

FLORIDA KEYS NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY ADVISORY COUNCIL
Hyatt Place
Marathon, FL 33050
April 19, 2016
FINAL MINUTES

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council met on Tuesday, April 19, 2016 in Marathon, Florida. Public Categories and government agencies were present as indicated:

Council Members

Conservation and Environment: Ken Nedimyer (Chair)
Conservation and Environment: Chris Bergh (Vice Chair) (absent)
Boating Industry: Bruce Popham
Citizen at Large – Lower Keys: Mimi Stafford (absent)
Citizen at Large – Middle Keys: David Vanden Bosch (absent)
Citizen at Large – Upper Keys: David Makepeace
Diving – Lower Keys: Don Kincaid
Diving – Upper Keys: Rob Mitchell (absent)
Education and Outreach: Martin Moe
Elected County Official: George R. Neugent
Fishing – Charter Fishing Flats Guide: Tad Burke
Fishing – Charter Sports Fishing: Steven Leopold
Fishing – Commercial – Marine/Tropical: Ben Daughtry
Fishing – Commercial – Shell/Scale: Justin Bruland (absent)
Fishing – Recreational: Jack Curlett (absent)
Research and Monitoring: David Vaughan
South Florida Ecosystem Restoration: Pete Frezza
Submerged Cultural Resources: Corey Malcom
Tourism – Lower Keys: Clinton Barras
Tourism – Upper Keys: Andy Newman

Council alternates (present)

Boating Industry: Kenneth Reda
Diving – Upper Keys: Elena Rodriguez
Citizen at Large – Upper Keys: Suzy Roebling
Citizen at Large – Middle Keys: George Garrett
Conservation and Environment: Caroline McLaughlin
Diving – Lower Keys: Bob Smith
Fishing – Charter Fishing Flats Guide: Will Benson
Fishing – Commercial – Shell/Scale: Jeff Cramer
Fishing – Recreational: Bruce Frerer
Research and Monitoring: Shelly Krueger
Submerged Cultural Resources: Diane Silvia
Tourism – Lower Keys: Joe Weatherby

Local Elected Officials

City of Key Colony Beach – Mayor Jerry Ellis (absent)
City of Key West – Mayor Craig Cates (absent)
City of Layton – Mayor Norman Anderson (absent)

City of Marathon – Mayor Chris Bull (absent)
Village of Islamorada – Vice Mayor Deb Gillis

Agency Representatives

Florida Department of Environmental Protection: Joanna Walczak
FWC Division of Law Enforcement: Captain Dave Dipre
FWC Fish and Wildlife Research Institute: Tom Matthews
NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service: Heather Blough
NOAA Office of General Counsel: Karen Raine (absent)
NOAA Office of Law Enforcement: Kenneth Blackburn (absent)
Dry Tortugas and Everglades National Park: Christopher Kavanagh
U.S. Coast Guard (USCG): LCDR Michelle Comeaux
U.S. EPA: (absent)
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), National Wildlife Refuges Florida Keys: Chris Eggleston
U.S. Navy: Matt Martin

I. CALL TO ORDER, ROLL CALL, AND MEETING MINUTES APPROVAL OF 2/16/16 DRAFT MEETING NOTES

Pledge of Allegiance

Roll Call

MOTIONS (Passed)

Chairperson Nedimyer welcomed everyone. A motion was made by George Neugent and seconded by Bruce Popham to approve the minutes from the February 16 meeting with the following correction made: NOAA Fisheries issues aquaculture permits, not the Gulf of Mexico Fisheries Management Council. Motion passed unanimously. Clinton Barras made a motion to adopt the agenda. The motion was seconded by Bruce Frerer. Motion passed with no opposition.

Chairperson Nedimyer commented that the Keys are a special place and are worth saving. He has been diving elsewhere in the Caribbean during this last year and while there are some very nice reefs, the Keys environment has very healthy fish populations, reefs and greater diversity. Some corals in the Keys are very hardy and this means there is hope for the future. He feels that everyone in the room cares and that focusing on the positive is the way to approach things.

Chairperson Nedimyer recognized Clinton Barras and *Floridakeys.com* for recording the meeting, which is broadcast live and is archived on the sanctuary's website.

II. VESSEL IMPACTS TO SHALLOW WATER HABITAT: GROUNDING AND PROP SCARRING

FKNMS Enforcement and Emergency Response Coordinator Steve Werndli gave a presentation entitled *Vessel Impacts to Shallow Water Habitat: Groundings and Prop Scarring in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary*. To view this presentation, visit <http://floridakeys.noaa.gov/sac/othermaterials/20160419fknmsshallowwater.pdf>.

The presentation provided an overview of vessel groundings with information on authorities, zoning, injuries, restoration and management strategies, challenges and responses. As part of the marine zoning and regulatory review, the Shallow Water Wildlife and Habitat Protection Working Group addressed shallow water habitat impacts, including methods used to salvage vessels.

