

MEMORANDUM

TO: Commissioners
FROM: Nick Wiley, Executive Director
DATE: April 7, 2014
SUBJECT: April 2014 Executive Director's Report

Accomplishments/Awards

FWC Officer receives award for exceptional performance - The State Law Enforcement Chief's Association (SLECA) presented its 2013 Officer of the Year Award to Officer Lee Lawshe of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) at its annual awards ceremony earlier this spring in Tallahassee. Lawshe was selected from a group of four nominees from other law enforcement agencies. SLECA provides training and educational opportunities so members can better manage state law enforcement agencies. In addition, SLECA provides a forum for state law enforcement agencies to share best practices that create more efficient and effective delivery of law enforcement services to the public.

Friends of Istokpoga recognize Lakeland Staff - The Friends of Istokpoga recognized key FWC regional biologists Bill Pouder, Kelle Sullivan, Jim Reed and Steve Gornak for outstanding efforts and management of Lake Istokpoga. They have been instrumental in this complex and challenging conservation effort to help manage this valuable resource, which is becoming one of the top trophy bass fisheries in the nation.

Commitment to aquatic resources recognized - The Florida Chapter of the American Fisheries Society presented Bob Wattendorf, Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management, with the 2014 Rich Cailteux Award for long-term commitment to research, management, and conservation of Florida fisheries and aquatic resources. This award honors individuals for their career contributions to the fisheries profession and enhancing the visibility of the Florida Chapter.

Captain Phil Chapman Conservation Award - FWC Division of Marine Fisheries Management Deputy Director Jim Estes was honored with the prestigious Captain Phil Chapman Conservation Award by the Florida Guides Association. The award is presented annually to a person who shows true commitment to the conservation of Florida's natural resources.

FWC Officer Recognized for Conservation Work -The Naples Chapter of the Coastal Conservation Association of Florida recently awarded FWC's Officer Jason Futch as its Regional Officer of the Year. Officer Futch graduated from the Florida Public Safety Institute in the fall of 2010 and began his career in Collier County. Over the past year, Officer Futch has put in more than 2,000 hours of proactive enforcement on boating safety, freshwater and marine fisheries issues.

Artificial reef team wins Best Professional Poster award - FWC Division of Marine Fisheries Management staff won the Best Professional Poster award at the Florida American Fisheries Society meeting Feb. 18-20 in Ocala. The poster was titled "Reef fish sampling, PCB analysis results and visual monitoring associated with the Oriskany Reef, a decommissioned former Navy aircraft carrier sunk in 2006 as an artificial reef in the Northeastern Gulf of Mexico off Pensacola, FL." Staff members honored with this award included lead author Keith Mille, along with Jon Dodrill and Bill Horn.

In the News

Public meetings gather input on managing bears in central Florida - In March, FWC's bear management program held seven public meetings to discuss conservation and management of black bears in central Florida and how people can get involved. Under the [Florida Black Bear Management Plan](#) approved by Commissioners in 2012, seven Bear Management Units (BMUs) are being established throughout the state. The BMU approach will allow the FWC to manage bears based on the characteristics of bears, people, and habitat in different parts of Florida. The meetings in March were the first steps in creating the Central Bear Management Unit to manage bears in central Florida, which includes the state's largest bear subpopulation in Ocala National Forest. People who attended the meetings provided input on local bear issues and could decide to sign up to be active members of the Central Bear Stakeholder Group. The Central BMU includes 13 counties - Alachua, Bradford, Brevard, Clay, Flagler, Lake, Marion, Orange, Putnam, Seminole, St. Johns, Sumter and Volusia - and is the second one being implemented, after the West Panhandle BMU was initiated last fall. A press release on the meetings was sent out on Feb. 26: <http://www.myfwc.com/news/news-releases/2014/february/26/bear-meetings/>.

Biologists hope for another busy sea turtle nesting season - More sea turtles nest on Florida's sandy beaches than on any other U.S. coastline. Florida had a record number of loggerhead nests in 2012, followed by a record number of green turtle nests in 2013. In March, leatherback sea turtles began emerging onto beaches to lay their eggs along Florida's Atlantic coast from Broward to Brevard counties. In May, people in other coastal counties may see loggerhead and green

sea turtle “crawls,” the line of tracks they leave behind in the sand. In Florida, sea turtle landings on the beach are documented by about 2,500 FWC-permitted volunteers. The volunteers patrol more than 800 miles of sandy shoreline to mark and protect sea turtle nests and collect nesting data. In February, about 400 people attended the annual Florida Marine Turtle Permit Holders Meeting in Deerfield Beach for training and information sharing, with the meeting co-sponsored by the Sea Turtle Conservancy and FWC. FWC’s Facebook post on sea turtle nesting season was viewed by about 75,000 people. A press release on the start of sea turtle nesting was sent out on March 3: <http://www.myfwc.com/news/news-releases/2014/march/03/sea-turtles/>.

Bassmaster Elite tournament highlights quality Florida bass fishing –

Pro-anglers enjoyed a successful Bassmaster’s Elite Tournament on the St. Johns River. On March 23, Chris Lane, originally from Lakeland, won with a four-day total of 90.13 pound. Tournaments like this are estimated to generate about \$2 million in local expenditures.

