of Four Giant Snakes that Threaten Everglades -- Enhancing the ongoing efforts of the State of Florida, United States Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar announced a ban on imports of four nonnative snake species including the Burmese python which has established a population in south Florida, primarily in Everglades National Park. This action will compliment ongoing efforts to control these invasive exotic species and is important to the restoration of the Florida Everglades.

The rule will ban the importation and interstate transportation of four nonnative constrictor snakes including the Burmese python, the yellow anaconda; and northern and southern African pythons. Those who own any of these four species of snakes will be allowed to keep them in accordance with state laws. However, they cannot take, send, or sell them across state lines.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Director Dan Ashe, Senator Bill Nelson and FWC Commissioner Ronald Bergeron addressed the crowd of reporters and answered questions about the new rule. Commissioner Bergeron explained how the FWC is working with partners to take aggressive measures to deal with these species.

Emerging Issues

Flatwoods Salamander Ephemeral Wetland Restoration -- During fall 2011, the Aquatic Habitat Restoration/Enhancement Sub-Section of the Florida Fish and FWC partnered with the U.S. Forest Service and The Nature Conservancy to enhance the breeding habitat for the Federally Threatened frosted flatwoods salamander (*Ambystoma cingulatum*), along with other amphibians in the Apalachicola National Forest. Restoration of the breeding habitat is critical to recovery of the species.

Most of the year, flatwoods salamanders live among the wiregrass and pine straw leaf litter. Being amphibians, they must annually seek temporary pools of water to mate and lay eggs. Due to decades of fire suppression, these ephemeral ponds have become choked with titi brush which caused these ponds to dry up prematurely.

Nineteen ephemeral wetlands were cleared of woody mid-story plants shrubs, predominately titi, to prepare them for salamander reproduction this fall. Approximately 20 acres were cleared by hand to allow future prescribed burns to keep the ephemeral ponds open by killing the mid-story brush and allowing for ground cover plants to become established.

The Aquatic Habitat Restoration/Enhancement Subsection provided funding to improve reproductive habitat of this threatened species. This particular flatwoods habitat is very important because it not only offers habitat for at least two Federally Listed wildlife species (*A. cingulatum* and the red-cockaded woodpecker, *Picoides borealis*), but also three Threatened and Endangered plant species.

Monitoring, herbicide applications and prescribed fires will be implemented for at least the next three years in these enhanced ephemeral wetlands.

Updates

Freshwater Fisheries -- The National Drought Monitor shows most of Florida is still abnormally dry, with areas in the north experiencing moderate to extreme droughts. Such conditions have profound effects on freshwater fisheries. A robust cycle of natural high and low water levels helps flush lakes and stimulates fish production. However, prolonged drought can lead to sink-hole openings, fish kills and lost access for anglers.

Such conditions currently exist in Orange Lake (Alachua County; North Central Region), which a year ago was experiencing an extraordinary resurgence of trophy-sized largemouth bass. Water levels are now too low to use boat ramps, and even air boaters do not have easy access. Fish are being trapped in shallow, muddy

water throughout the lake. Consequently, on January 4, 2012, FWC issued an Executive Order to remove all length and bag limits on freshwater sportfish caught from shore, and allow those fish to be taken by hand or dip-net. Fishing licenses are required. The order will expire on June 1, unless repealed before then.

While low water levels exist, the Northwest Region staff is working with the local community in Jackson County to **drawdown Merritt's Mill Pond. The water** management district supports the idea, which will help oxidize and consolidate soils, and revitalize native plant and invertebrate communities. Water levels will be restored in early March, depending on rainfall.

Similarly, Rodman Reservoir is undergoing a scheduled drawdown by the Department of Environmental Protection, under water management district permitting. Temporary ramps allow fishing access and outstanding bass fishing is resulting. Another FWC executive order, prohibits harvest of bass during this drawdown, the reservoir will begin refilling March 1.

Lake Okeechobee has benefited from low water and high rainfall this fall, and fishing has been outstanding.

Harmful Algal Blooms Florida Red Tide Update -- In late September 2011, FWC confirmed a bloom of *Karenia brevis*, the Florida red tide organism, along the southwest coast of Florida. The bloom was initially a discrete patch that lingered offshore, mostly near Lee and Charlotte counties, until early November. With storms and winds, the continuous patch was broken up into smaller patches and now includes two major patches near Sanibel and Marco Islands. In addition, the bloom has expanded south through the FL Keys and around to the East Coast. The FWC Fish Kill Hotline continues to receive reports of fish kills associated with the bloom, and the bloom is causing illnesses and death to other wildlife including manatees and sea turtles.

FWC provides up-to-date information on bloom conditions to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) for management of shellfish harvesting areas. FWC also conducts shellfish toxicity testing in support of **FDACS' Neurotoxic Shellfish Poisoning monitoring program. FWC will continue to** work with multiple agency partners to monitor the bloom, respond to reports of fish and wildlife mortalities, and safeguard human health.

