



The purpose of this presentation is to inform the Commission of proposed rule amendments on four Quail Enhancement Areas (Three Lakes WMA, Jennings Forest WMA, Blackwater WMA and Apalachicola WMA). Staff worked with partner agencies on development of the proposed rule amendments. Full text of all proposed rule amendments (Rules 68A-15.062, 15.063 and 15.065) are included in the additional background.

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Update Changes:

Slide 7 bullets and notes added regarding results of stakeholder outreach.

Bobwhite Habitat Management



Increased bobwhite management continues throughout the state on Upland Ecosystem Restoration Project (UERP) and selected bobwhite focal areas. Thanks to work conducted through UERP and agency partners, we now have over 150,000 acres of public land under favorable bobwhite management. Land management activities (fire frequency, timber harvest, hardwood reduction, winter disking) continue to have a positive effect on population growth.

UERP is a cooperative partnership between the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Florida Forest Service, U.S. Forest Service, Florida Park Service, and Tall Timbers Research Station and Land Conservancy to improve populations of bobwhite and other declining fire-dependent species on public land throughout Florida.

Quail Enhancement Areas – Current

- Established in 2010
- Quota permit required, no exemptions
- Two persons per quota permit
- Maximum of 8 Saturdays of hunting in January and February
- Bag limit on bobwhite of 6 per quota permit
- Number of quota permits established by order of the Executive Director



In conjunction with on-going habitat management, FWC Commissioners established Quail Enhancement Areas (QEAs) on portions of five Wildlife Management Areas (Three Lakes WMA, Jennings Forest WMA, Blackwater WMA, Apalachicola WMA and Twin Rivers WMA -Blue Springs Unit) in 2010. QEAs were designed to balance pressure and harvest as bobwhite populations improved with increased habitat management. Each QEA requires a quota permit which allows 2 persons per permit and a bag limit of 6 bobwhite per permit. A maximum of 8 Saturdays of hunting was permitted in January and February. FWC Commissioners authorized the Executive Director to establish the number of quota permits annually, based on fall population surveys.

Since establishment, four of the QEAs (Three Lakes WMA, Jennings Forest WMA, Blackwater WMA and Apalachicola WMA) have experienced low attendance. Reasons for low attendance on these four QEAs has been attributed to poor weather conditions on day of hunt and hunters having conflicts arising on the permitted hunt date.

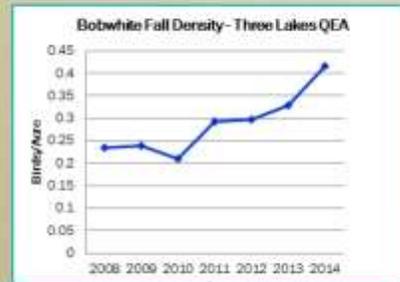
Harvest and Population Data

Harvest Data

- Multi-state annual average harvest: 1.3 birds per man-day
- Florida public land harvest: 0.16 birds per man-day

Population Data

- QEA populations continue to expand
- Based on average harvest, bobwhite numbers should continue to expand



Since QEAs were designed to balance pressure and harvest, a conservative approach was adopted. While we do not collect harvest data from QEAs, we do have several gauges for annual QEA harvest. First, a public land harvest analysis conducted by Dr. James Martin (University of Georgia) across multiple states averaged 1.3 birds per man-day on public land. Second, a 2012 – 2013 Florida Triennial Small Game Survey showed an average of 0.16 birds per man-day on public land. In each case man-day was equal to a day spent hunting. Unsolicited feedback from QEA hunters, regarding harvest, fall within these reported values.

Overall, bobwhite populations on QEAs have expanded as a result of targeted increased land management. The slide above is an example of population data from the QEA on Three Lakes WMA. Based on harvest data and population data, bobwhite numbers should continue to increase while providing greater opportunity.

Proposed Amendments to QEA Rules

- Remove quota permit requirements
- Establish a bag limit on bobwhite of 6 per person
- Establish up to 16 days (Saturday and Wednesday) of quail hunting in January and February, combined
- Season will be established annually by order of the Executive Director, based on annual fall densities



Using Dr. Martin's harvest data, the 2012 – 2013 Small Game Survey, and current population information staff believes QEAs can support greater access and still have quail populations grow. Therefore, the proposed rule amendments would remove quota permit requirements, establish a bag limit of 6 bobwhite per person, and provide up to 16 days (Saturday and Wednesday) of quail hunting in January and February as established annually by order of the Executive Director based on annual fall densities on the QEAs on Three Lakes, Jennings Forest, Blackwater, and Apalachicola WMAs. The 15% maximum harvest limit will be removed.

Fall population surveys will be used to provide annual density estimates and overall health of the population. Therefore, if the density estimate is low on a given year, the number of days will/can be adjusted accordingly.

Intended Benefits

- Expand hunting opportunities
- Improve hunter satisfaction
- Increase hunter access and attendance



The proposed rule amendments will expand hunting opportunities, should improve hunter satisfaction and increase hunter access and attendance (e.g. allow hunters to plan around scheduling conflicts, poor weather, and take advantage of last minute opportunities) all while seeing bobwhite populations continue to expand.

Outreach Results



- Online poll - 805 responses
- Strong support for the proposed changes
- Concerns regarding statewide quail population and habitat management were the common responses for opposition
- 79% of respondents who never hunted QEAs would consider hunting if rules were changed



We used Survey Monkey to ask stakeholders their opinion on this proposed rule change. We sent an invitation to participate through GovDelivery to over 13,000 recipients, which included subscribers interested in general FWC news releases, rules and regulations, and information pertinent to FWC management area users.

We received 805 total responses. The survey showed strong support for the proposed changes (87% support the proposed amendments). Out of the 20% of respondents that had previously applied for QEA quota permits, 85% supported the changes. Comments in opposition related mostly to concern for statewide quail population and proper habitat management on Florida's public lands.

We also asked if the rule changes were adopted, would you consider hunting on one of the QEAs? Of the 642 respondents that had not previously applied for a QEA quota permit, 505 (79%) said they would consider hunting these areas if the proposed rule changes were adopted.

Requested Action

- Approval to advertise the draft rule amendments for final adoption at June 2015 meeting
- Provide direction and guidance for staff as we continue working with the public



Staff is requesting Commission approval to advertise draft rule amendments for Rules 68A-15.062, 15.063, and 15.065, FAC for final public hearing at the June 2015 Commission meeting. If adopted, the proposed rule amendments would be in effect for the 2015-2016 hunting season.