

MEMORANDUM

TO: Commissioners
FROM: Nick Wiley, Executive Director
DATE: August 31, 2012
SUBJECT: September 2012 Executive Director's Report

Awards and Accomplishments

Nation's symbol soars in Florida with bald eagle conservation success -- On the eve of the July 4 holiday, FWC Chairman Kenneth Wright, along with Charles Lee of Audubon Florida, spoke to Orlando-area media and stakeholders about the comeback of bald eagles in Florida. Florida continues to be one of the top spots in the lower 48 states for bald eagles to nest and raise their young. Since 2008, FWC has had a bald eagle management plan administered by the Division of Habitat and Species Conservation (HSC) and coordinated by biologist Michelle Vandeventer. Annual aerial surveys of active bald eagles nests are conducted under the supervision of Janell Brush of the Florida Wildlife Research Institute. While the bald eagle is no longer listed as an endangered or threatened species, it is protected under the federal Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act and Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and by state rule.

HSC communications coordinator Diane Hirth worked with Vandeventer and Brush to develop the media event and a news release focused on sharing the success of bald eagles in Florida and the on-going challenge of conserving this large raptor that is the nation's symbol. FWC decided to partner with Audubon Florida, which was enthusiastic about participating and providing live bald eagles and their Center for Birds of Prey in Maitland for the event. Audubon is an important on-going partner, recruiting EagleWatch volunteers and rehabilitating hundreds of eagles at the center.

A statewide news release on Florida's bald eagle conservation success, with a link to a bald eagle photo gallery on FWC's Flickr page, was sent out on July 3. It reported that FWC's 2011 aerial survey counted an estimated 1,457 active bald eagle nests, nearly a 10 percent increase since 2008 when the state implemented the bald eagle management plan. Long-term success with bald eagles in Florida is reflected in the species' recovery from just 88 active nests in 1973. Twenty positive news stories on Florida's bald eagle conservation resulted from the event and the news release. FWC social media was used as well, generating a record number of likes on MyFWC's Facebook page.

Communication Awards -- The FWC received 7 awards in 5 categories for communications excellence during 2011 by the Association for Conservation Information (ACI), a national organization of conservation communication professionals. The awards were presented at ACI's recent conference at the

National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, WV. The FWC achieved a sweep in the News Release category, taking 1st place for a news release about tiger prawn, 2nd place for a news release on ill-advised wildlife rescues, and 3rd place for a news release about the FWC's project to map fox squirrel sightings.

In the Graphics category, the FWC's Hunter Safety trailer-wrap design took 1st place. "The Inside Job" employee newsletter won 2nd place for internal communications. A TV public service announcement about the Florida panther specialty license plate won 2nd place in its category, and the FWC won 3rd place for its communication campaign about the Draft Black Bear Management Plan.

The award-winning products are the result of cooperative efforts between Community Relations and other divisions and offices.

Also at the conference, Scott Ball concluded his 2-year term as ACI President.

Southeastern American Kestrel -- During the 2012 kestrel breeding season, the Southwest Region had a significant nesting boost for this threatened species. The southeastern American kestrel is the smallest falcon in Florida and has been affected by the loss of their habitat. As secondary cavity nesters, kestrels use cavities constructed by other species, such as woodpeckers, for raising young. Kestrels will use artificial nest boxes when natural cavities are lacking, as long as the boxes are placed within the appropriate habitat.

In 2007, Jennifer Myers, FWC's SW Regional Conservation Biologist, evaluated potential kestrel habitat on wildlife management areas (WMAs) and wildlife and environmental areas (WEAs) in the Southwest Region and installed kestrel nest boxes where appropriate. Jennifer currently coordinates the maintenance and monitoring of 53 nest boxes on 10 WMAs/WEAs in the Southwest Region.

Nine nest boxes were used by breeding kestrels in during the 2012 kestrel breeding season. This additional productivity represents a significant regional boost to this imperiled population, which is often affected by a limited supply of natural suitable nest cavities.

In the News

Operation Dry Water -- On June 22 at the Naples Landing Boat Ramp in Naples, the FWC held a news conference to inform the media about Operation Dry Water. Law enforcement agencies around the state and country participated in "Operation Dry Water," an initiative focusing on boating under the influence, during the weekend of June 22-24. At the news conference, the FWC and partners including the Naples Police Department and the Collier County Sheriff's Office explained the hazards of boating under the influence of alcohol and drugs. Last year, nine people died in boating accidents related to alcohol and drug use in Florida. That represents 13 percent of the state's boating fatalities for 2011.

