



FWC unveils state-of-the-art facility

By Henry Cabbage

Photographs by
Tim Donovan

Along with statewide efforts to improve habitat and regulate harvest, the Florida Bass Conservation Center will help Florida maintain the undisputable title – “Fishing Capital of the World.”

When the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) dedicated the new Florida Bass Conservation Center in February, the FWC began harnessing cutting-edge technology to support the recreational freshwater fishing industry that pours \$2 billion a year into the state’s economy and supports 19,000 jobs. Gov. Charlie Crist, in a letter to FWC Chairman Rodney Barreto, said the ceremony ushered in a new era.

Freshwater fishing opportunities, especially the ones that feature Florida’s legendary largemouth bass, draw anglers from all over the world. The conservation center will help conserve and enhance Florida bass fishing and lure more bass anglers and other fishermen.

“This state-of-the-art facility, combined with new research and production methods, will help ensure safe and sustainable use of these resources for generations to come,” Crist said.

The new facility replaced the 1965-vintage Richloam Fish Hatchery and triples its capacity to produce various bass, bream, catfish and feeder fish. The old hatchery put a drain on the Brooksville area’s natural water supply, but the new facility recycles water from its 63 exterior ponds and dozens of tanks, raceways and troughs inside the 39,000-square-foot main building.

From the moment fish eggs begin to develop until the juvenile fish reach the right size for release in to Florida waters, scientists will control their diet and

water quality to accelerate their growth. Along with statewide efforts to improve habitat and regulate harvest, the center will help Florida maintain the undisputable title – “Fishing Capital of the World.”

The old hatchery was just a hatchery, but the \$17.5-million conservation center combines production with research. The new facility includes a pathology lab and will use genetic technology to enable scientists to preserve the unique Florida largemouth bass that is native only to peninsular Florida and ensure only healthy fish leave the lab for stocking projects.

It will be a sight to behold when the conservation center kicks into high gear. During the dedication, biologists described what it will be like – hatchery workers scurrying around, transferring fish from jars to tanks and tanks to raceways – all at just the right times for maximum productivity. Meanwhile, biologists will pore over microscopes, examine specimens, fret over calculations and scrutinize scientific literature. Everyone will scramble to make sure every detail is in place as perfectly as they can make it.

Plans call for a comprehensive library and Internet data center and facilities to host scientists from



Top: Ken Haddad, FWC Executive Director, welcomes visitors to the dedication of the new Florida Bass Conservation Center. **Center:** Commissioner David K. Meehan (left) looks on as Commission Chairman Rodney Barreto (center) and Pete Vogel, President of Vogel Bros. Building Co. (right) hold a Florida largemouth bass. The FBCC won the 2007 “President’s Award” from the Associated General Contractors of Greater Florida. **Bottom:** Glen Lau stands in front of one of his murals on display at the center. **Facing page:** The sun rises on the new Florida Bass Conservation Center.



so naturally, scientists had to release them in Central Florida at times of year when fish lacked adequate prey for survival. The new facility will enable scientists to produce more fish for stocking and to release them throughout the state when they can contribute most to healthy fisheries.

“I applaud the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission for the innovation they incorporated in this design to make production more environmentally sensitive, cost-effective and efficient,” Crist

Left: Bass eggs are counted to estimate production. Each female may lay 20,000-45,000 eggs. Preventing fungus from growing on the eggs while they incubate is a major concern for hatchery biologists. **Below:** In two to three days, eggs typically hatch into “yolk-sac fry.” These fry begin swimming in about four days, and use the yolk for energy for nearly two weeks. After that, they must begin actively feeding.

the highest levels of research. The library will house a wealth of the latest scientific information about various fish species and angler use and angler success on various lakes.

A visitor center, with a \$6-million price tag, is part of the vision. Most of the funding for the visitor center will come from private sector partners and matching federal funds

Ed Moyer, then-director of the FWC's Division of Freshwater Fisheries, initially proposed construction of the

new conservation center about five years ago when he and other experts recognized the old hatchery was too antiquated and inefficient to match the state's needs. He envisioned a climate-controlled rearing facility to give biologists an opportunity to spawn bass and other freshwater species at the most favorable time for stocking projects.

Timing is important in stocking projects. Without the ability to “trick” fish into developing and maturing at times of the year when they don't do



said. "I hope that visitors to this facility and Sumter County will be enlightened and encouraged by the conservation stewardship efforts taking place to ensure that Florida remains the 'Fishing Capital of the World.'"

Even before the new conservation center, Florida's waters produced more than 700 world-record fish catches. That's more than any other state – more than any other country can claim. With the new facility hitting on all cylinders, the possibilities can boggle the mind.

"Think about it," Moyer said. "We're already on top, and we have no intention of going anywhere but up."

FWC officials plan to open the center's interpretive areas to the public later this year along with some public fishing areas. However, the full-featured visitor center still needs both large and small donations and sponsorships to make it happen. World-renowned bass cinematographer Glen Lau has stepped up and made the first cast. Now, you can purchase his decorative bass prints for the home or office (with inspirational sayings) as well as videos and a DVD at www.WildlifeFoundation.net and all the profit goes to the FBCC. **FW**

Henry Cabbage has been drowning worms in Florida's waters for more than half a century, and he catches his share of largemouth bass when he gets serious about it. He is a senior editor for the FWC's Community Relations Office in Tallahassee.

Top: McDonald jars with bass eggs receive round-the-clock care with filtered, aerated water flowing constantly to keep them healthy, a function the male takes care of in nature. **Middle:** A very fine mesh dip net is used to harvest fry to move them to larger grow-out raceways, safe from predators. **Bottom:** After a final grow-out phase in ponds, the fingerling bass, now about 1 to 2 inches long, are harvested and may be stocked in public lakes or transferred into the building to grow to larger sizes.