Updates

Gopher tortoise smartphone app allows public to report sightings - A free “Florida Gopher Tortoise” smartphone app is now available. Using the smartphone app, Floridians and visitors to the state can photograph the gopher tortoise or its burrow and send the photo to the FWC. The GPS coordinates of the location where the tortoise or burrow was photographed will be transmitted automatically to the agency. The app was designed by the FWC to encourage public participation in gopher tortoise data collection and conservation. The information collected will help FWC biologists better understand where local populations of gopher tortoises are living in Florida. An interactive quiz and educational information on this threatened species is included in the app, available on Android and iPhone smartphones. The gopher tortoise app is being promoted on Facebook, MyFWC.com/Gopher Tortoise by clicking on [Florida Gopher Tortoise App](#), GovDelivery, and in the online Florida Wildlife magazine.

Project restores Lake Jackson in central Florida – FWC staff in the Division of Habitat and Species Conservation recently finished aquatic plant harvesting on Lake Jackson in Osceola County. About 21 acres of dense and floating vegetation were removed. A designated fish management area, Lake Jackson is part of the FWC’s Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area and the headwaters of the Kissimmee River. The project should improve anglers’ access to Lake Jackson and sport fishing there, as well as providing better habitat for wildlife such as the endangered snail kite.

Free Fishing Weekend - The first of two license-free recreational freshwater fishing weekends each year occurred April 5-6. During license-free freshwater fishing weekends (the first weekend in April and the second weekend in June) no recreational fishing license is required; however, all other bag limit, season, gear and size restrictions apply on these dates. To further encourage recreational fishing, the Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management is conducting a photo contest during April. Anglers who post a photo of their family or friends fishing in Florida's fresh waters on Twitter or Instagram, with #FLfish, will have a chance to win one of six surprise packages valued at \$100.

TrophyCatch Program - Between Jan. 1 and March 23 of this year, anglers entered approximately three times as many bass over eight pounds in TrophyCatch, as they did during the same period in 2013. Part of that three-fold increase was due to simplified rules and more anglers being aware. It is clear that Florida is producing and recycling vast numbers of trophy bass. Of four Hall of Fame entries this season, which started Oct. 1, the first was caught by Van Soles on Lake Kissimmee, during a tournament. The next three were caught in March from semi-private Lake Kingsley in Clay County. Currently, the largest verified bass is 14 pounds, 9 ounces. If it holds up, the angler will earn the TrophyCatch Championship ring in October, but there is a lot of catching and releasing still to be done.

Partnerships

Innovative approach to growing aquatic plants helps restore Florida lakes, rivers – FWC's Division of Habitat and Species Conservation worked with the University of Florida/IFAS to develop a new approach to growing and planting desirable aquatic vegetation to restore Florida's lakes and rivers. Plants are grown in a nursery on bio-degradable coconut fiber mats. Once plants are well-established, mats are rolled up and taken to the planting site where they are unrolled and staked to the lake or river bottom. This system enhances success by utilizing fully rooted actively growing plants and reduces the labor involved. A total of 1,500 square feet of this "sod" has been placed in seven lakes in areas that stretch from Volusia to Miami/Dade counties, including a self-sustaining population of eelgrass in Lake Jesup where previous, more traditional attempts failed. Submersed aquatic vegetation is important to the health of Florida's numerous lakes and rivers and a critical component of healthy fish and wildlife populations.

Apalachicola Oyster Status Update – According to reports, landings on the winter oyster reefs continue to be very poor. Commercial harvest of oysters in the winter areas has been closed on Saturdays and Sundays since Nov. 23, 2013. FWC staff continues to assist with technical support for the Florida lawsuit against Georgia in the U.S. Supreme Court. FWC is developing a research plan for a 5-year

oyster restoration research project that will utilize funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) which came from the Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund. FWC worked with the Governor's office, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity, and the Apalachicola Bay community to determine a spending plan for the \$6.3 million funding that is being provided by the Department of Commerce to mitigate the commercial oyster failure. The projects that will be funded focus on four areas and are subject to final approval from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The projects include:

- **\$4,569,767 for Apalachicola Bay Habitat Improvement.** Apalachicola Bay will be reshelled, which is the process of adding oyster shells to existing oyster reefs as a habitat improvement technique. Shelling operations will use assistance from local fishermen in addition to contracting with a barge operator. Hiring fishermen to conduct shelling operations produces economic activity across a larger portion of the community than barge shelling.
- **\$415,473 for Monitoring of the Wild Apalachicola Bay Oyster Population.** This will help evaluate the success of shelling programs, so that the fishery can be adaptively managed as the oyster population recovers.
- **\$563,233 for Vocational and Educational Training for Apalachicola Bay Oyster Industry Workers.** This training will be conducted so that those in the oyster industry can have a greater diversity of job opportunities.
- **\$768,060 for Apalachicola Bay Processor Facilities Upgrades.** In order for the oyster industry to remain viable, upgrades in processing facilities are needed. Cost reimbursement agreements (in whole or in part) will be made with wholesale dealers to make these improvements, based on losses incurred during the disaster.