Alligator Bites -- The FWC investigated two alligator bites in South Florida this summer. The first occurred on June 12 in Collier County near Everglades City. A tour boat captain lost his left hand during an encounter with an alligator. Following an investigation of the event, the man was charged with feeding alligators. On Monday, July 9 the FWC received a report of an alligator bite that occurred in the Caloosahatchee River near the town of Moore Haven in Glades County. Seventeen-year-old Kaleb Langdale of Moore Haven lost his right arm from the elbow down as a result of the bite. Langdale was swimming within 10 feet of the shoreline when the bite occurred.

In both instances the FWC dispatched the alligator, removed the limbs and transported them to the hospital in the hopes that they could be reattached. Unfortunately, in both cases, doctors were not able to attach the limbs. Both incidents received national and international attention. FWC public information staff provided the media with safety tips including the importance of being aware of swimming in posted swim areas, not swimming in areas that are known to have large gators and not feeding alligators as this causes them to lose their natural wariness of humans.

Lobster Mini-Season 2012 -- According to the Monroe County Tourist Development Council, FWC's annual two day spiny lobster sport season, commonly called the "mini season," attracts more than 25,000 visitors and generates in excess of \$10 million in economic impact for local businesses. The Division of Law Enforcement is tasked with providing a safe and enjoyable outdoor experience for all. Many law enforcement agencies assist, including local municipal and county agencies, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, NOAA Office of Law Enforcement, US Customs and Border Protection and the US Coast Guard. The focus is boating safety, resource protection and public safety. In the Keys, a large meeting is held with all involved agencies as well as local State Attorneys prior to the event.

While some areas didn't seem as busy as previous years, other areas had a lot of activity. Officers responded to numerous calls for service, checked over a thousand users and issued citations as well. FWC K-9s were also used to sniff out lobsters that violators may have hidden on their boats.

Our officer's efforts not only served to make the 2012 mini-season a safe and enjoyable event, but they will have a positive impact on the future as well by promoting Florida as a safe recreational destination and maintaining the health of the resource. This positive economic impact of this event spans the entire local economy; hotels, restaurants, charter boats, dive shops and the host of other businesses that cater to visitors to the Keys.

Black Bear in Ave Maria -- Recently the FWC responded to concerns about a black bear that was frequenting Ave Maria in Collier County. The FWC has been working with property managers, community leaders, Collier County Solid Waste, and the waste management provider to help remove bear attractants from the neighborhood. An initial trapping effort was conducted for 4 nights, but was unsuccessful due to the level of attractants throughout the community. FWC law enforcement patrolled the neighborhood trying to locate the bear in order to conduct aversive conditioning or hazing, but did not encounter the bear during their

patrols. Steps are underway to make the dumpsters in commercial areas and those associated with schools "bear proof." FWC staff held two public "town hall" meetings to provide interested citizens with information about bears and advice on proper garbage storage. Most residents began placing their garbage out only on the morning of garbage pick-up. In addition, the waste management provider agreed to schedule pick-up later in the mornings to accommodate this change. Subsequently, our biologists set three traps over a period of 4 consecutive nights in locations in an attempt to capture the bear. Although this trapping effort was also unsuccessful, educating and recommending proper trash storage to residents and property managers, as well as working with the waste management company to bear-proof existing dumpsters has resulted in the bear spending less time in this community. FWC is continuing efforts to work with the community.

Illegal Harvest -- On January 27, 2012, the FWC seized 6,471 pounds of mullet from three commercial fishermen that had harvested the fish illegally. The incident happened just off Marco Island in Collier County. The fishermen were using three seine nets as one, which is an illegal use of the nets. This case is considered a case of "first impression", meaning it's the first of its kind for this specific violation. This case was unique because the nets were being held together by hand instead of being tied together. The first of the three defendants was sentenced in July and he received a \$32,355 fine and 20 days in jail.

Parasailing Accident -- The FWC is working with Broward County Sheriff's Office and the US Coast Guard to investigate a fatal boating accident in Broward County on August 15. The accident happened at approximately 3 p.m. just outside of Hillsboro Inlet. A married couple from Connecticut was on a parasailing trip with a company called Wave Blast Watersports. The parasail malfunctioned and the female passenger, Kathleen Miskell, fell from the parasail. Miskell died as a result of the accident. The incident has generated a great deal of media interest on both a state and national level.