Discussion/Comments (advisory council)

- More education and enforcement can help with this issue. The amount of outreach and enforcement that can be done is related to budget, which is given to the sanctuary by Congress.
- Individuals can communicate to Congress their support for the sanctuary and the need for more enforcement and outreach.
- The FKNMS education and outreach raises awareness about this issue at events and through other fora.
- FWC is the primary enforcement agency and also conducts outreach on boating impacts.
- Other agencies are also involved in addressing groundings, including USFWS, NPS, Coast Guard and Monroe County. FKNMS personnel are involved in conducting the restoration work and/or a contractor may be hired. Large injuries where there is high vessel traffic would be a higher priority injury for restoration compared to another place where healing is likely to occur naturally.
- A question was asked as to what can be done about these party aggregations throughout the Keys. Concerns were expressed in particular for the party beach area on Lower Matecumbe Key, which is extremely popular with boaters in the summer months and has a tremendous impact environmentally and socially. The residents have tried to find ways to curb this activity, but haven't found an avenue to address this problem. The difficulty is that access can't be limited very easily and it's not easy to regulate this kind of use. One solution that worked inside Biscayne National Park near Elliot Key was to install buoys and then limit the number of people who could tie up to those buoys.
- Concerns were expressed for the "lakes" entrance, which has very healthy seagrass and has hundreds of scars because it is shallow. Vessels that are too large regularly transit through the channel. Mr. Werndli noted that this area was mentioned in the working group and is should have a controlling depth sign to warn people.
- The suggestion was made to charge people to enter the Keys to help offset some of the costs as is done in other communities. This issue has been discussed by the council and its working group. Monroe County government officials have discussed this with legislators and the governor. Money from a road toll goes toward road maintenance and repairs.
- The fact that technology used to collect fees has changed might have an impact on whether tolls can be collected in the future. To do so would require legislative support.
- One of the challenges regarding the toll road is that the highway is federally owned and that is why Monroe County can't put a toll on it. If a toll were to be collected, it would be difficult to get the money to be used locally.

Groundings and other similar incidents should be reported to FWC dispatch (888-404-3922) or *FWC or #FWC on a cell phone. Be prepared to provide FWC with appropriate information. FWC has a resource reporting system online (MyFWC.com).

III. FLORIDA KEYS SHALLOW WATER BOATING IMPACT ANALYSIS AND TRENDS ASSESSMENT — PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Conservation Consultant Curtis Kruer gave a presentation entitled *Florida Keys Shallow Water Boating Impact Analysis and Trends Assessment—Preliminary Results*. To view this presentation, visit <http://floridakeys.noaa.gov/sac/othermaterials/20160419boatingimpacts.pdf>

Mr. Charles Causey introduced Conservation Consultant Curtis Kruer, who has extensive experience and knowledge on the subject. Mr. Kruer is currently working on a shallow water boating impact

analysis and trends project sponsored by the Florida Keys Environmental Fund. The project seeks to document the value and benefit of existing shallow water management and to assess trends and current conditions of seagrass meadows based on 2015 aerial photographs. It will also include a review of other shallow water managed areas around the state, including Everglades National Park.

Part of Mr. Krueer's project is to give support to the good work that was done by the advisory council's Shallow Water and Habitat Protection Working Group and to provide information that supports the recommendations of the group. He acknowledged that seagrasses in areas in Florida Bay and elsewhere are also being affected by water quality. Seagrass flat degradation originates from physical destruction of the habitat and elevated turbidity and also occurs when passing vessels disturb fish and wildlife such as great white herons, reddish egrets and migratory shorebirds that forage on the flats.

Mr. Krueer reviewed the extensive history of shallow water habitat management in the Florida Keys. The review included highlights from dredging and seafloor destruction cases and the development of the Seagrass Outreach Partnership and the Boating Impacting Work Group and the publication of several reports. In 1995, the Seagrass Management Work Group was organized to work with the FKNMS on drafting the FKNMS management plan, which contains strategies for protecting seagrass.

In 1993, at the request of local advocates from the Boating Impact Work Group, the state of Florida implemented the first "No Motor Zone" in badly impacted areas in John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park (JPCRSP). Since those flats were protected from boat traffic, great improvements have been documented using 2014 aerial photography. Many of the scars have been recolonized by nearby grasses. Boat damage still exists and occurs, but is taking place primarily along the channel edges and not on the interior of the flat. Similar results were observed with regards to the Port Largo No Motor Zone. Places where damage is still visible through aerial photograph could receive additional measures such as better marking, etc. In 1999, JPCRSP released a study that reported that No Motor Zones in the park had reduced seagrass resource damage by 44% in only four years. More limited success was experienced when No Motor Zones were created to protect the flats in the vicinity Lignumvitae Key.

