

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Commissioners

FROM: Kenneth D. Haddad, Executive Director

DATE: January 17, 2006

SUBJECT: Executive Director's Report

### Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management

→The Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management staff in cooperation with ESPN and the Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (B.A.S.S.) will host a presentation and conduct a tour of the Florida Bass Conservation Center (FBCC), which is under construction at Richloam Fish Hatchery in Sumter County, on February 24, 2006. Approximately 60 State Fish and Wildlife Agency Fisheries Chiefs and B.A.S.S. Federation Conservation Directors from throughout the United States will be provided presentations on the Vision of the FBCC and future capabilities of this state-of-the-art production facility. After the presentations, they will observe the many components of the facility from the intensive fish culture area to the final grow out raceways. Lunch will then be provided at the facility for those attending the tour by ESPN/B.A.S.S.

### Division of Hunting and Game Management

→Everglades National Park Supplemental Turkey Stocking--Historically, wild turkeys occurred within the Everglades National Park (ENP); however, these turkeys were apparently extirpated through over-hunting associated with private farming operations within the ENP boundaries, and the lack of appropriate habitat management. The restoration of wild turkeys to Everglades National Park (ENP) was initiated in January 2000 following improvements in habitat management and the acquisition of the private in-holdings. The initial restoration attempt involved the capture and release of 29 turkeys. Monitoring of these turkeys by staff of the ENP indicated that they presently persist at a low population level. Consequently, a supplemental turkey stocking was planned in an effort to boost the present turkey population and bring it to a level that will ensure its future viability. Supplemental turkey trapping operations were initiated on January 5, 2006 and were completed on January 7, 2006. A total of 31 turkeys (20 females and 11 males) were captured by rocket net from 2 private ranches in south Florida. Radio transmitters were placed on 10 females (hens) to help document their survival, distribution, and reproduction aspects. ENP staff is responsible for monitoring of the released turkeys via radio-telemetry and biannual camera surveys. This restoration project is a cooperative effort involving the Commission, the U.S. Park Service, and the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF), and private landowners.

## Division of Habitat and Species Conservation

### •Terrestrial Habitat Conservation and Restoration Section

→Ecological restoration of a 23-acre Bahia grass pasture on Half Moon Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is in progress to restore it to herbaceous vegetation native to pine flatwoods. Much of the WMA was formerly a cattle ranch, and many acres are still improved and semi-improved pasture. The restoration method requires mechanical removal of invasive hardwoods, application of herbicide, disking and scarification of the ground surface, and compaction of soil using a roller. Resulting exposed mineral soil provide a good seed bed from which staff can mechanically harvest native seed. About 400 pounds of wiregrass seed and 15 pounds of lopsided indiagrass seed were harvested for this project. Future activities may include application of water to increase seed germination rate, and spot applications of herbicide to remove resprouting bahia grass from the site.

→As part of the groundcover restoration initiative at Three Lakes WMA, staff from the Northeast, North Central, Southwest, and South regions collected 309 pounds of lopsided indiagrass and 2,063 pounds of wiregrass seed which will be planted at Three Lakes, Hilochee, Half Moon, and OK Slough on former pasture sites to restore native groundcover.

→The upward trend in bear encounters continues into the current year. The Northeast Region will again have a record number of nuisance bear calls in 2005. In 1999, the region only recorded 155 complaints, but that number increased to 775 in 2000. In 2004, there were a total of 1,104 bear reports. From January through November 2005 the Northeast Region had already received 1,236 bear reports. The largest number of calls is from Lake, Seminole, and Marion counties, mostly in urban areas outside the Ocala National Forest.

### •Exotic Species Coordination Section

→A pilot surveillance project to determine the distribution of the exotic channeled applesnail in south Florida has been initiated between FWC and South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD). Staff has developed a reporting sheet and database, along with a color photo identification card showing egg masses of channeled, titan, spiketop and native applesnails. Identification cards have been distributed to selected field staff at SFWMD. After field ID, data sheets are returned to FWC to enter into a GIS database of exotic and native snail distributions. If successful, other Invasive Species Working Group members will be invited to participate.

