

MEMORANDUM

TO: Commissioners
FROM: Nick Wiley
DATE: September 3, 2014
SUBJECT: September 2014 Executive Director's Report

Accomplishments/Awards

Ron Taylor Received 2014 American Fisheries Society William E. Ricker Resource Conservation Award - biologist Ron Taylor, who works for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) Fish and Wildlife Research Institute, received the 2014 American Fisheries Society William E. Ricker Resource Conservation Award. This award is given annually, if warranted, to an individual or organization for long-term contributions that advance aquatic resource conservation at a national or international level. When notifying Taylor of his award, the society addressed him as the world expert on snook.

FWC Recognized for Excellence in Communications - The FWC received five awards in four categories for communications excellence during 2013 from the Association for Conservation Information (ACI), an organization of information and education professionals from state, federal and Canadian agencies, and private conservation organizations. The awards were presented at ACI's recent conference in Nebraska City, Nebraska. The FWC was honored in the following categories:

- Communication Campaign – Python Challenge
- Poster – Big Catch
- Poster – Nature Coast Birding & Wildlife Festival
- Brochure – Project WILD
- Internal Communications – The Inside Job

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

Panther biologists named Wildlife Conservationists of the Year by Florida Wildlife Federation - FWC panther biologists Mark Lotz, Dr. Dave Onorato, and Marc Criffield were chosen as the Florida Wildlife Federation's (FWF) 2014 Wildlife Conservationists of the Year. The three were recognized for exceptional work as Florida panther biologists who have contributed greatly to the research, management, and conservation of the panther population.

Restoration bringing largemouth bass back to Lake Trafford in Collier County - The FWC has worked since the mid-2000s to restore fish and wildlife in Lake Trafford, a 1,500-acre lake in Collier County, once one of the best places to catch largemouth bass in the state. In May, 15,000 plants were transplanted from

existing stands of bulrush and another aquatic grass in the southeast corner of Lake Trafford into deeper areas there. The transplants will provide protective habitat cover for forage fish and concentrate sportfish such as bass and black crappie for anglers. The grasses also contribute to aquatic plant diversity and acreage, restoring habitat for alligators, apple snails, and nesting birds. In the 1990s, the lake was impacted by major nutrient runoff and algae blooms. Recently, a local TV station reported an angler's catch during a tournament of an over 7-pound bass as evidence of the lake's successful comeback. The FWC also announced a one-time bonus incentive for the first angler with a bass heavier than 8 pounds from Lake Trafford approved for [TrophyCatch](#) recognition.

Progress on Suwannee Lake restoration with hope for return of trophy bass - Since its creation in 1967, the Suwannee Lake Fish Management Area (FMA) and its 63-acre manmade lake has been managed for the public as a sportfish fishery by the FWC. Over time, through a natural succession of intermittent droughts and invasive aquatic vegetation, the lake's reputation as a high-quality largemouth bass fishery declined. This fall, Suwannee Lake will be refilled with water and restocked with bream and forage fish, followed by re-stocking Florida's strain of largemouth bass in spring 2015. FWC Restoration of Suwannee Lake began in June 2013. The project's construction components were completed this past summer, including draining the lake, removing 60,000 cubic yards of organic material, and creating habitat-enhancing features such as submerged log piles and irregular bottom contours. Efforts were also made to improve angler access and plant native vegetation. Within a few years, Suwannee Lake should again be a productive fishery with high-quality trophy largemouth bass, providing jobs and recreational opportunities in rural Suwannee County.

Updates

Captive Wildlife Rule Review Process - Based on staff recommendation and input from stakeholders, FWC's captive wildlife rules (Florida Administrative Code Rule 68A-6, 68A-9 and 68A-12) were identified as needing review. The goal of the review process is to work with stakeholders to provide useful recommendations for improving captive wildlife regulations. FWC staff aims to ensure that all interested parties have a venue to address their concerns and provide comments, so the FWC will host seven public workshops around the state beginning late 2014 and ending in 2015, as well as posting information on MyFWC.com. The workshops will be held in Panama City, Jacksonville, Orlando, Tampa, Naples, West Palm Beach, and Miami. After stakeholder engagement is complete, draft rule language will be developed for further consideration by the Commission.

