

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Commissioners

FROM: Nick Wiley

DATE: April 7, 2015

SUBJECT: April 2015 Executive Director's Report

### **Accomplishments/Awards**

**FWC officers recognized for exceptional leadership and training** - The State Law Enforcement Chief's Association (SLECA) presented its 2014 Leadership Award to Lt. Avery Tubbs and its 2014 Outstanding Law Enforcement Trainer of the Year Award to Lt. Robert Bratton at its annual awards ceremony earlier this spring in Tallahassee. SLECA provides a forum for state law enforcement agencies to share best practices which creates more efficient and effective delivery of law enforcement services to the public. Tubbs and Bratton were selected from a broad group of nominees from other law enforcement agencies.

**Imperiled species management plan ready for input** - The draft Imperiled Species Management Plan, developed over multiple years by FWC staff in conjunction with partners and stakeholders, focuses on improving imperiled species conservation by filling in key information gaps and emphasizing cooperative efforts with other agencies, private landowners, stakeholders, and the public. The plan is based on an innovative new wildlife conservation model designed to achieve conservation efficiencies and accountability by identifying key priorities and measurable objectives. Of the 60 species included in the plan, 37 will remain listed as state-threatened, three are now federally listed, 15 will be removed from the imperiled species list, and the five remaining require additional data prior to finalizing their status. The draft plan was available online for public comment through March 13<sup>th</sup>. Additional public comment periods are planned.

**FWC recognized for lionfish efforts** - Florida TaxWatch, the fiscal watchdog group in Tallahassee, released a report applauding the FWC's efforts to tame the lionfish. This rapidly breeding pest, normally found in the western Pacific Ocean, can consume more than 70 types of fish, and has become a threat to Florida's big-dollar sport and commercial fishing industries, as well as its tourist-attracting coral reefs. TaxWatch noted that the FWC has met the threat by prohibiting its import for aquarium sales, organizing lionfish derbies (with no bag limit), and developing a smartphone app to report sightings.

### **Partnerships**

**The 2016 Python Challenge™** - The FWC intends to host a second Python Challenge™ campaign building on the successes of the 2013 Python Challenge™. Starting in January 2016, the 2016 Python Challenge™ will include an incentive-

based removal of Burmese pythons with prizes for people bringing in pythons. As part of this invasive species awareness campaign, at least two public awareness and educational events will be held including a kickoff event and a high-level professional awards ceremony. The Fish and Wildlife Foundation of Florida is partnering with FWC for the 2016 Python Challenge™ by soliciting sponsorships and helping organize the event. Staff will address the Commission on this item at the June 2015 Commission meeting.

**TrophyCatch helps demonstrate Lake Trafford restoration** - John Stewart of Alva caught, documented, and released an 8-pound, 2-ounce Florida largemouth bass on Lake Trafford. Over the past several years, Lake Trafford has been the focus of a major multi-agency restoration project. Restoration efforts included dredging more than six million cubic yards of muck from the lake and re-establishing native vegetation. This bass showcases the remarkable recovery of fishing at Lake Trafford after years of restoration efforts led by citizens of Collier County, the South Florida Water Management District, and the FWC.

**Angling improvements at Lake Harris** - FWC staff is working with partners to install artificial structures in the five major lakes in the Harris Chain of Lakes to provide additional fishing opportunities that enhance angler effort and fishing success by strategically placing the structures to congregate sport fish. Sixty-five volunteers from Hawthorne Fishing Club helped construct and install ¼-acre plastic fish attractors consisting of 100 units each in Lake Harris. Including work on Lake Apopka, Lake Griffin, and Lake Harris, the Hawthorne Team assisted in constructing 1,000 fish attractors for the Harris Chain of Lakes. Other partners for this project include the Lake County Water Authority, the Harris Chain of Lakes Bassmasters, and the Villages Fishing Club.

## **Events**

**FWC hosts 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Outdoor Experience** - The eighth annual Outdoor Experience is scheduled for Saturday, May 2<sup>nd</sup>, at the Beau Turner Youth Conservation Center from 10:00 AM to 3:00 PM. This Saturday event is free and open to all ages. The FWC and its partners will have activities and educational programs that highlight the conservation of Florida's fish and wildlife resources. Activities include fishing, archery, shooting sports stations, a K-9 demonstration, wild animal displays, hayrides, performances by professional archer Randy Oitker and the Gould Brothers, and more.