### •Imperiled Species Management Section

→The FWC continues to work closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the National Park Service (NPS) in monitoring panther activity and implementing appropriate public safety measures in the vicinity of Pinecrest in the Big Cypress National Preserve. In response to public safety concerns raised by the

Miccosukee Tribe of Indians, the NPS initiated monitoring of female Florida panther FP124 three times a day, maintains a hotline with daily locations, and has coordinated with the contracted FWC houndsman to use aversive conditioning when appropriate and feasible. The agencies are using the draft Panther Response Plan to guide management actions in this case. Additional public review and comment on this plan is being coordinated by the USFWS as part of a federally required environmental assessment.

→In an unrelated incident, an un-collared male Florida panther killed a small dog that was tethered in a yard in Immokalee. The incident was handled in accordance with the draft response plan which included providing information to the affected homeowners and the press on how to reduce risks associated with living in panther country.

- Species Conservation Planning Section

→Florida's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy—The FWC-led effort to create a comprehensive strategy for all wildlife in Florida was approved by the USFWS's National Advisory and Acceptance Team. Staff has received good reviews on the Strategy and is working on a statewide announcement and kick-off of the approved Strategy on February 2, 2006. The Strategy is being highlighted in the January edition of *Florida Wildlife* magazine. Additionally, press releases and announcements will be made on February 2. The Strategy is one component of Florida's Wildlife Legacy Initiative, an agency-wide effort to proactively plan for and conserve wildlife in Florida.

→Perdido Key Beach Mouse—An Intergovernmental Agreement (IA) between Escambia County, the USFWS, and the FWC was approved by the Escambia County Board of County Commissioners, and currently is being routed to the parties for signatures. The agreement establishes the Perdido Key Beach Mouse Conservation Fund that can receive mitigation funds and disperse funds to enhance the survival potential of Perdido Key beach mice. Approval of the IA is a key step toward implementation of the Perdido Key Beach Mouse Conservation Strategy and preventing further declines or extinction of the Perdido Key beach mouse.

#### Division of Marine Fisheries Management

→The Environmental Protection Agency has scheduled a public meeting on the *Oriskany* artificial reefing project in Pensacola on January 10, 2006. Written public comment will be received by EPA on the *Oriskany* project through January 20. Following review of all meeting and written comments, the EPA is expected to finalize and formally issue the risk based authorization permit to sink the vessel within 30 days of the close of the public comment period. Once the permit is issued, the Navy will begin the necessary steps to return the ship from Beaumont, Texas to Pensacola, allowing up to 90 days for the completion of remaining pre-sinking activities in preparation for the vessel's final trip 22 nautical miles off Pensacola to serve as a recreational fishing and diving site. The vessel is currently

on track to be sunk prior to the onset of the 2006 hurricane season. DMFM staff is closely monitoring the progress of this project.

→In November, Chad Hanson attended the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's Ecosystem Research and Monitoring Workshop in Charleston, South Carolina. The primary objective of the workshop was to assess the research requirements and data gaps needed to proceed with an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management in the South Atlantic. Chad presented a paper on applying this approach to fisheries in Florida. The workshop was well-attended by researchers and managers, primarily from numerous state and federal agencies and universities, including several employees of FWRI.

#### Office of Recreation Services

→The Grand Opening of the South Florida Birding Trail was held January 14 at the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary in Naples. The opening of the south Florida leg completes the 2,000-mile trail, which began in 2000 with the opening of the east Florida section. The south leg has 114 sites and winds through 12 counties: Broward, Charlotte, Collier, De Soto, Glades, Hendry, Lee, Martin, Miami-Dade, Monroe, Palm Beach and Sarasota. Another gateway is located at the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge in Palm Beach County. At these sites, both beginning and avid birders can borrow binoculars, pick up field guides (written in English or Spanish) and gather other educational materials. FWC selected the sites based on the quality of bird-watching experiences they offer and their resilience to expanded visitation.