The Future of Anchoring Regulations in Florida - During the 2014 Legislative session, the Legislature approved FWC's request for a three-year extension to the current anchoring and mooring pilot program being used to explore potential options for regulating the anchoring or mooring of vessels outside of mooring fields. To further this initiative and work toward future recommendations from the FWC to both the Governor and Legislature, the Division of Law Enforcement is engaging stakeholders through a series of public meetings. The goal is to capture and better

understand their perspectives on potential regulatory options. The next steps include analysis of the comments received, refinement of potential options, and implementation of an online survey intended to provide a commenting opportunity to the community of interested people, local governments, and organizations. The Division will provide periodic updates to the Commission as appropriate.

TrophyCatch Website - The new TrophyCatch website hosted by Brandt, our Recreational License Information System vendor, is now operational. The World Wide Fishing Network helped FWC launch TrophyCatch in Oct. 2012 by providing free development and hosting valued at over \$100,000 for the first year and a half of the program. As the program gained in popularity, the need for technological enhancements, greater bandwidth, and advanced features became necessary. Brandt stepped up and had the ability to integrate directly with our license system making user registration easier. The new site incorporates the ability to upload video, as well as GPS and date information captured directly from photos if the information is digitally embedded. In the first 28 days, we had close to 4,000 sessions, 398 new registrants and 44 TrophyCatch submissions, plus 45 Big Catch entries. You can view the catches by going to www.TrophyCatchFlorida.com.

Lionfish - The FWC initiated a new lionfish outreach team program this past July. The team attends lionfish derbies, festivals, and other events to educate the public about this harmful invasive species. The team played an integral role during the 3rd Annual Lion Tamer Tournament at Captain Anderson's Marina in Panama City. Hundreds of Panama City residents and visitors visited the FWC tent where lionfish handling and fillet demonstrations were given and information was provided about how the invasive species is affecting local marine environments. The Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve (ANERR) organized a "Sci-Café" in downtown Apalachicola where over 60 people from the community gathered to listen to a presentation on lionfish while they enjoyed a free meal. During these events, many asked questions and provided ideas for population control of this species. By spreading the word to groups of different backgrounds, FWC's lionfish outreach team is encouraging participation in lionfish control state-wide. Report Florida Lionfish, the FWC's new lionfish data reporting app, has been downloaded by more than 2,000 people since it was released in May.

Four bear management units underway after 19 public workshops - In June and July, the FWC conducted three public workshops in south Florida to discuss management of Florida black bears and how people can get involved in working with the agency on bear issues. Under the FWC's Florida Black Bear Management Plan approved in 2012, seven bear management units (BMUs) will be established to allow the FWC to manage bears based on the characteristics of bears, people, and habitat in different parts of Florida. The four BMUs established so far are the South BMU, Central BMU, Eastern Panhandle BMU and West Panhandle BMU. Each contains a separate subpopulation of Florida black bears. During the 19 BMU public workshops conducted to date by Black Bear Management Stakeholder Coordinator Kaitlin Goode, staff listened carefully to local citizens and heard diverse perspectives regarding bear conservation in their area. Interested individuals were invited to sign up to be members of their local Bear Stakeholder Group. So far two

Bear Stakeholder Groups have been formed and meet quarterly to discuss bear management issues. This fall, the three remaining BMUs will be initiated: the North BMU, South Central BMU, and Big Bend BMU.

Apalachicola Oyster Status Update – Apalachicola oyster harvests from the winter reefs were greatly reduced last year and are expected to be even more drastically reduced this year due to low river flows for several years. In response, changes to the existing harvest regulations were necessary for the winter season that started September 1. FWC issued an Executive Order restricting commercial and recreational harvest by lowering the bag limits; closing commercial harvest on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays; and closing certain bars under specific conditions. FWC staff will be working closely with FDACS and the oyster industry to monitor the status of the oyster population and harvest as the winter harvest season begins. It is likely further management measures will be necessary, possibly including complete closures.

FWC staff are making every effort to coordinate and communicate these efforts with the local community, the oyster industry, local and state elected officials, and all of our state level agency partners. In this regard, these recent oyster recovery measures were discussed with representatives of the oyster industry, local government officials, staff for state and federal elected officials, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), the University of Florida/IFAS, Northwest Florida Water Management District, and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP). FWC staff are working with the same entities to develop a long-term comprehensive oyster recovery and management plan.

FWC staff continues to provide technical support for the Florida lawsuit against Georgia in the U.S. Supreme Court. FWC worked closely with the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (FDEO), FDACS and FDEP to finalize a spending plan for the \$6.3 million funding from the US Department of Commerce to mitigate the commercial oyster failure. Funding support for the local community should become available through FDEO this fall.