**Lionfish Removal and Awareness Day Festival** – FWC is hosting a festival in Pensacola on May 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> to celebrate the first annual Lionfish Removal and Awareness Day. The festival will be held in conjunction with a lionfish tournament sponsored by the Gulf Coast Lionfish Coalition. Several other lionfish removal events are scheduled across the state that weekend and FWC will promote these events through video at the Pensacola festival. The goal of these events is to see how many lionfish can be removed statewide in one weekend. The festival will include lionfish tastings, fillet and cooking demonstrations, more than 40 vendors and educational booths, family-friendly activities, music, and more.

**Courtney Tye Memorial** - University of Florida students, the FWC, Florida Forest Service staff, and the friends and family of Courtney Tye joined together to participate in a memorial tree planting and restoration project on February 28<sup>th</sup> at the Watermelon Pond Wildlife and Environmental Area (WEA). Courtney, a FWC biologist working on her Master's Degree at the University of Florida, passed away in 2014. Forty-five adults and children planted three long leaf pines and installed a memorial plaque near the WEA entrance. Following the memorial, the group traveled into the WEA and planted 1000 longleaf pines.

**Heroes on the Water** - Heroes on the Water (HOW) is a national program designed to help US Military veterans decompress from the stresses associated with combat and the physical rigors of rehabilitation. Officer Josh Greenier, Inv. John Brechler, and Lt. Steve Zukowsky participated in the HOW, Northeast Florida Chapter, kayak outing in the Palm Valley area of the Intracoastal Waterway in February. The officers provided vessel traffic control and general waterborne security for approximately 68 military veterans and their family members. Jim Sweatman, a FWC biologist, also participated in the HOW, Central Florida Chapter, event held at Turkey Lake on February 22<sup>nd</sup>.

**2015 Florida State Fair** - The theme of the FWC's exhibit at the 2015 Florida State Fair was "The FWC is Management, Research and Law Enforcement". From February 5<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup>, an estimated 311,064 people toured the exhibit. Static and video displays called attention to The Florida Youth Conservation Centers Network, law enforcement recruiting, boating safety, and shorebird and sea turtle conservation. Live native fish and wildlife including a black bear, panther, alligator snapping turtle, four species of black bass, panfish, and a sea grass display with grouper and flounder helped focus fair patrons on conservation messages about those species. Live nonnative fish and plant displays were accompanied by "do not release" messages about lionfish, swamp eels, tegus, grass carp, and hydrilla. An interactive display about nonnative species involved unrolling a 17-foot long Burmese python skin.

### **In the News**

**Crash at Eglin Air Force Base** - On March 11<sup>th</sup>, a National Guard helicopter conducting a training mission went down near Eglin Air Force Base in the Panhandle. Seven Marines and four soldiers aboard the UH-60 Blackhawk were presumed dead. FWC officers from the Northwest region immediately responded to the crash and were actively engaged in search and rescue efforts. Working in conjunction with the Santa Rosa and Okaloosa County Sherriff's Offices, Eglin Fire Rescue, the United States Coast Guard, and other agencies, our officers located the wreckage and aided in recovering nine passengers.

**Four constrictor snakes newly listed as injurious species** - The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) announced the listing of four additional nonnative large constrictor snakes as injurious wildlife species under the Lacey Act: the reticulated python, DeSchauensee's anaconda, green anaconda, and Beni anaconda. Listing these snakes as "injurious" means importation and interstate transportation of

these species is now prohibited by the federal government. Two of the newly declared injurious species, the reticulated python and green anaconda, are listed as “conditional” by the FWC. A person cannot acquire conditional species as personal pets in the State of Florida; possession of these animals is only allowed for commercial, research, or exhibition purposes.

## **Updates**

### **FWC division of law enforcement receives reaccreditation confirmation -**

Last year, assessors determined that FWC adhered to standards set by the Commission for Florida Law Enforcement Accreditation (CFA), and unanimously recommended to CFA that FWC’s Division of Law Enforcement be reaccredited. FWC Commissioner Rick Hanas addressed CFA on behalf of the FWC at the CFA Commission meeting on February 25<sup>th</sup> in Daytona Beach where the assessor recommendation was reviewed and confirmed by CFA Commissioners.