Lionfish -- The FWC is increasing efforts to limit the negative impacts nonnative invasive lionfish are having on native fish and wildlife. An Executive Order was issued August 3, allowing recreational fishers to fish without a recreational license when using certain gear to target lionfish. The order also removed the recreational bag limit. Gear included in the order are a pole spear, a Hawaiian sling, a handheld net or any spearing device that is specifically designed and marketed exclusively for lionfish. These changes were announced to the media in a press conference in Miami on August 13. The FWC is taking these actions to encourage more Floridians and visitors to harvest lionfish. Several members of FWC staff met August 8-9, to discuss future agency actions including outreach and education, research and inter- and outer-agency coordination. This team jointly headed by both Marine Fisheries Management and Habitat and Species Conservation staff will continue to work on this important goal.

FWC attends ICAST, celebrates 75th anniversary of WSFR and announces TrophyCatchSM -- The largest sport fishing industry tradeshow in the world, the International Convention of Allied Sportfishing Trades (ICAST) was held in Orlando in July. It was the ideal venue for FWC staff to highlight the 75th anniversary of the

Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration programs and show the public how funds from the sportfishing part of the program are used to enhance Florida's recreational fishing and boating industries, which respectively generate economic impacts of \$8 billion and \$17 billion. The national Sport Fish Restoration program (SFR), managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, collects money from excise fees on fishing equipment, import duties on fishing equipment and boats, and charges for motorboat and small-engine fuels. Funds from SFR combined with fishing license revenues help support future fishing and boating opportunities, including FWC programs such as habitat enhancement, fish stocking, building boat ramps and artificial reefs and youth fishing programs. Staff also announced TrophyCatchSM, a new federal-state-industry partnership to promote catch-and-release of trophy bass—the most popular sport fish in the world and Florida's state freshwater fish.

FWC responds to Tropical Storm Debby -- Division of Law Enforcement staff worked with other state agencies at the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) and in the field to respond to Tropical Storm Debby. Severe flooding and storm conditions in Wakulla, Franklin, Columbia, Clay, Baker, Hamilton, Suwannee and Pasco counties prompted extra FWC response. Using swamp buggies, airplanes, helicopters, air boats, other patrol boats and patrol trucks, FWC officers were able to respond and transport other law enforcement partners to check on residents, assess flooding conditions, check utility systems, remove stranded vehicles, deliver food, water and supplies and prevent and address criminal activity.

Nearly 300 people were rescued or evacuated by FWC officers during Tropical Storm Debby and its aftermath. The rescues included three elderly men stranded in a tree in Wakulla County, a hospice patient with his life-sustaining equipment in Pasco County, a father and son camping on St. George Island and several family pets in Columbia County.

After the storm passed through, FWC officers continued to relay reconnaissance information to the SEOC and assist with operational planning. Columbia, Baker, Suwannee, Hamilton and Clay counties were still recovering from the impact of the storm long after other areas. Excessive rain over a four-day period caused local flooding, making travel difficult and even impossible in some areas. FWC officers worked around the clock on 12-hour shifts. Initially, they helped evacuate and rescue residents. Later, FWC officers conducted public safety patrols to protect residents and their property as some were unable to access their homes. They also helped extract vehicles and drivers, conducted medical rescues and welfare checks, patrolled for boating safety issues and provided high visibility roving patrols to detect and deter criminal activity. They even helped searched for an escaped inmate. As flooding conditions continued, FWC officers also provided information to citizens about flood conditions, passable routes, relief sites, humanitarian needs and wildlife problems.

FWC responds to Tropical Storm/Hurricane Isaac – FWC staff worked with other state agencies at the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) and in the field to respond to Hurricane Isaac. Isaac passed by Florida as a large tropical storm with the most significant impacts resulting from massive rainfall along Florida's southeastern coast. The greatest impacts were focused in Palm Beach

County where several neighborhoods and businesses experienced significant flooding.

Executive Director Nick Wiley was asked to join Governor Scott and a team of state and federal representatives (FEMA) on a trip to West Palm Beach on Wednesday, August 29th. The purpose of the trip was to get a first hand view of the impacts and emphasize that the State of Florida is doing everything possible to assist with response and recovery efforts. The agencies leading this effort include the South Florida Water Management District (District), Florida Division of Emergency Management, and the Division of Emergency Management in Palm Beach County. The District and Palm Beach County are doing an excellent job responding to this difficult situation by working to move water out of residential areas as quickly as possible and to address the needs of people who are stranded by the high water in their yards, roadways and some homes.