Emerging Issues

Quota Hunt Permits - FWC has continued to experience problems with re-issuing returned quota hunt permits through the Recreational License Issuance Services (RLIS) system. We had been using a first-come, first-served (FCFS) process every Tuesday morning at 10:00 am to reissue permits for quota (limited-entry) hunts. These are permits that are turned in by people who originally received them and cannot or will not use them. The reissuance process, which makes returned permits available to others, was not working smoothly.

Because of a long history of problems with issuing permits on a first-come, first-served basis, we have been gradually moving away from this method for limited-entry permits overall, in favor of a random-draw process, which includes an application period before a computerized random selection process is run to issue

available permits. For speed and efficiency's sake, we retained the FCFS process for those events that we believed would be lower demand and where FCFS was more likely to succeed. At the same time, FWC staff and the RLIS vendor, Brandt, Inc., have been making technical improvements and repairs to help ensure success of the remaining FCFS processes. However, despite FWC and the vendor devoting every reasonable effort and resource toward resolving these issues, they continued.

In response, we now have implemented a new method of issuing returned quota hunt permits. As of September 6, we now have short applications periods from noon on Saturday through noon on Tuesday, wherein hunters interested in any available returned quota hunts may submit an application with up to five choices for any permits returned for that period. While Brandt works to streamline this new issuance method, we will have these three-day application periods followed by lotteries for each permit type, with the results posted by the following morning – by 10:00 a.m. on Wednesdays.

Staff has communicated with affected stakeholders through email, social media, and other outreach about these changes. Overall, these modifications are needed for our customers to undoubtedly trust that we have addressed the problems and that all customers are treated fairly in their chances to obtain these hunting opportunities. We will consider similar changes next year for other components of issuing limited entry hunting permits. Some of these may require rule changes for Commission consideration.

Partnerships

Judge Farms Project - The Judge Farm property is located on the north shore of Lake Tohopekaliga (Osceola County) adjacent to the City of Kissimmee. Recently a joint venture between the cities of Kissimmee and St. Cloud, Osceola County, and the Toho Water Authority was forged to purchase this property and accomplish the following goals: treat two of three storm water ditches that discharge untreated water into Lake Tohopekaliga from Kissimmee; cease pumping nutrient-rich water into the lake from Judge Farm's operations; increase surface water storage, reclaim water for irrigation, increase aquifer recharging to decrease water withdrawals from the lake; create economic opportunities by expanding Heritage Park and initiating a new International Business Park, and provide opportunities for picnicking, wildlife viewing and fishing. The FWC provided technical assistance in this endeavor and may be able to provide financial assistance to create wetlands, a critically important habitat type in Florida. The FWC looks forward to continuing its partnership with the cities of Kissimmee and St. Cloud, and Osceola County to ensure optimal benefits for Lake Tohopekaliga, its users, fish and wildlife, and associated wetlands.

US Fish and Wildlife Service Director Visit - Dan Ashe, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and James Kurth, Chief of the National Wildlife Refuge System, recently visited south Florida where they toured the area around the new Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge, discussed current state and federal efforts to identify and prioritize conservation lands, and discussed Everglades restoration. The National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) organized the visit

where Commissioner Liesa Priddy participated in a partnership meeting at the Adams Ranch and then Commissioner Ron Bergeron hosted a separate meeting to discuss planning efforts regarding the future of conservation lands and the key wildlife issues associated with Everglades restoration. This visit provided a good opportunity for Commissioners and FWC staff to discuss Florida's critical conservation issues directly with FWS leadership emphasizing the importance of private lands and landowners as stewards of Florida's fish and wildlife resources and our mutual interest in protecting fish and wildlife diversity while restoring Florida's Everglades. Participants from FWS, FWC, and NWRA also discussed our mutual commitments to continuing efforts that will assure sustainable access for lands that may be conserved as part of the refuge and expand public hunting opportunities on other National Wildlife Refuges in Florida.

Biscayne National Park - Biscayne National Park will host three public workshops in Southeast Florida Sept. 22-24 to gather public input on its General Management Plan which will establish an overall long-term management philosophy about visitor use and activities in the park. The upcoming workshops will focus on three of the seven proposals, more specifically alternatives 4, 6, and 7.

- Alternative 4 includes the creation of a no-fishing marine reserve zone. FWC did not support this proposal as the park had not yet considered less restrictive measures that might accomplish the National Park Service's (NPS) goals for the park.
- Alternative 6, created by NPS in conjunction with FWC and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), would create a special recreation zone that is 50 percent larger than the proposed no-fishing marine reserve, where only certain types of fishing would be allowed. Recreational anglers would be required to obtain a permit to fish in this area and a limited number of these permits would be available.
- Alternative 7 would create a special recreation zone and prohibit some types of fishing, but does not include a recreational fishing permit program. Instead, the special recreation zone would be closed to all fishing from June to September.