**FWC captive wildlife rule review workshops** - FWC staff held eight public meetings around the state to let the public address captive wildlife staff regarding their concerns and provide comments as part of FWC’s captive wildlife rule review process. The final three public meetings were held in Jacksonville, Orlando, and Ocala. Twenty-six members of the public attended the meeting in Jacksonville and 22 recommendations were received. Twenty-five members of the public attended the meeting in Orlando and 11 recommendations were received. Twenty-one members of the public attended the meeting in Ocala and 12 recommendations were received. Feedback included comments on standard caging requirements, the classifications of captive wildlife and experience documentation, invasive reptile species, importation of captive wildlife, and possession of protected species. After stakeholder engagement is complete, draft rule language will be developed as appropriate for further consideration by the Commission.

**Bully net/Barracuda Workshops** – FWC staff hosted several workshops between February and March to gather public input on management of the commercial bully net fishery for lobster and on barracuda management. Approximately 150 stakeholders attended the three bully net workshops. Staff received mixed opinions on whether or not the Commission should create a limited entry program for commercial bully netting. The majority of stakeholders opposed measures that would lower the daily limit or limit the times of day when bully netted lobster could be on board the harvester’s vessel. The FWC received mixed reviews on several other management options that were presented. Approximately 100 stakeholders attended the three barracuda workshops. Many expressed concern that the number of barracudas in Miami-Dade, Palm Beach, and on the flats in the Keys declined substantially over the last five years and were in favor of additional regulations including size and bag limits. These items will be brought before the Commission at a future meeting.

**Apalachicola Oyster Status Update** – FWC is working with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (DACS) to evaluate the Apalachicola oyster population as harvests from the winter reefs continue to be low.

FWC staff is working closely with the Department of Economic Opportunity, DACS, and the local oyster industry to identify suitable sites in the Bay for habitat improvements. Oyster fishermen began placing shell on important commercial oyster harvesting bars. The Department of Economic Opportunity, with funding provided by the US Department of Commerce, should be able to continue this program for a couple more months. In response to requests from the industry, FWC Law Enforcement increased their patrols in the Bay. Staff continue to provide expertise related to the lawsuit Florida filed against Georgia pertaining to harm to Florida's resources. Oyster sampling to determine the status of the reefs that can be harvested this summer will begin soon.

**Webinars give public access to proposals on bear management** - FWC hosted two webinars in March to engage the public on the current efforts and proposed changes to improve Florida black bear management and reduce human-bear conflict. Proposed amendments to both the bear feeding and conservation rules, as well as rule changes required to have a bear hunt in fall 2015 were discussed. The webinars allowed the FWC to communicate with a wider audience than a traditional public meeting; 91 members of the public attended the first webinar and 118 attended the second webinar.

**Deepwater Horizon oil spill anniversary** - April 20, 2015 will mark five years since the *Deepwater Horizon* (DWH) oil disaster that killed 11 rig workers off the coast of Louisiana and sent in excess of 100 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Since that time, FWC has been one of many agencies from the five Gulf States and Federal government working to restore natural resources damaged by the spill and otherwise putting related civil and criminal recoveries to work improving the Gulf. Subsequent to the last significant update on Gulf restoration to the Commission presented at the June 2013 meeting:

- A third phase of Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) early restoration projects have been approved by the DWH NRDA Trustee Council and funded by BP. Phase III, totaling some \$627 million in projects across the five Gulf states, includes six projects for which FWC is an implementing party.
- Over \$50 million for projects in the State of Florida was approved by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation through its Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund, which is putting criminal recoveries from two parties involved in the spill to work on 15 projects.
- Five proposals have been submitted on behalf of the State of Florida to the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council for consideration for funding under the RESTORE Act. A draft Funded Priorities List is expected to be released later this year and public comment will be sought on the selected proposals. Additional funds will become available once Clean Water Act penalties are determined for BP's role in the spill.

- FWC staff are collaborating with stakeholders and all levels of government to pursue other RESTORE Act-based opportunities to further local conservation priorities and advance research on Gulf resources.