FWC continues to work with the oyster industry on ideas for commercial oyster management in Apalachicola Bay.

Bay County Gun Range Groundbreaking Ceremony - The Bay County Board of County Commissioners and FWC held a groundbreaking ceremony of the Bay County gun range on March 19. Plans for the first phase of the new facility include 100-yard and 50-yard rifle ranges, a pistol range, classroom, restroom and maintenance building. The second phase of the project includes a 15-position sporting clays course and the final phase includes archery, trap and skeet fields. This facility is expected to be partially completed and open by early summer.

Tenoroc Shooting Center Remodeling Project and Charity Event - In a partnership with the Polk County Sheriff's office, the FWC Tenoroc Shooting Center Sporting Clay course was completely remodeled. The entire project took five weeks to complete. FWC provided building materials and the Polk County Sheriff's office provided construction supervision and labor from the jail. Sheriff Judd held his annual Polk County Sheriff Charities Clay event on March 8th at Tenoroc. The event was a success, having 360 registered shooters and raising approximately \$100,000 for charity. Sheriff Judd was very pleased with the outcome and is looking forward in assisting FWC with other construction projects.

Successes

Snail kite numbers rebound on Lake Okeechobee - The number of snail kites on Lake Okeechobee appears to be on the rebound, good news for this endangered species previously experiencing a severe population crash. Lake restoration efforts by the Division of Habitat and Species Conservation (HSC) are playing an important role in the snail kites' recovery. For the last two breeding seasons, there have been more snail kites and their nests on Lake Okeechobee than in any other wetland system in the state. During this period staff conducted extensive marsh habitat restoration on Lake Okeechobee including removing nuisance floating plants and organic sediment, planting native vegetation, and doing hydrologic restoration. HSC staff is coordinating its efforts with FWC snail kite biologists, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and herbicide contractors. Also restored were a number of spoil islands along the lakeshore, used by a variety of wildlife but especially valuable to birds.

Events

FWC hosting SEAFWA Conference - The 68th Annual Conference of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA) will be hosted by FWC October 19-22, 2014 in Destin, Florida. SEAFWA is an organization whose members are the state agencies with primary responsibility for management and protection of the fish and wildlife resources in 15 states, Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands. Member states are Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Presentation abstracts are being submitted with a strong link to the theme "Conservation: Managing for Resilience and Adaptability".

7th Annual Florida National Archery in the Schools Program - On February 22, FWC conducted the 7th Annual Florida National Archery in the Schools Program State Tournament at the Easton Newberry Archery Park in Newberry, Florida. Over

700 school children competed in this year's tournament, representing 35 public and private schools. Additionally, kids from two Homeschool Associations competed for the first time in a state tournament. FWC employees and volunteers staffed the event as lane judges and the tournament was once again a tremendous success.

Three Exotic Pet Amnesty Days scheduled in March and April - In March and April, the Division of Habitat and Species Conservation worked with partners to host Exotic Pet Amnesty Days in Miami, Melbourne, and Gainesville. The partners included the University of Florida (UF) Fort Lauderdale Research and Educational Center, Eastern Florida State College, Melbourne Wildlife Club, and UF's Student Chapter of the Wildlife Society. These events provide an opportunity for exotic pet owners to surrender pets with no penalties or cost, instead of releasing them into the wild where animals can do harm to native wildlife and in some cases develop breeding populations. If determined to be healthy by veterinarians, the pets are adopted by people pre-qualified by the FWC as knowledgeable and responsible pet owners. In 2013, 369 exotic pets were turned into the FWC, either at the seven Pet Amnesty Day events held that year or through calls to the exotic species hotline, 888-IVE-GOT-1. In the eight years of this successful, innovative FWC program to curb the number of exotic pet species released into the wild, a total of 1,705 exotic pets were surrendered to the agency.

Scrub-Jay Festival honored bird that lives only in Florida - The 5th annual Florida Scrub-Jay Festival was held Feb. 8 at the Lyonia Environmental Center in Volusia County. The free festival was an opportunity for children and adults to learn more about scrub-jays and explore first-hand the ecosystem where they live. The Florida scrub-jay is the only bird species that makes its home exclusively in the Sunshine State. It is a federally threatened species that depends on scrub habitat for survival. The festival was co-sponsored by the FWC, Volusia County, Florida Scrub-Jay Consortium, Florida Park Service and Around the Bend Nature Tours. The FWC sent out a Jan. 29 press release alerting media about this event:
<http://www.myfwc.com/news/news-releases/2014/january/29/scrub-jay-fest/>.

2014 Beau Turner Youth Conservation Center Outdoor Experience - FWC hosted the 2014 Beau Turner Youth Conservation Center Outdoor Experience on April 12th. This event was supported by fourteen other partnering organizations. In addition to the hands-on activities for youth, this year's program included performances by "the fastest shooter in the world" - Patrick Flanigan and the world-renowned "Master of the Longbow" - Byron Ferguson.