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*Managing fish and wildlife
resources for their long-term
well-being and the benefit
of people.*

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August 31, 2017

The Honorable Dennis K. Baxley
Chairman, Governmental Oversight & Accountability
The Florida Senate
206 South Highway 27/411
Lady Lake, FL 32159

Re: Harris Chain of Lakes Restoration Council Letter

Dear Senator Baxley,

In a letter dated August 11, 2017, the Harris Chain of Lakes Restoration Council (Council) requested a review of the restoration efforts on the Harris Chain of Lakes by the by the Florida Legislature's Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability (OPPAGA). Considering the documented and continuing water quality and habitat improvements in the lakes, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) does not feel that this course of action is an appropriate use of time or resources.

Restoration of the Harris Chain of Lakes is a collaborative and highly coordinated effort between the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD), the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), the FWC and the Lake County Water Authority (LCWA). These agencies are committed to meeting the restoration goals that have been established in Surface Water Improvement and Management (SWIM) plans as developed by the SJRWMD.

Water quality improvements are essential in achieving overall ecological restoration on the Harris Chain of Lakes. From the early 2000's until the present, water quality has improved in part due to management actions and strategies by state and local agencies. As a result of these improvements, aquatic vegetation has steadily increased and is once again providing critical habitat for largemouth bass and other sport fish. The correlation between improvements in water quality and improvements in the fishery are indicated by increased catch rates and angler effort. Data collection and interactions with recreational and tournament anglers, support the claim that that the bass fishery at the Harris Chain of Lakes is once again becoming a premier bass fishing destination in Florida. In 2017, the Harris Chain of Lakes was host to two major bass tournaments, FLW Walmart Tour and B.A.S.S. Southern Open. Lake County Visitors and Tourism indicated that the tournaments provided a combined \$2.8 million-dollar economic value to the area. FLW Tour is returning to the Harris Chain of Lakes in February 2018.

Agencies are also working together on large scale restoration projects on the Harris Chain of Lakes to restore marsh connections and improve water quality. The Emerald Marsh Conservation Area project that reconnects 2,060 acres to Lake Griffin is almost complete. This new area restores aquatic and wetland habitat, creates marsh flow-ways to remove excess phosphorus and sediments from the lake, and increases recreational opportunities for fishing, hunting, boating, and wildlife viewing.

The FWC continues to work with and be responsive to the Council on issues related to the Harris Chain of Lakes. Staff attend the monthly meetings and respond to data requests in a timely and professional manner. FWC staff have given multiple presentations over the last several years to provide updates on current and proposed projects, on fishery status


reports, and on special events. FWC is committed to working with all partners on the Harris Chain of Lakes and will continue to work collaboratively on the long-term management.

Restoring the Harris Chain of Lakes for the benefit of multiple species and to provide a premier fishery that produces both a recreational and economic benefit to the communities surrounding the Harris Chain of Lakes is a priority of the FWC. Continuing the agencies' model of working together with local communities, organizations, and stakeholders to manage the Chain of Lakes allows for agencies to share their expertise and encourages input from the public. The water quality and habitat improvements that have been documented on the Chain of Lakes is an accomplishment that results from this collaborative approach. Considering the substantial improvements in the ecological conditions of the Harris Chain of Lakes, the FWC does not feel that an OPPAGA review is necessary. The FWC is in agreement with the SJRWMD that the best use of our collective resources is to continue to focus on restoration efforts that result in a benefit for Florida's fish and wildlife resources and provide recreational opportunities for the public. Should you have any questions or need additional information on the Harris Chain of Lakes or any of Florida's aquatic resources please contact Tom Champeau, Director of Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management at 850-488-0331.

Sincerely,

Tom Champeau
Division Director

Cc:


Noah Volenstain, Secretary, Department of Environmental Protection
Kevin Coyne, Department of Environmental Protection
Ann Shortelle, Executive Director, St Johns River Water Management District
Dennis Renfro, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Mike Perry, Executive Director, Lake County Water Authority
Mark V. Hoyer, Director, Florida LAKEWATCH, University of Florida
Bob Johnson, Chairman, Harris Chain of Lakes Restoration Council
Skip Goerner, Board Member, Harris Chain of Lakes Restoration Council
Don Nicholson, Board Member, Harris Chain of Lakes Restoration Council
Stephanie J. Bishop, Board Member, Harris Chain of Lakes Restoration Council
John Stump, Board Member, Harris Chain of Lakes Restoration Council
Keith Truenow, Board Member, Harris Chain of Lakes Restoration Council