



# FWC Update

## FWC extends sponge diving to northern Gulf

The harvest of commercial sponges by diving is legal in parts of Northwest Florida marine waters beginning July 1.

The FWC approved a rule to extend the area where harvest of commercial sponges is allowed by diving from west of 84 degrees west longitude, near Cabell Point on the eastern border of Jefferson County, to Cape San Blas.

The rule also specifies that all commercial sponges taken by divers must be cut rather than pulled from the sea bottom.

The commercial harvest of sponges in Florida is a historical fishery that is concentrated principally along the central Gulf of Mexico near the traditional sponge docks in Tarpon Springs and in the Florida Keys. This fishery is the source of natural sponges used for a variety of household cleaning purposes and also supports a curio trade.



Sponges and buyers at a Tarpon Springs sponge market in the early 1900s.

Of the many species of sponges that occur in Florida, only a few are sought after by the fishery and regulated. These species are called "commercial sponges" and include the sheepswool, grass, yellow, glove, finger, wire, reef and velvet sponges.

A daily recreational bag limit of 10 commercial sponges per day also applies, and sponging in Biscayne National Park is prohibited.

FLORIDA PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION

## FWC adopts new rules

The FWC approved a set of rules during its April meeting to clarify and firm up permit regulations for activities involving sea turtles. Such activities include nesting surveys, nest relocation, educational turtle walks, captive facilities, research and rehabilitation.

Commissioners adopted new rules concerning importation, possession and sale of nonnative fish, wildlife and plants. New rules also address possession, exhibition and caging for venomous reptiles. In addition, Commissioners adopted a resolution to endorse a voluntary set of standards for caging and husbandry of captive reptiles.

Commissioners approved staff recommendations to start the imperiled species reclassification process for the peregrine falcon and another bird called the smooth-billed ani.



The peregrine falcon, the world's fastest bird, does not breed in Florida but some winter here.

THOMAS J. DUNKERTON

Commissioners also heard reports on reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act and federal Gulf red snapper management, and received an update on development of a vision document for the future of saltwater fishing in Florida. They also considered several federal fisheries-management issues and expressed opposition to a proposed federally exempted fishing permit that would allow longline fishing for swordfish in an area of East Florida that is now closed.

The complete agenda and background materials are available at [MyFWC.com/commission/2007/Apr07/](http://MyFWC.com/commission/2007/Apr07/).

The next FWC meeting will be in St. Petersburg September 12-14.

## FWC serves notice on prior fish and wildlife law violators

Prior offenders of Florida's fish and wildlife laws have received notice from the FWC that the next time they are caught they could face stricter penalties. The FWC mailed about 30,000 notices to prior violators.

The notices result from a 2006 statute, commonly referred to as the "Enhanced Penalty Law." It increases penalties for those who repeatedly violate Florida's recreational saltwater fishing, freshwater fishing and hunting laws; increases the penalty for hunting or fishing with a suspended or revoked license and establishes mandatory fines and suspension of recreational licenses.

"It is meant to deter individuals from hunting or fishing illegally," Capt. Curtis Brown, FWC's Interstate Wildlife

Compact administrator, said. "Repeat offenders could lose their hunting and fishing privileges for several years or in some cases their lifetime."

Under this law, Florida joins 23 other states in the Wildlife Violator Compact, which prevents anyone who has had his hunting, fishing or trapping privileges revoked or suspended in his home state from engaging in those activities in any other member state.

Hunting or fishing with a suspended or revoked license previously carried a penalty of a mere \$50 fine, court costs and the cost of the license. Anyone convicted of violating the law now will face a mandatory \$1,000 fine and five-year suspension of all FWC recreational licenses, and could face up to a year in jail.



DIANE ROME PEEBLES

## New rules approved for saltwater reef fish

Regulations are changing for several recreational and commercial marine reef fish species in waters offshore of Florida. The FWC approved a series of rule amendments that will bring Florida regulations into line with recent rule changes for federal waters adjacent to state waters.

Florida state waters extend 9 nautical miles offshore in the Gulf of Mexico and 3 nautical miles offshore in the Atlantic Ocean. So-called “federal” waters, also known as the Exclusive Economic Zone or EEZ, extend farther offshore beyond state waters. The FWC has regulatory jurisdiction in Florida waters, and federal agencies and councils manage fishing in federal waters.

The new reef fish rules approved by the FWC help make Florida’s rules consistent with recent federal regulatory changes, and as a result, minimize public confusion and aid rule enforcement. They took effect July 1.

In the Atlantic, the rules allow recreational fishers to keep one golden tilefish and one snowy grouper within the five-fish daily aggregate grouper bag limit. The daily recreational bag limit for Atlantic red porgy will jump from one fish to three fish per person and the recreational minimum size limit for Atlantic vermilion snapper will rise from 11 to 12 inches total length. The rules also set commercial trip limits

in the Atlantic that are the same as trip limits in federal waters.

Rules for Atlantic black sea bass include increasing the recreational minimum size limit from 10 inches total length to 11 inches total length in 2007, and then to 12 inches total length in 2008, and establishing a June 1 – May 31 harvest season. The rules also require a minimum 2-inch mesh for the back panel of black sea bass traps in the Atlantic, and require removal of black sea bass traps in the Atlantic when the commercial quota is reached.

New Gulf reef fish rules decrease the commercial and recreational minimum size limit for vermilion snapper from 11 to 10 inches total length, eliminate the April 22-May 31 closed season for commercial harvest of vermilion snapper, establish a zero bag limit for gag, red and black grouper for captains and crew on for-hire vessels, and remove the requirement for Class I and Class II commercial red snapper licenses.