FWC Law Enforcement and Regional Director Chuck Collins have worked closely with local officials in the response and recovery. FWC officers have played a key role in conducting wellness checks and helping local officials take care of the needs of local residents. FWC Law Enforcement vehicles have been important tools in helping access neighborhoods where water levels are too high for vehicles with normal clearance.

FWC's J.W. Corbett Wildlife Management Area (60,348 acres in size) is located in the area that received the heaviest rainfall and subsequent flooding. The flooding has resulted in the need to close certain roads to public access. FWC staff from HSC are working diligently to manage water levels in the WMA to minimize any impacts on adjacent neighborhoods. There is limited capacity for drainage canals to handle the massive volume of flood waters from this once-in-100-year rainfall event. In fact, the WMA is waiting to release flood waters until after the local neighborhoods have drained waters from their roadways and homes. There are concerns and challenges associated with levee systems on the south side of the WMA that local staff are addressing in close partnership with the District given their lead role in managing the draining of flood waters.

FWC staff also will be closely monitoring water levels in the Water Conservation Areas (WCAs) as a portion of the flood waters will be moving south through these lands. Further closures to public access and hunting seasons may be warranted if water levels rise to the point that deer populations are stressed. Commission Bergeron has been working diligently to bring all partners together to make sure contingency plans are in place to move water through the WCAs as quickly as possible and avoid serious impact to wildlife.

Updates

Operation Wild Web -- The FWC's Internet Crimes Unit (ICU), along with officers and investigators from around the state, recently took part in a nationwide detail involving 16 states and three countries, organized by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This detail targeted the illegal sale of fish and wildlife over the internet. Over four days, 50 citations and warnings were issued for violations that include the

illegal sale of freshwater and saltwater fish, the illegal sale of alligators, the illegal sale of oysters and the illegal possession and sale of restricted species. The detail utilized volunteers from outside groups, such as the Humane Society, to collect leads on illegal sales of fish and wildlife over the internet. The leads were then forwarded to ICU members to attempt to arrange the purchase or sale of the item involved. The cases were then forwarded to officers and investigators in the field to complete.

Florida Wildlife Magazine -- On August 15, the new, online "Florida Wildlife" Magazine was officially launched at FloridaWildlifeMagazine.com. Its new digital format features a news area, which is updated as articles become available. The online magazine itself is published monthly and is designed specifically for viewing on computers, offering slideshows and bonus video features. As an online magazine, "Florida Wildlife" is available free of charge, and readers can sign up to receive automatic email alerts when a new issue is published.

Dry Tortugas Research Continues -- The FWC and our research partners continue to collaborate to evaluate the performance of reserves in and near Dry Tortugas National Park. At the June Commission meeting, staff highlighted the existence of a significant spawning aggregation of mutton snapper at Riley's Hump located in the Tortugas South Ecological Reserve within the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. Since then, NOAA offered FWC researchers the use of its RV Nancy Foster, a 187-foot research vessel, to retrieve and download data from our underwater listening posts, conduct seafloor mapping and continue research on the spawning aggregations at Riley's Hump. On the 10-day research trip that began on July 26, FWC scientists again observed mutton snapper aggregating, and confirmed the existence of a spawning aggregation of cubera snapper, as well as a probable spawning aggregation of ocean triggerfish. These observations further underscore the importance of the Dry Tortugas region's network of protected areas in providing substantial benefits to the reef fish communities of south Florida.

Events

Annual Kid's Fishing Days -- The FWC joined the West Palm Beach Fishing Club for their 25th Annual Kid's Fishing Days, July 31- August 2, at the Lake Park Harbor Marina in Palm Beach County. The annual event is a community outreach program designed to introduce disadvantaged children to fishing and the marine environment. Participating children had an opportunity to take a boat ride and fish on the open ocean. Various hands-on educational stations taught children all about our marine environment, why we need to protect it and why it's important to be an ethical angler. To date, more than 10,000 kids have participated in this event.

Partnerships

Youth Alligator Hunt -- The FWC in partnership with the South Florida Water Management District, The Florida Sportsmen's Conservation Association and the Broward County Airboaters Association held a youth alligator hunt August 3-5 in

Broward County. The goal of the hunt was to have participants learn safe and ethical hunting while experiencing the outdoors with a parent/guardian and other youths. Licensed trappers taught participants about proper harvesting techniques and FWC alligator management staff explained alligator biology. All five youths on the trip successfully harvested an alligator during the event.