Fish Kill at St. Lucie Power Plant -- FWC staff met with staff at the St. Lucie nuclear power plant on Hutchinson Island in December 2011, to discuss a fish kill that occurred in August of 2011. The plant experienced an unprecedented influx of moon jellyfish that resulted in a fish kill. Plant staff filed a **report to the FWC's Fish Kill Hotline** which covered the jellyfish intrusion and noted a fish kill, but did not

include specific mention of fish species affected. Many goliath grouper died during the event and unfortunately a valuable research opportunity was lost as the FWC. FWC staff initiated the meeting with power plant staff to determine how to respond to future events. At the meeting, both parties worked together to identify several actions for improving communication and cooperation. These actions include allowing FWC staff on FPL property to collect data if an event like this occurs again, as well as meeting again in the future to review any incidents that may occur and to identify research needs that may arise.

Panther Depredation -- In December 2011, FWC responded to a report of a panther depredation in Golden Gate Estates in Collier County when a horse suffered injuries consistent with a panther attack. An FWC panther biologist spent hours examining the pasture where the horse was attacked, observing the necropsy performed by a local veterinarian, and searching for panther tracks, of which several were found nearby.

In response to the event, the FWC distributed a press release to remind local residents of the importance of keeping their pets and livestock housed in predator-proof enclosures at night. Also, an FWC biologist set up a remote wildlife camera to monitor panther activity on the property where the horse was attacked.

Law Enforcement Reaccreditation Assessment --The FWC was initially accredited in 2009 by the Commission for Law Enforcement Accreditation (CFA). After the initial accreditation, staff continued to work on improving policy and operating procedures. On December 13-15, 2011, CFA assessors visited four field offices and headquarters to review these policies and procedures and interview staff to evaluate their level of understanding and compliance.

During the reaccreditation assessment, assessors conducted an initial entrance interview, observed a static display at the Tallahassee airport hangar, went on several ride-alongs in the Tallahassee area, visited the Tallahassee Regional Communication Center and training academy, interviewed GHQ staff and reviewed files. Assessors also visited field offices in Panama City, Lakeland, Jupiter and **Ocala. After the rigorous evaluation, the CFA team leader reported a "flawless" on-site assessment.**

At the exit interview, the team leader **said that the FWC's biggest asset is not its equipment or capabilities, though he considered those very impressive; he said that its biggest asset is the people.** The success of the assessment represents hard work from staff across the entire agency. Though an official decision from the CFA will not be announced until February 23, 2012, the assessors unanimously agreed to recommend the Division for reaccreditation.

Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area --

FWC staff continued coordination with the Department of Interior (DOI) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) regarding the establishment of a new National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in central Florida.

Executive Director Nick Wiley and Commission Chair Kathy Barco participated in an event near Haines City where Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar and Director of USFWS Dan Ashe announced the establishment of this new refuge as the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge.

FWC's primary role in this process has been to help make sure, if a refuge is established, that public access including hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing are provided as requested by many Florida stakeholder groups representing these interests. The USFWS has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with FWC that will provide public hunting opportunities and give FWC the authority **to incorporate lands that may be acquired into Florida's Wildlife Management Area system and further giving FWC the authority to establish and implement public hunting on these lands.** The MOU provides for the USFWS to provide funding for administration of public hunting by FWC. Regional Directors Dennis David and Chris Wynn played a key role in coordinating this effort and making certain stakeholder interests were addressed.

This new NWR differs from existing refuges in that it includes purchase of public lands and conservation easements spread over a much larger area of critical natural habitat and water resources in the Kissimmee River basin. The plan to create the NWR and Conservation Area north of Lake Okeechobee, calls for the acquisition of up to 50,000-acres from willing private sellers or donors, and the federal purchase of conservation easements on an additional 100,000-acres of private ranch and farm lands. The family ranching practices in this area have proven that ranchers are excellent stewards of the land, and the purchase of conservation easements ensures that land and water resources continue to be managed in ways that contribute to the health of fish and wildlife.

Funding for this NWR would come from budget appropriations to the USFWS as well federal agency acquisition and easement programs. No state funding contributions are proposed or contemplated for acquisition.

Events

First Annual Lake Apopka Summit – Staff from the Divisions of Habitat and Species Conservation (HSC) and Freshwater Fisheries Management (DFFM) attended the First Annual Lake Apopka Summit hosted by Senator Alan Hays, Representative Brian Nelson, and Lake County Commissioner Sean Parks on December 14, 2011 in Clermont, FL.

The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), St. John's River Water Management District (SJRWMD), FWC, University of Florida, and Lake County Water Authority presented information on past and current restoration efforts and condition of the lake. There also was extensive discussion on options to accelerate and/or enhance restoration efforts to facilitate a more rapid recovery of fish and wildlife populations, habitat and water quality.

Subsequent to the summit, DEP, SJRWMD and FWC agreed to collaborate on plans to develop, implement, and evaluate innovative restoration strategies. HSC and DFFM are currently developing habitat restoration options and fishery management prescriptions to meet these objectives.