Wildlife Management Areas were established in the Upper Keys by the FKNMS to protect habitat from boats and human impacts (Cotton Key, Tavernier Key, Snake Creek, Rodriguez Key). The FKNMS advisory council's Shallow Water Habitat Protection Working Group recommends expanding the protection of some of these WMAs. Since WMAs were first implemented as part of the FKNMS management plan, the flats in the vicinity of Tavernier Key WMA showed great improvement as did the channel, which became more defined and exhibited less turbidity. Until creation of the No Wake Zone, high speed travel that generated turbidity in the creek had been the norm. A variety of aerial photographs showed the improvement in other areas of the Tavernier Key WMA. A comparison was also made with a nearby flat that have received no management over the years. The photographs showed the erosion of the flat, the increase in prop scars and widening of the channel that occurred over the past 20 years.

The assessment of trends has detected both good and bad trends with regards to seagrass impacts. Good trends include the fact that blatant prop dredging for channel creation has ceased and managed areas with Idle speed/no wake zones show fewer scars and other impacts. Recognition of the issue has also increased. Bad trends include the fact that the number of registered vessels is increasing and hot spots that are not managed are getting worse. Dock and pier construction also leads to additional boating impacts.

The prop scar mapping that was published in the *1995 Technical Report Scarring of Florida's Seagrasses: Assessment and Management Options* is 21 years old today. A typical scar can take 10 to 15 years to heal, but a smaller scar can restore itself in about 5 to 10 years, so using older maps is not giving a current picture of the issue. Mr. Kruer would like to revisit the scar mapping that was done years ago. Flats and banks that have repeatedly damaged become eroded over time such as the one off of the 7-Mile Bridge, which is basically disintegrating. The loss of the banks may affect flats fishing due to the loss of food source and habitat for fish. Some banks in the Whale Harbor Channel flats area and Cotton Key WMA show signs of boating damage.

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and Protection Act states that the sanctuary will facilitate uses consistent with resource protection and consider temporal and geographic zoning in doing so. Project goals include encouraging review of the impending Management Plan Review Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Management Plan review process with regards to boating impacts and shallow water habitats, researching trends and presenting relevant data, and assisting with the development of alternatives for a comprehensive shallow water protection program that can be accomplished without cutting off access to those areas.

Discussion/Comments (council members)

- In general, council members expressed support for managing shallow water areas with zoning and other effective measures.
- No Motor Zones areas have shown improvement and such zones are effective.
- The presentation was very helpful in understanding how management can protect and promote healing in shallow water areas and what can happen when management is not in place.
- If measures are taken that are prescriptive, a difference will result because areas can recover with protection. Controlling depths are needed on some of these channels. Some channels shouldn't have large boats or some are places where boats need to slow down.
- Despite declining water quality and increasing boater use, these zoned areas are working.
- More zoning is needed to protect the flats against the impacts of more and more boaters and people who don't know the waters and how to operate in shallow water.
- Over the years, Monroe County has played an important role in channel marking.
- It would be great if the information that this approach is working to restore damaged flats could be communicated to the greater community and beyond. This success story should be shared.
- Communication is of major importance and getting this message of hope to everyone. A short video could be produced to show the positive benefits of such zones and the consequences that result from lack of management and from actions that destroy flats such as cutting the channel, etc.
- Another observation is that data can influence decisions and support was expressed for utilizing this information to put additional zoning in place.
- Science is very important and new science on this topic is needed. A prop scar study in Florida Bay was a major reason that they were able to establish pole and troll zones in Everglades National Park.

Mr. Kruer made the following observations.

- While the presentation highlighted the Upper keys somewhat, the problem exists Keys-wide. Other hotspots exist in Marathon, Key West, Boca Grande, Sugarloaf, etc. Flats are eroding in many areas and their fisheries value is being lost.
- Each site is somewhat unique and requires its own combination of measures to be effective. The solutions depend on whether or not the problem stems from cutting the channel or too much

wake causing erosion, etc. Gated markers are also important and can help keep boaters off of flats.

- Education is a big key to making a difference. Areas will repair themselves if they are managed properly.

Break

IV. MARQUESAS KEYS VESSEL POLLUTION HAZARD ASSESSMENT AND POLLUTION REMOVAL

U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) LCDR Michelle Comeaux gave a presentation, *Marquesas Keys: Pollution Assessment and Removal*, which described how the USCG is working with other agencies to address derelict vessels.

LCDR Comeaux summarized the history of USCG assessment of derelict vessels in the Marquesas Keys. In 2014, representatives from the appropriate agencies formed a derelict vessel work group, which met to address the issue. USFWS provided survey information from a 2014 report that indicated 12-15 derelict vessels needed removal. USFWS personnel had used kayaks and other shallow boats to reach and mark these vessels. The report brought the issue, which exists throughout the Keys, to the attention of the USCG. Many derelict vessels originate as part of successful interdictions with Cuban migrants. When intercepting such a vessel at sea, if the USCG is not able to destroy the vessel, then it is marked and set adrift. Sometimes, heavy seas prevent even marking the vessel. In other instances, migrants successfully reach shore, but leave their vessel behind and then it becomes derelict.

