Proposed Rule Amendments for Quail Enhancement Areas

April 2015

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Division of Hunting and Game Management

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) and request approval to advertise the proposed rule amendments. 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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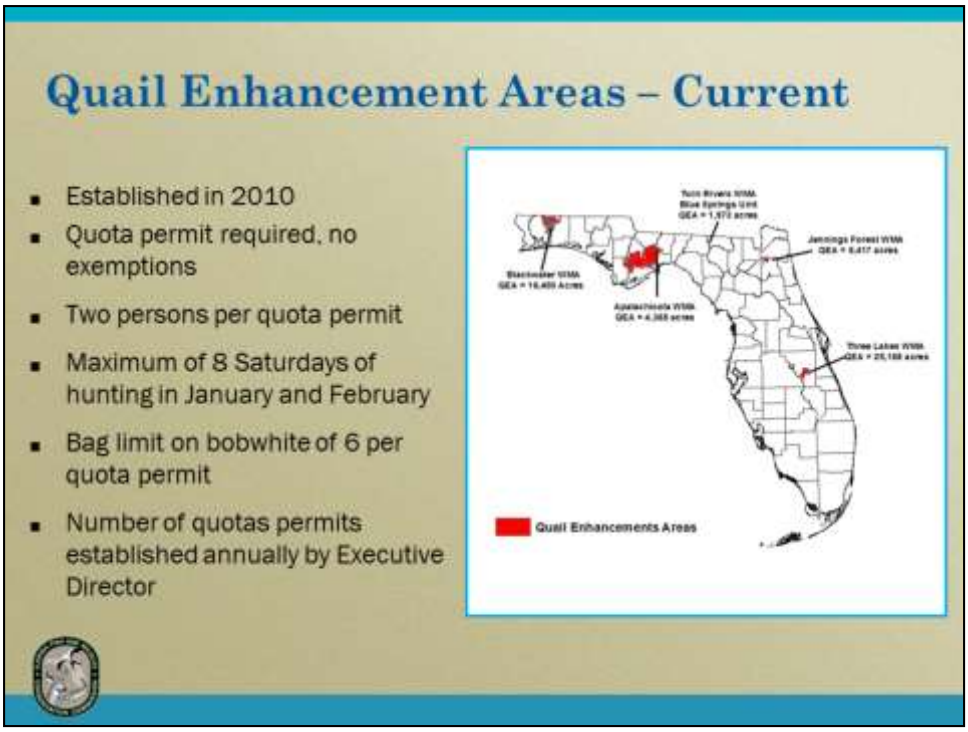
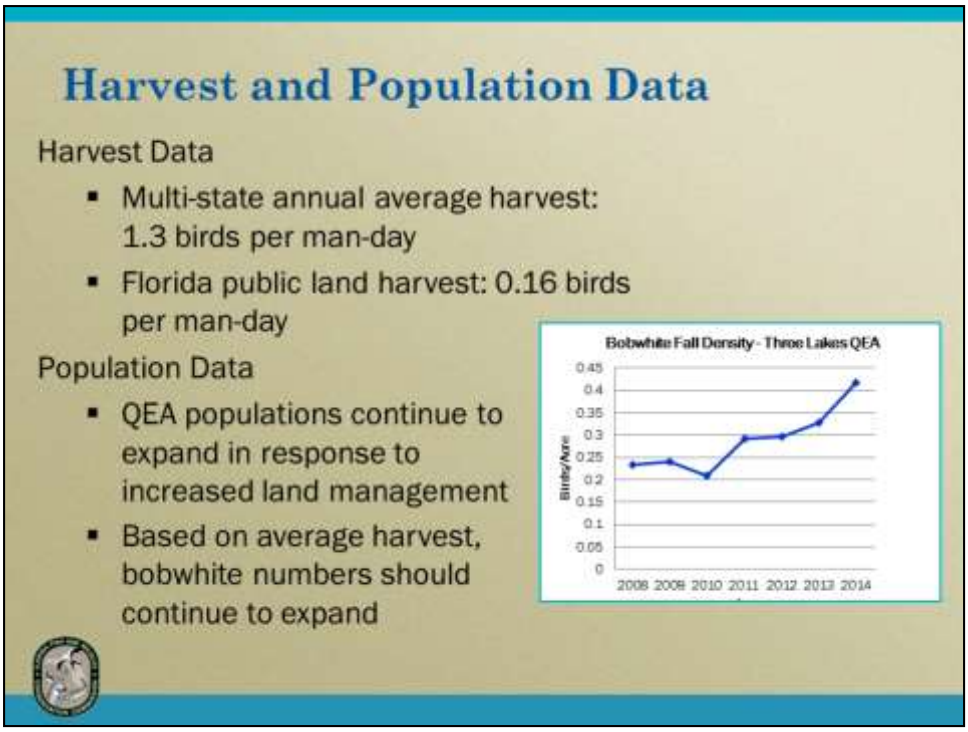
Increased bobwhite management continues throughout the state on Upland Ecosystem Restoration Project (UERP) and selected bobwhite focal areas. Thanks to work conducted through UERP and agency partners, we now have over 150,000 acres of public land under favorable bobwhite management. Land management 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.



