

Recreational Fishing Industry in Florida

By: Bob Wattendorf

Appropriately, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) staff were at the world's largest tackle trade show when it came to Florida, the Fishing Capital of the World, during July. ICAST attracted 11,000-plus attendees, all of whom were professionals involved in the recreational fishing industry.

This was a tremendous opportunity for FWC staff to thank the industry for their contributions, while highlighting the importance of recreational fishing in Florida and working out new partnerships that will benefit Florida anglers and resources.

For over 60 years, the Sport Fish Restoration program (SFR) has made an essential contribution to enhancing recreational fishing and boating opportunities. In recent years, SFR has provided Florida approximately \$9-13 million annually to supplement recreational fishing license fees. Funds paid on the purchase of fishing equipment and motorboat fuels, and import duties on boats are placed into a federal trust fund administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. States and territories are then allocated their share based on the number of paid fishing-license holders, number of registered boats, and the state's land and water area.

Recreational fishing provides an \$8.7 billion benefit to the state's economy, which supports 80,000 fishing and boating related jobs, greater than any other state. The latest national survey ranks Florida #1 with 3.1 million anglers, and total direct expenditures of \$5 billion. Moreover, Florida is the fishing destination for 2 million non-resident anglers — think tourists — compared to the next highest state that only had

347,000 non-resident anglers. Florida is also #1 for registered vessels with 870,000.

The FWC uses SFR and license dollars for conservation programs, improving access and enhancing quality fishing opportunities to ensure conservation of the resource while supporting local economic development and jobs. On the freshwater side, these funds allow the Division of Freshwater Fisheries to produce more than 3 million sport fish per year for stocking public waters, including about 2 million largemouth bass. Biologists throughout the state monitor fish populations and angler use in key lakes, reservoirs, rivers and canals that are among the 7,700 lakes and 12,000 miles of fishable rivers in Florida. When combined with public input and research on the ecology, genetics and life history of Florida's freshwater sport fishes, this allows the FWC to have solid data to guide management activities that ensure sustainable use.

An example of this is the proposal for a statewide five-fish daily bag limit on black bass, only one of which could be 16 inches total length or longer. This would simplify existing regulations, allow harvest of more abundant younger fish and reduce harvest of older female bass that many recreational anglers target for catch-and release. Anglers can learn more and comment on the proposal at MyFWC.com/Fishing (under Freshwater Fishing scroll down to the link that reads "Speak out on bass rules"). The proposal, if approved, would not go into effect until July 2016.

FWC, working with SFR and the industry, tries to minimize the need for regulations and to bring extra value to anglers to encourage them to renew their fishing licenses and fish more frequently. TrophyCatch (TrophyCatchFlorida.com) is a citizen-science, data-collection program that rewards anglers who document and release bass heavier than 8 pounds. By providing valuable rewards, donated by industry partners

such as those at ICAST, TrophyCatch provides hard-to-obtain information about when, where and how trophy bass are caught in Florida to determine which conservation efforts are most effective. It also encourages live release of trophy bass and keeps the mature females in their native water system. These efforts could significantly enhance Florida's already exceptional trophy bass fisheries.

In recent years, FWC has also begun investigating a new species of black bass, tentatively called Choctaw bass, found in eastern Gulf coastal rivers. In addition, FWC oversees six Commission-Managed Impoundments and 80 Fish Management Areas as premier public fisheries while helping develop new fisheries when reservoirs such as Stick Marsh and Fellesmere are flooded.

Creating the Next Generation that Cares via the freshwater Aquatic Education Program, training trainers and providing fish camps is yet another way that FWC invests license and SFR monies to ensure the future of quality recreational fisheries in Florida.

Besides these fisheries programs, boating access and safety also benefit from SFR. Fuel purchases for boats are a major source of SFR funds, so by law 15 percent of these funds are used for boating programs in Florida. These include funding an average of 30 boating access projects annually with city, county and government entities. In addition, FWC maintains more than 240 boat ramps statewide, and provides location and access information to over 1,700 public boat ramps on the Boat Ramp Finder (MyFWC.com/BoatRamps). Finally, the Boating Infrastructure Grant Program (BigP) pays for projects to construct facilities for recreational, transient vessels 26-feet or larger.

Boating Safety funds support outreach programs, such as “Wear It Florida,” a campaign designed to encourage use of life jackets. FWC conservation officers and operational costs to promote boating safety by offering boating safety courses and issuing boating safety ID cards to the public are also supported by these dedicated funding sources.

The FWC arduously pursues a mission of “Managing fish and wildlife resources for their long-term well-being and the benefit of people.” To sustain these resources, license fees and SFR provide critical funding. Furthermore, state statutes ensure “revenues from fees paid by hunters and sport fishers may not be diverted to purposes other than the administration of fish and wildlife programs by the FWC.” This is your guarantee that your license money will not be diverted to other purposes.

In recognition of this, the Wildlife Foundation of Florida, Florida Sportsman magazine and other valued partners have launched the “I Do” Florida fishing license campaign (FloridaFishingLicenseCampaign.com). This campaign encourages all anglers, even those who are exempt, to buy a Florida fishing license to contribute directly to improving fishing opportunities and sustain our sport fisheries for generations to come. Every new paid-license holder, in addition to the cost of their license, helps FWC attain approximately \$8 more from SFR according to the apportionment formula. So you spend \$17 but generate \$25 to support your sport and conserve our fish and their habitats.

Karl Wickstrom, Founder and Editor-in-Chief of Florida Sportsman, says “Let’s buy a license as an investment in the outdoors we cherish. Think of it as not a burden but a bargain.” Go to License.MyFWC.com or call 1-888-Fish Florida (888-347-4356) to

order your license and to ensure access to a lifetime of fun, safe and sustainable fishing opportunities.

*Instant licenses are available at MyFWC.com/License or by calling 888-FISH-FLORIDA (347-4356). Report violators by calling 888-404-3922, *FWC or #FWC on your cell phone, or texting to Tip@MyFWC.com. Visit MyFWC.com/Fishing and select "more news," or scr.bi/Fish-Busters for more Fish Busters' Bulletins. To subscribe to FWC columns or to receive news releases, visit myfwc.com/Contact.*

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