In June 2016, the USCG conducted its own survey in the Marquesas Keys with assistance from USFWS staff who could reach shallow areas in their vessels. Several vessels were identified as candidates for removal. The USCG organized a tentative response with National Pollution Funds Center. These funds can be used for pollution removal when a responsible party is not identified. Weather and critical nesting season times prevented the USCG from getting out to the Marquesas again right away. Another vessel survey was needed to provide up-to-date information. In April 2016, 22 vessels were identified and mapped; not every one meets USCG criteria for removal using pollution funds. In some cases, the vessel has fallen apart and only trash is left behind. Trash is not eligible for pollution funds unless it is a container with oil, etc. It's very hard to justify a strategy to remove just trash; an engine can be removed if present.

Partnerships have been formed with USFWS, NOAA, FKNMS, FWC and Monroe County/Monroe County Sheriff's Office to work on the derelict vessel issue. Assistance from the agencies is very much appreciated. One of the first steps identifying a responsible party; which is not feasible when it is a Cuban vessel. After the survey is conducted, the USCG requires a consultation process with the agencies that have a stake in the process, including NOAA, etc. The USCG then assesses for pollution and opens the fund to remove any items that might pollute. USCG and the agencies work together to identify the means and funding to remove any trash that would otherwise be left after the pollution is addressed. By working together in one step, USCG has made the process more efficient and made it more feasible for another agency to pay for the salvage of the vessel. Typically, once the response recommendations are made and the strategy is approved, the USCG will hire a contractor using pollution funds and begin to execute the removal.

Discussion/Comments (council members)

- Derelict vessels are a huge issue in the Florida Keys and the matter needs more attention. A stronger stance should be taken and actions should be taken more quickly. These vessels are

- navigational hazards, especially at night. They should not be allowed to float around or remain aground for long periods of time because of the damage that they do to the seafloor over time.
- Even when the authorities are notified of functional vessels left behind after the migrants are removed, these vessels are still being left behind where they can cause damage. A strategy to address this problem in a more immediate manner is needed. Captains call in the migrant landings they observe; USCG responds and the migrants are taken off. The process should include informing the agencies immediately so that they can retrieve the boat while the engine is still running. This is much better than waiting for the boat to become nonfunctional and a source of pollution.
 - LCDR Comeaux explained that a complicating issue with regards to derelict vessels is that some of these structures are not even really vessels and this hinders their removal in the process, which entails gaining approval for each salvaged vessel by USCG headquarters. In addition, once an agency begins to tow or operate that vessel to remove it, they are liable and can be considered the responsible party (which makes the pollution funds no longer available). If that vessel sinks at a later time, it can become even more problematic to remove. In the Marquesas, the agencies are trying to work out the process as to who is responsible for the various aspects of operation and funding.
 - Regarding derelict vessels found on islands in the Marquesas, LCDR Comeaux explained that typically the USCG leaves the vessels in place after pollution removal. They are motivated, though, to put forth the critical habitat and endangered species pieces to articulate that it is better to remove the vessel and transport it to deeper water away from the turtle nesting beach to conduct the full assessment. Then, they can identify a party to pay for the salvage and vessel removal.
 - In response to a question about derelict vessels left on private property/docks, LCDR Comeaux explained that if a derelict vessel is left unmanned adrift or tied up in a private canal, for example, the USCG will respond and assess the situation. Most often they find plastic containers with fuel in them. That allows the funds to be opened and a contractor is hired to remove the vessel pollution. The next step is making sure that FWC and Monroe County are informed so that full removal can take place after the pollution is addressed.
 - Captain Dipre gave an example of how USCG and FWC cooperate with regards to derelict vessels. If the USCG finds a sunken vessel that is leaking oil, they are obligated to remove the pollution, but not the vessel. FWC can and does ask USCG to inform them when the vessel is being raised so that FWC can have the vessel salvaged.
 - A question was asked about what is done with a vessel that is intercepted at sea. LCDR Comeaux explained that after removing the people from the vessel, their goal is to destroy the vessel at sea. In the event that the vessel can't be sunk, the second action is to mark the vessel. If seas are unsafe, it may not be feasible to mark the vessel even though an unmarked vessel will trigger a search and rescue response when encountered at a later time. If the vessel cannot be sunk, the USCG notifies mariners that a vessel is adrift in the area. It was noted that this is not a perfect solution.
 - Captain Dipre explained that if a vessel is not operable and it is on land, FWC does not consider it to be a vessel. In terms of how derelict vessels are being addressed, he added that Monroe County Sheriff Ramsey has dedicated one person in the sheriff's office to cover this in the Lower Keys. FWC has one dedicated officer in the Upper Keys and one in the Lower Keys. Monroe County is working on five grants to obtain derelict vessel money. Since 2008, derelict vessels have been a huge priority. Right now, about 80 to 100 vessels are removed each year; they are restricted by funding and could remove more with more funding. Each agency has a particular mission; FWC is the only agency that has derelict vessels in their mission. When

something is deemed to be a vessel, there are procedures in place that FWC has to follow before salvaging and destroying it.