The NPS has received a lot of public comment on Alternatives 4 and 6, but very little on Alternative 7.

Rare Schaus' swallowtail butterflies released in Florida Keys - In 2012, only four Schaus' swallowtail butterflies were found on a single island in Biscayne National Park. Recently over 1,000 Schaus' swallowtail butterflies and larvae were released into their natural habitat. Making this possible is a captive breeding program for this butterfly at the University of Florida's McGuire Center for Lepidoptera, plus support from multiple agencies including the FWC. The comeback effort concerning the Schaus' swallowtail was featured on MyFWC Facebook on June 17, as well as in a National Park Service press release, <http://www.nps.gov/bisc/parknews/endangered-schaus-swallowtail-butterfly-release-in-biscayne-national-park.htm>.

Coastal marsh restoration begins at New Smyrna Beach - The FWC recently broke ground on a 4-acre coastal marsh restoration project at its New Smyrna Beach marine fisheries enhancement center in Volusia County. This center is located on land formerly occupied by New Smyrna Beach High School, which was constructed on filled-in coastal marsh. The project will return a portion of the site to the original coastal marsh habitat, providing a critical enhancement of Florida's fish and wildlife populations. FWC worked with multiple partners including the St. Johns River Water Management District, New Smyrna Beach Marine Discovery Center, Coastal Del Mar, Inc., NOAA, Wildlife Foundation of Florida, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to develop a successful grant proposal for the restoration funded by NOAA.

Teachers learn about invasive plants and their impact at Plant Camp – This past June, teachers from around the state received intensive hands-on training from biologists and others involved in plant management on how to identify invasive plants and understand their impact on Florida's fish and wildlife habitats. Now in its ninth year, Plant Camp is co-sponsored by the FWC through HSC's Invasive Plant Management Section and the University of Florida/IFAS Center for Aquatic and Invasive Plants. The teachers go on hikes, explore lakes, and experience nature first-hand. They leave Plant Camp with tools for sharing this knowledge with their students and fellow educators. All materials and curriculum provided are aligned with Florida Standards. The goal of Plant Camp is to help teachers educate the next generation about conservation of Florida's fish, wildlife, and habitats.

Workshops share gopher tortoise conservation opportunities with local governments – This past summer, the FWC held four regional workshops providing an overview of the Gopher Tortoise Management Plan and focusing on ways the FWC and local governments can coordinate on protecting the threatened gopher tortoise and its burrows. For example, 25 people attended the first June 25 workshop in Leon County, including representatives of county, state and federal agencies, the military, private environmental consultants and local residents. Afterwards participants were invited on a site visit to St. Marks Headwater, a county-owned and managed site, to further discuss gopher tortoise habitat management. Other workshops were held in Seminole, Polk, and Martin counties.

Volunteers improve shooting experience - In Palm Beach County, local union members volunteered their time and trade skills through the Union Sportsmen's Alliance's Work Boots on the Ground program to install a new roof on the Everglades Youth Camp shooting range, so youth and adults who utilize the camp are protected from the elements while perfecting their shooting skills. This was made possible by 39 workers from: Sheet Metal Workers Local 32; Carpenters Local 1809; Electrical Workers Local 359 and Insulators Local 60.

Events

Celebrating 20 Years of MarineQuest - On Saturday, October 18th, the public is invited to enjoy MarineQuest at FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute in St.

Petersburg, Florida. Visitors can learn about fish and wildlife research in Florida through dozens of interactive exhibits staffed by some of the state's top scientists. People can see live alligators and snakes, help researchers with a simulated manatee rescue, and check out live critters found in Tampa Bay at touch tanks. Special activities for children include wildlife origami and gyotaku, the Japanese art of fish printing. We invite you to join us as we celebrate 20 years of MarineQuest. Additional information is available at MyFWC.com/MarineQuest.

Special Recognition

Marcia Crawford serves FWC for 40 years - Marcia began her career with the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (GFC) on September 13, 1974. Since starting with the agency she has filled a variety of positions, from roles providing administrative support to dispatch, starting in the Lakeland office and eventually transferring to the Ocala office in 1990. She stayed with the GFC when it merged with Florida Marine Patrol to become the FWC. She was eligible to retire ten years ago, but continues to work diligently for FWC to this day.