Other rules approved by the FWC designate golden tilefish as a “restricted species” in Florida, change the minimum size limit of vermilion snapper imported into Florida from 11 to 10 inches total length, and prohibit commercial fishermen from harvesting or possessing the recreational bag limit of reef fish species on commercial trips.

## FWC consolidates rules for nonnative species

New rules approved by the FWC consolidate regulations on nonnative species into one chapter and expand regulations beyond freshwater aquatic life and wildlife to include marine life.

“The overriding purpose of the change is to get all nonnative species regulations into one rule and incorporate nonnative marine life into current regulations,” said Scott Hardin, section leader for nonnative species with the FWC. “It prohibits the release of nonnative marine life without a permit and is by far the broadest statement FWC has made with regard to nonnative species.”

Current regulations already prohibit the release of nonnative freshwater aquatic life and wildlife. The new rule outlines requirements to possess conditional and prohibited nonnative species and names additional nonnatives to these lists. The FWC does not issue permits for personal possession of conditional or prohibited species because of the significant potential to damage native flora and fauna. Only researchers, exhibitors and those with stringent biosecurity can secure a permit for prohibited nonnative species.



JOE B. BLOSSOM / PHOTO RESEARCHERS, INC

*Gambian rats weigh an average of 3 pounds and measure 20-35 inches from the head to the tip of the tail. A distinctive feature is the long tail (14-18 inches) that is virtually hairless, with the last third being cream colored.*

Most notable are changes in regulations for owners of red-eared slider turtles. Current owners of red-eared sliders may keep these turtles without a permit but may not be in possession of a red-eared slider less than 4 inches long after July 1, 2008. Albino and other unusual color varieties are exempt. The red-eared slider is the little green turtle sold by the millions in stores and pet shops. Released into the wild, they interbreed with a native turtle species.

Another change prohibits future fish farms from fee-fishing and outdoor culture of barramundi, a large predatory fish from Australia. FWC staff will conduct a risk assessment to determine security measures for Nile perches, including barramundi.

New rules also add nutria to the list of conditional species, prohibiting their possession and distribution without a permit.

Giant African pouched rats – including the Gambian pouched rat – were added to the list of prohibited species.

For more information, visit [MyFWC.com/nonnatives](http://MyFWC.com/nonnatives).



# FWC Update

## Former NFL center will tackle conservation issues

Dwight Stephenson, 49-year-old NFL hall of famer for the Miami Dolphins, has joined the lineup on the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.



TIM LEWIS

Stephenson, who lives with his wife, Dinah, in Delray Beach, received word recently that Gov. Charlie Crist had appointed him to replace Sandra Kaupe on the seven-member Commission. The couple has three grown children – Marshea, Dwight Jr. and Dwayne.

The new Commissioner played center for the Miami Dolphins from 1980 to 1987. Before then, he played center for the University of Alabama, where he studied social work. His compassion for children and people in need of social services led him to serve on the boards of directors for United Cerebral Palsy, and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Broward County.

He also serves on the Orange Bowl Committee.

Stephenson is president of D. Stephenson Construction, Inc. – a general contractor.

In his spare time, Stephenson said, he enjoys lake-fishing for bream and bass and does a little deep-sea fishing. He also enjoys turkey hunting and playing golf.

Stevenson was born in Murfreesboro, N.C. and grew up in Hampton, Va., where he lived until he attended college.

“We all have to protect what’s important,” Stephenson said. “That’s why I want to serve on the Commission. Fish and wildlife are an important part of life in Florida.”

## FWC releases draft bald eagle management plan

The FWC has released a draft bald eagle management plan and is asking for public comment. FWC is creating a species-specific management plan as a requirement of its listing process before moving the bald eagle off the imperiled species list.

FWC policy changes outlined in the draft management plan include regulation of nests inside the 660-foot buffer zone and requirements for permitting activities that violate guidelines described in the permitting framework of the draft plan.

The FWC is moving to delist the species because of the increased number of bald eagles in Florida over the past few decades. The goal of the management plan is to maintain a stable or increasing bald eagle population throughout Florida.

The bald eagle is still classified

as threatened by the FWC and will not be delisted until the management plan, developed with public input, is approved by FWC Commissioners.



ROBERT J. LA FOLLETTE

The bald eagle will remain protected by the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the federal Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. The draft management plan also will ensure the bald eagle will continue to be protected and thrive in Florida.

The public comment period lasts from May 17 through July 2. FWC staff will revise the plan

to reflect comments received. Staff will present the revised draft at the September Commission meeting in St. Petersburg and will likely bring the plan for its final hearing and approval at the December Commission meeting in Key Largo.

The draft plan is available at MyFWC.com under Quick Clicks.

## Pair recognized for contribution to Youth Hunting Program

FWC commissioners, during an April 11-12 meeting in Tallahassee, recognized Jackson County landowner and businessman Steve Smith and land manager Ray Windham for their contribution to the Youth Hunting Program of Florida.

Smith owns Lily Pad Ranch and had never hunted until he moved to Jackson County. There, he met Windham, his neighbor, and together they worked with the FWC to host a youth hunt during the 2005-06 hunting season. The hunt was so successful and well-received that the FWC considered it a model for future youth hunts in the state.

Smith and Windham again hosted a youth hunt during the 2006-07 general gun season and the first youth spring turkey hunt in March.

“Both Steve Smith and Ray Windham have worked tirelessly at each of the youth hunts to meet the needs of the young hunters, their parents and volunteers. We are indebted to them for their contribution to educating and training a future generation of hunters,” said Bill Cline, the FWC’s section leader for hunter safety and public shooting ranges.