Python Executive Leadership Workshop -- Burmese pythons are one of seven constrictor species listed as conditional species. This species can no longer be purchased or sold in the state. Currently, pythons are found primarily in South Florida in and around the Everglades. FWC staff are coordinating a meeting with top level leaders from partnering agencies including the Everglades National Park, Big Cypress National Preserve, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Geological Survey, Seminole Tribe, Miccosukee Tribe, South Florida Water Management District, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and the Florida Department of Agricultural and Consumer Services. The objective of the workshop is to develop a collaborative approach to provide direction in the areas of management, policy and research. Although postponed due to inclement weather associated with Tropical Storm Isaac, this meeting is anticipated to be rescheduled this fall.

FWC Acquisition and Restoration Council Appointee -- In consultation with the Chairman of the Commission, FWC has selected Dr. William E. Palmer as FWC's new member to the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC). ARC was established by the Florida Legislature under authority of Section 259.035, Florida Statutes, to serve as an advisory council to the Governor and Cabinet on land acquisition and management programs, and related issues. The ARC is composed of ten members which includes four gubernatorial appointees, one FWC appointee, and one Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services appointee, who initially serve either two or four year terms not to exceed six years of service. In addition, the following four public agencies serve as permanent members: FWC; Department of Environmental Protection; Florida Forest Service; and the Department of State, Division of Historical Resources. The term of FWC's current appointee to ARC, Mr. Lane Green, expired subsequent to the August 17, 2012 ARC meeting. Currently the Director of Game Bird Research at Tall Timbers, Mr. Palmer will serve on ARC as an effective voice for fish and wildlife conservation and fish and wildlife based public outdoor recreation. He has an extensive background in fish and wildlife research, management, and ecology.

Emerging Issues

The Florida grasshopper sparrow -- The Florida grasshopper sparrow is one of four subspecies of grasshopper sparrows in the U.S. It only occurs in dry prairie habitats of Central Florida, primarily on three public lands: Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area, Kissimmee Prairie State Preserve, and Avon Park Air Force Base. Florida grasshopper sparrows are ground-nesting birds that do not migrate. While only a small fraction of the sparrow's original habitat remains, much of that habitat is well managed for the bird, yet surveys have shown a serious decline across all areas. It is estimated that there are fewer than 1,000 birds currently remaining.

FWC is working closely with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Florida Forestry Service, State Parks, Avon Park Air Force Base, other public land managers, academic experts, non-governmental associations, and others to develop focused, collaborative research and management efforts to identify and implement possible actions to prevent the Florida grasshopper sparrow's extinction. Staff will keep the Commission apprised of these efforts and results.

Algal Blooms in the Indian River Lagoon System -- The FWC documented two different algal blooms in the Indian River Lagoon (IRL) system this summer. In mid-July, after receiving reports of discolored water in the Mosquito Lagoon, the FWC confirmed a bloom of "brown tide" algae in the northern IRL system. Researchers continued to document these algae through mid August and also identified a bloom of another algal species, *Pyrodinium bahamense*, in the Banana River and in the Indian River between Titusville and Cocoa.

These blooms are caused by different organisms than the one that caused the March 2011 to March 2012 bloom in the Northern IRL system, Banana River and lower Mosquito Lagoon. That year-long bloom of a non-toxic alga resulted in long periods of reduced water clarity, which led to a dramatic reduction of seagrass.

Brown tides occur naturally and can be common in areas with high salinity. They turn the water a murky brown, which may reduce water clarity. In the IRL, the reduction of water clarity may affect the seagrasses already stressed by the 2011-2012 algal bloom. Fish and shellfish kills can occur during brown tides, and shellfish can stop reproducing. However, there are no known harmful effects of brown tides to humans, and no toxins have been identified from brown tide algae.

Pyrodinium bahamense can be found in the Indian River Lagoon from late spring through late fall. This species produces a neurotoxin (saxitoxin) that can accumulate in shellfish and puffer fish. Since 2002, FWC has banned the harvest of puffer fish from the IRL because of the potential for poisoning incidents. The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) and the FWC monitor toxins in shellfish, and FDACS closes shellfish beds when saxitoxin concentrations exceed the regulatory limit. As with any algal bloom, fish kills can occur during *Pyrodinium* blooms.

The FWC, the St. Johns River Water Management District and other agencies and researchers continue to monitor the algal blooms as well as seagrasses in areas affected by these blooms.