- Steve Werndli stated that FKNMS has been meeting with the USCG about this issue for several years and that FWC has begun to address this issue at a statewide level. NOAA's Marine Debris program has been hosting meetings around the state to develop a marine debris response plan for the state of Florida. Dealing with derelict vessels is a component of that plan, which will also describe hurricane responses. A statewide document is also being developed that describes the policies and strategies and builds off of removal projects such as the one USCG plan for the Marquesas. This entire effort requires coordination amongst the different agencies.
- The point was made that setting migrant vessels adrift, even when allowed by USCG policy, is actually discharging into the sanctuary and is prohibited by FKNMS regulations.

LCDR Comeaux and Captain Dipre encouraged people to make suggestions and let decision-makers know about the issue to garner support and possibly make some changes in the rules as to how derelict vessels are handled.

Lunch

South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD)

Mr. Matt Morrison, Federal Policy Chief for the Office of Everglades Policy & Coordination, gave a presentation about the water management system in South Florida, which stretches from Orlando to the Florida Keys. To view this presentation

<http://floridakeys.noaa.gov/sac/othermaterials/20160419sfwmd.pdf>

The SFWMD is one of five water districts in Florida created by the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 1972 with the core mission of flood control, water supply, natural systems and water quality. Flood control carried out by this largest water management system in the world makes it possible for people to inhabit South Florida. The SFWMD has a regulatory role with regards to public and agricultural water supplies and manages water flows and quality in the natural systems on the south Florida mainland. The extensive water management system consists of more than 2,000 miles of canals, 2,800 miles of levees, more than 650 water control structures and nearly 70 pump stations and covers about 18,000 square miles. The area contains one of the world's most diverse ecosystems and two national parks (Biscayne NP and Everglades NP). More than 7.7 million residents are served, along with agricultural interests. New projects are being implemented as part of Everglades restoration, which results in adding more infrastructure for water management.

The Central and South Florida (C & SF) Project, first authorized by Congress in 1948, is the system of canals that makes flood control possible in South Florida. This project channelized the Kissimmee River, which flowed into Lake Okeechobee, and diked and impounded the lake so that it could store water and prevent flooding of agricultural lands to the south. The project also created two new river channels – the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie Rivers. The canal drainage system created by the C & SF project significantly altered the natural or pre-drainage flow of water from the lake south through the Everglades to Big Cypress and Florida Bay and made coastal development possible through flood control.

The goal of restoration taking place today is to improve the quality, timing, distribution and quantity of water flowing through the natural system. In 1999, the Comprehensive Everglades Plan (CEP) included 68 components to be implemented over 30 years to work toward restoring the natural Everglades system while recognizing that the aerial extent of the original Everglades is greatly reduced.

Restoration is being implemented in stages: Pre-CERP Foundation Projects, 1st Generation CERP, 2nd Generation CERP and 3rd Generation CERP. CERP will be followed by a set of Next Generation Projects. Features of CERP include reservoirs, Stormwater Treatment Areas (STAs), seepage management and other options. In 2012, the SFWMD began operating a series of projects that include STAs to treat water from the agricultural areas and the lake before being sent to any Water Conservation Areas (WCAs) prior to flowing south into the Everglades National Park (ENP) and Florida Bay. The state invested about \$800 million dollars in these projects.

Pre-CERP foundation projects are currently under construction and include the Kissimmee River Restoration, C-111 South Dade and Modified Water Deliveries. The Kissimmee River Restoration project is nearing completion and has a significant storage component north of the lake. Modified Water Deliveries and the C-111 South Dade Projects are both expected to contribute to restoring hydrological conditions to ENP. C-111 South Dade is expected to improve flows through Taylor Slough while still offering flood protection. The C-111 Spreader Canal Western Project is also designed to keep seepage in the park and improve water flows to Florida Bay through Taylor Slough.

First generation CERP projects were authorized under WRDA 2007 and are now under construction. Second generation CERP projects were authorized by WRDA 2014. Two 2nd Generation Projects, the C-111 Spreader Canal and Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands, were expedited by the State and are now operational. The C-111 Spreader Canal project is expected to move more water through Taylor Slough while still offering flood protection for inhabited areas and agricultural interests.

Central Everglades Planning Project (CEPP) is one of two 3rd Generation Projects. CEPP addresses the central part of the system and is a candidate for authorization in the next WRDA. This project is expected to redirect undesirable discharges from Lake Okeechobee to STAs for treatment and then to Water Conservation 3A and then into ENP.