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.



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.

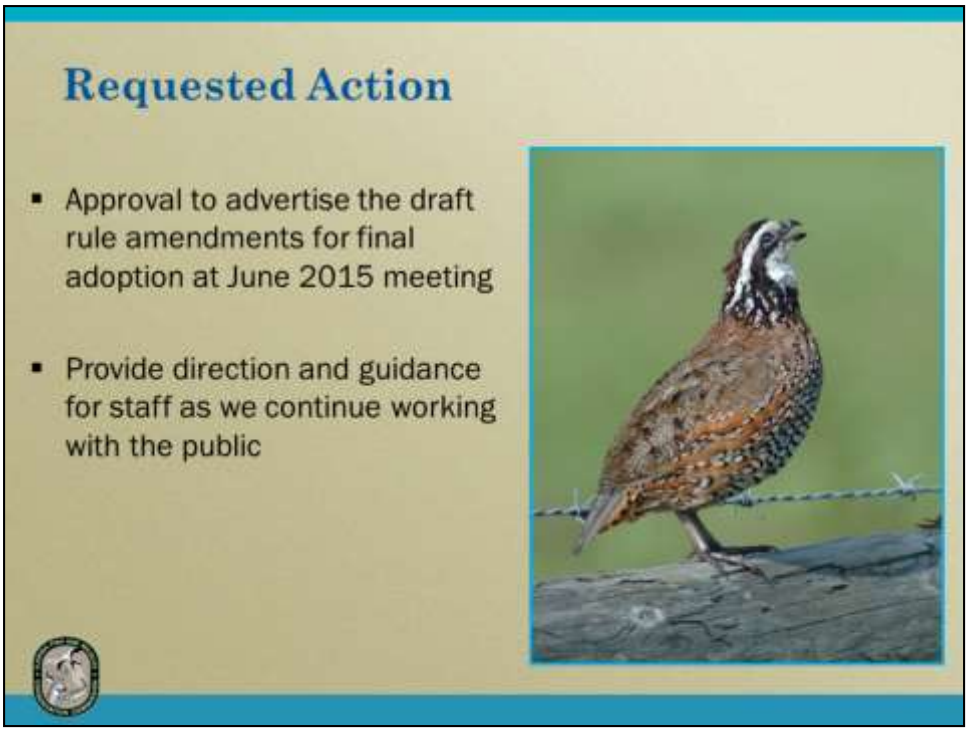
Using Dr. Martin's harvest data, the 2012 – 2013 Small Game Survey, and current population information staff believes QEAs can support greater access and still have quail populations grow. Therefore, the proposed rule amendments would remove quota permit requirements, establish a bag limit of 6 bobwhite 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.

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

- to be developed shortly before Commission meeting



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.