#### Division of Law Enforcement

→The Boating and Waterways staff worked with Flagler County to develop a non-regulatory approach to vessel traffic concerns in the Intracoastal Waterway. Citizens requested county and state officials to further regulate the ICW to Slow and Idle speed because of vessel wake disturbances. Boating and Waterways staff facilitated a workshop consisting of marina operators, law enforcement, homeowners and other interests. A consensus was agreed upon to test some non-regulatory smart-sign concepts in lieu of further regulatory actions. The plan was presented to the Flagler County Commission in December and received unanimous support.

#### Fish and Wildlife Research Institute

→FWC/FWRI Scientist Sandy Farrington was recently honored by having a new species of marine bristle worm (Polychaete) named after her. As part of a revision of the genus *Chone*, one of five new species was named *Chone farringtonae* by Mexican researcher Dr. Maria Ana Tovar-Hernandez. The recently-released publication included the following details: Etymology: This species is named in honor of Sandra Farrington in recognition of her work and dedication in the Invertebrate Collection of the Fish and Wildlife Research Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida.

→In December, FWRI scientists submitted a report to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that outlines a long-term monitoring plan for the Key Largo woodrat and cotton mouse. These two endangered species occur only on Key Largo and biologists believe their numbers have been declining precipitously. However, lack of a standard monitoring procedure has left managers without reliable data for detecting population trends and justifying management actions. USFWS contracted FWC biologists to review past assessments of Key Largo woodrat and cotton mouse populations, to evaluate potential monitoring techniques, and to propose a plan for long-term monitoring. FWC recommended an innovative technique of monitoring the animals by their tracks at bait stations, which is less expensive, less stressful to the animal, and potentially more accurate than current monitoring based on live-trapping.

→This past year proved to be the second-highest year for manatee mortality on record. FWC/FWRI documented 396 manatee deaths in state waters. Red tide toxin exposure played a significant role contributing to 81 manatee deaths. Yearly mortality numbers and causes of death fluctuate naturally from year to year. Eighty manatees died in 2005 from watercraft-related injuries. Although this figure represents an increase over the 69 deaths reported last year, it remains consistent with the five-year average for watercraft-related deaths. Lee County led all Florida counties in watercraft-related manatee deaths with 11 documented deaths; Volusia County is the next-highest with eight. Watercraft-related mortality averages approximately 25 percent of annual deaths in years without red tide. In general, except in southwest Florida, the manatee population appears to be doing fairly well. The Northwest and Upper St. Johns sub-populations are growing. The Atlantic coast sub-population may be stable. Evidence indicates the Southwest sub-population could decline significantly because, in addition to the threats experienced by the whole manatee population, it also has experienced increased mortality that is linked to red tide exposure.

#### Wildlife Foundation of Florida

→An Outdoor Enthusiast's Fundraising Event was held in November, in conjunction with West Palm Beach Fishing Club and Dewing's Fly and Gun Shop. The event included 75 attendees from the West Palm Beach area. Presentations included two priority FWC/WFF projects: mooring buoys and a proposed shooting range in WPB. The event was covered by the local media and the WPB Mayor. Special thanks to Commissioner Huffman and Commissioner Kaupe for acting as chairs for the two locations. The silent auction portion of the event raised \$6,600 for the Foundation.

→Alan S. Maltz, Photographer/Artist is working with the Foundation on various projects. The Foundation is in the process of finalizing a contract with Mr. Maltz outlining a two-year relationship.

•Discover Florida Oceans Tag Grants Update:

→A grant was awarded to support the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Snook Symposium, sponsored by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Grant funds serve as core funding, making sure that needs such as printing, meeting space, etc., are met.

Project managers have selected a steering committee. They have received cost estimates from hotels and catering providers. Matching funds may be forthcoming from other partners.

→A Repeatability Study to be included in a Technical Report Documenting Methods of Propeller cut Analysis Based on the Use of Photographs of Cuts and Scars on Carcasses and Living Animals: The technique offers promise for determining the size of the vessel involved in a manatee strike from analysis of the prop scar. The report is complete and is now being peer reviewed.

→Grants for the Conserve Wildlife Tag and Discover Florida Oceans Tag will be prioritized and issued by the Board on February 7<sup>th</sup> in Tallahassee.

EDR/February 2006