Next generation projects include planning projects in the Integrated Delivery Schedule (IDS), including the Western Everglades Restoration Project, which has storage and treatment facilities and is expected to help hydrate ENP and Big Cypress National Preserve. The second phases of the C-111 Spreader Canal and Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands are Next Generation projects.

With regards to water management and Florida Bay in recent times, the region has experienced some very atypical weather. The last wet season was drier than usual and resulted in a reduced amount of water flowing through the system toward Florida Bay. This past dry season experienced rainfall amounts higher than ever on record. In January 2016, water levels in WCA-3A were too high. An emergency order was issued by US Army Corps to lower the stages of water in WCA-3A, sending this water to northeast Shark River Slough. This entailed opening structures and adding pump stations. Components of various CERP projects that are not yet completed were used to manage this excess water. The fact that so much water moved through the system was a good sign; it showed that when the system is fully functional, it will handle such high volumes of water.

From 2011 to 2015, the SFWMD delivered about 24.7 billion gallons per year to ENP. In 2016, the volume of water was nine times (227 billion) that amount. In 2015, flows into Florida Bay dipped below the 105,000 acre-feet threshold at the end of the wet season. Since then, the rainfall and other high water events have improved the situation. Once restoration of the water management system is complete, the system will have the capability to move the water through to Florida Bay. The high volume of water dealt with during this past winter allowed water managers to operate the system at its

maximum potential and the results they observed give them confidence that the original intent of the system will be met, including hydrating the Everglades and Florida Bay.

Discussion/Comments (council members)

- Superintendent Morton thanked Mr. Morrison for his presentation. Superintendent Morton wanted to confirm that getting the next level of authorization and appropriation from Congress is tied to the 2016 Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) bill, which is making its way through committee now. Mr. Morrison confirmed that CEPP has made it through the entire federal process and is ready for authorization and funding by Congress. The last two WRDA bills were passed in 2007 and 2014. Citizens are free to contact a member of Congress regarding support for WRDA 2016.
- The presentation provided a very good overview, but offered no description of storage capabilities south of Lake Okeechobee. Without additional storage south of the lake, the vision of Everglades restoration put forth can't be achieved. Storage and treatment are needed to restore ENP and Florida Bay.
- A question was asked about what plans are being made for storage south of the lake and about the time table for those plans. Mr. Morrison provided a handout (Integrated Delivery Schedule (IDS) DRAFT 2015 Update) that shows the framework for the suite of restoration projects. The Western Everglades Restoration Project, a Next Generation Project, will have a storage and water quality treatment component south of the lake and will look at creating a connection to the lake that does not currently exist. CEPP will allow more water to be brought south into the central part of the system and to Big Cypress National Preserve. This project will be done at the same time that storage will be planned for as part of the the Next Generation Lake Okeechobee Watershed Aquifer Storage and Recovery project. Both will add storage to the system. The IDS handout gives the time frame for the process.
- Concerns were expressed for conditions in Florida Bay, especially because last summer low freshwater inputs led to high salinity levels and seagrass die-off. The last time such conditions were seen was back in the 1980s and 1990s when the ecosystem collapsed and it could occur again in the future. Short term options are needed since restoration involves long-term projects.
- A question was asked about SFWMD plans for short term solutions to prevent hypersalinity and the consequences it brings. Mr. Morrison recognized that restoration is a long term endeavor, but added that the state of Florida has implemented federal projects in advance of the federal process in order to move restoration forward. If regional water is available in the system to be moved under drought conditions to Florida Bay, then it would be possible to move water to the bay.
- In response to a question about whether an emergency order could be issued for Florida Bay if conditions became critical again in the future, Mr. Morrison stated that SFWMD does have the capability to issue an emergency order and then move water to the bay if water is available. The current emergency order to deal with excess water elsewhere in the system is in place until May 8th.
- Concerns were expressed as to whether the quantity needed for Florida Bay will be achieved when restoration is complete. Mr. Morrison pointed out that CEPP proposes to move an additional 200,000 acre-feet annually and return it to the natural system by reducing the discharges to the estuaries through the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Rivers. This amount of water is almost what was estimated to be needed for restoration. The discharges that occur through the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie are still problematic, even though discharges will be less when CEPP is in place. This is why additional storage is needed north of the lake. Part of restoration involves reducing unintended consequences of this managed system.

- A question was asked about how well the water would be treated before entering the southern part of the system. Concerns were expressed that water levels will be so high in the restored system that water will sheet over and flow into the bay without the benefit of treatment or filtration. Mr. Morrison explained that SFWMD has an extensive water quality monitoring program and that the state of Florida is implementing \$800 million dollars of projects, some of which involve storage and Stormwater Treatment Areas (STAs). When CEPP is complete, any water that is brought from the lake will be treated before it enters the southern part of the system.
- Mr. Morrison clarified that at this time water from Lake Okeechobee is not being moved into WCA-3A. Water in WCA-3A is the result of direct rainfall. No additional water from the lake is going into the STAs that feed into WCAs. SFWMD has no intention of bringing water from the lake into WCA-3A until WCA regulation schedules drop below the upper limits. Additional water is being discharged through the two estuaries, Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie.
- Mr. Morrison added that people have a tendency to blame the lake for all pollution when the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie River estuary discharges contain runoff from urban areas and agriculture. Monitoring is occurring on water originating on agricultural lands and entering into the STAs. Runoff from agricultural areas is being analyzed and data are being collected regarding what happens under different conditions. Sources of phosphorus in the system have been identified. The water quality treatment program is designed accordingly to treat water before entering the natural system. As new projects come online, monitoring and new parameters will be required through permits to make sure that project is meeting its performance requirements. Using adaptive management, adjustments are made when needed. The SFWMD Monitoring and Assessment Program (MAP) tracks water quality and species, etc. system-wide.
- Concerns were expressed that phosphorus in restoration water flows would reach the reef tract and cause impacts. Mr. Morrison assured everyone that the standards would be met for any water coming into the system.
- A question was asked about the quality of the water being piped into the L-29 canal. The pipes are clearly visible from the Tamiami Trail and the water is discolored and looks bad. Mr. Morrison explained that in this temporary operation to move water, pumps are taking water from WCA-3B and moving into Shark River Slough and moving water from WCA-3A to L-29 canal on the north side of the Tamiami Trail. Water that moves east in L-29 flows southward into ENP under the new one mile Tamiami Bridge. Mr. Morrison assured everyone that this water being moved was clean. It contains no chemicals, but does have naturally occurring tannins that account for its brown color. This water comes from WCA-3A and WCA-3B as a result of direct rainfall. Water quality data is being collected on a daily basis and shows that nutrient levels are extremely low.
- Mr. Morrison explained that to accommodate for the extra water due to high winter rainfalls, the system is being operated at its fullest capacity. The capacity to move water will improve greatly when Modified Water Deliveries is complete, including the 2.5 mile Tamiami Bridge in the western area that will allow for greater sheet flow into the park. The planning for the project to store more water north of the lake will begin this summer and completed by 2019.
- Mr. Morrison added that the SFWMD water monitoring includes monitoring ground water levels and water quality on the east side of the system adjacent to agricultural community in south Miami-Dade County. The fact that moving more water through the system did not flood or cause high water in the agricultural area is very encouraging. Under these high water volumes, if negative impacts were found, actions would be taken to address them as part of their approach using adaptive management.

- A question was asked about testing for heavy metal compounds, endocrine disruptors, pesticides and other chemicals. Concerns were expressed regarding the impacts of endocrine disruptors. Mr. Morrison stated that SFWMD does test for heavy metals. He is not sure about endocrine disruptors, but can find out whether they test or not or should be testing and will share the concerns expressed.
- A suggestion was made by ENP Scientist Chris Kavanagh to review the thresholds in place for water flow at stations that affect Florida Bay. Last summer, the lowest point in water flows (dipped below the threshold) occurred past the time when the seagrass die-off was occurring. The threshold might need to be adjusted so that sending more flows could be accomplished in advance of reaching the critical point that leads to hypersalinity and die-off. The salinity threshold should be evaluated as well.
- A question was asked about how the federal and state agencies work together in terms of funding and project development. Mr. Morrison explained that WRDA 2000 authorized the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) and established the relationship between the U. S. Army Corps and the SFWMD. Guiding principles and cost-sharing arrangements are described in related documents. Authorization and funding at the federal level is very important. SFWMD also coordinates with a variety of other agencies.
- In regards to the recent fish kill in the Indian River Lagoon (IRL), the fish kill occurred in the northern part of the IRL system and is outside the SFWMD jurisdiction. This area is not being influenced by the way the system is operated, including moving water from Lake Okeechobee to the St. Lucie estuary. The water being moved south includes lake water with local runoff from both cities and agricultural operations.

Chairperson Nedimyer thanked Mr. Morrison for his presentation. Mr. Morrison indicated that he is happy to return in the future.

Recognition of Service Award

On behalf of NOAA and Regional Director Billy Causey, Beth Dieveney recognized Sean Morton for 10 years of service in NOAA.

V. PUBLIC COMMENT FOR ITEMS NOT ON THE AGENDA

Jennifer Patino, U.S. Virgin Islands

Ms. Jenny Patino explained that she flew up to the Keys from the US Virgin Islands for this meeting to tell everyone about a situation in the US Virgin Island regarding the health of the coral reef. The local marine park called Coral World is proposing a new project, which consists of land and underwater construction. The project is to build shallow water dolphin pens to hopefully create an attraction for their water park. It's pretty important to understand how these pens affect the surrounding ecosystem and coral reefs. It wasn't until 2003 that a study was done to examine how these shallow water dolphin pens affect the surrounding coral reefs. The study was done by Dr. Thomas Goreau, a biochemist and marine biologist. She thinks Dr. Goreau is also the President of the National Coral Reef Alliance. The study was conducted in Cozumel and the results indicated that the effects to the surrounding reefs from such pens are devastating. Dr. Goreau looked over Coral World's proposal. He not only opposes it, he wrote to the Army Corps of Engineers asking them not to issue a permit for the project because it will cause devastating effects to the surrounding coral reefs based on the study. At this point, the Army Corps of Engineers has been sitting on this decision for over two years and are apparently waiting for a biological opinion from NOAA. As soon as they have that, they can decide whether or not to issue the permit. She is here to make sure the right people have this information and know the devastating effects

on coral that these dolphin pens can have. She is not picking on Coral World, but there are other options such as underwater sculptures that are artificial reefs. She spoke to Jason deCaires Taylor, who creates these underwater sculptures. He indicated that he would be very interested in doing an attraction at a discounted price if it were in place harming the surrounding ecosystem. The same was true when she spoke to someone who creates virtual reality experiences. The building of the proposed dolphin pen will involve destroying 250 individual threatened corals. She will be here after the meeting and she would like to speak to anyone has guidance as to what steps to take next. She is interested in speaking to people further about this and has access to the studies on this topic. She added that Coral World has actually already started work on this project; they have already begun to excavate, which is violating the CZM local permits. They have already started construction illegally. The owner of Coral World was quoted as saying that this project is on its way no matter what NOAA says. Ms. Patino would just like help from people on this and thanked everyone.

Captain Bill Wickers, Key West Charter Boat Association

Captain Wickers stated that he thought that the South Florida Water Management District gave a good presentation. He may have been misinformed because he thought there was a huge controversy over the reservoir that is supposed to be on the south of Lake Okeechobee. The money has not been appropriated for that.

Today, he wants to bring everyone up to date about something that is important to the Key West Charter Boat Association. About five or six years ago, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council went to limited entry in the charter industry. This means a person had to have a record of being in the industry to be in the business. Now, a permit is required for charter fishing in the Gulf. Originally, the Charter Boat Association thought that this might not be such a good idea. But now seeing it in place in the Gulf, it seems to be working okay. The South Atlantic Council about three to four weeks ago and have now approved limited entry on the Atlantic side. This is a federal council so the process will take a few years, but the process has started and is moving forward. The Key West Charter Boat Association wanted the advisory council to know that they highly endorse this move. They see every year that there are more and more regulations, stricter bag limits, seasonal closures, etc. Basically, there are more and more boats trying to chase fewer fish. They feel that it is time to go to a permitting system for charter vessels and would like this board to endorse the actions of the South Atlantic Council and maybe even go a little further. It came up in discussion at another meeting that its time to take a hard look at not only the number of charter boats and guide boats, but the number of dive boats that are now using the resources of the sanctuary. Fishermen have lost a large amount of the area that they fished, so more boats are trying to fish smaller areas. They feel that the resources in this place called paradise do need to be protected. At this point, with the number of vessels fishing and diving and using the resource, it is time for the advisory council to take a real hard look and do the same thing that the fisheries councils have done. The approach would have to be different from the one taken by fisheries management councils because it would require a different kind of permit. He would be glad to answer any questions and to help in any way.

Note: Chairperson Nedimyer commented that this would be good item as an agenda topic in a future meeting.

Julie Dick, Everglades Law Center on behalf of Last Stand & Florida Keys Environmental Fund

Ms. Dick thanked Matt Morrison for staying to hear public comments. She agrees with Matt on the water quality issue. The water being moved into Everglades National Park from the Tamiami has been cleaned and was stored in wetlands. She has spoken to a lot of scientist experts on that issue. The organizations that she represents disagree, however, with the land under the lake in the Everglades

Agricultural Area (EAA). CERP itself calls for storage and treatment of water in the Everglades Agricultural Area. This has not happened and the state has failed to move forward with that. It falls on the state to purchase land. That part of the Everglades restoration is really the state's obligation and it is a missing piece. Storage will allow them to move clean water through the Everglades ecosystem and deliver the quantity of water needed for Florida Bay and also keep the dirty discharges from going down the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Rivers. They would like to see movement forward and progress made on this specific piece. All the other projects have something moving and are going forward. But, the critical piece to get the amount of water needed for Florida Bay has no priority whatsoever and the plans to consider that are so far down the line. She can't emphasize enough how important it is to see some kind of storage in the Everglades Agricultural Area south of the lake.

She appreciates that the South Florida Water Management District presented today. It is helpful for people to hear from the District. She has participated in full day workshops held by the District to work out solutions related to agricultural issues and flooding in South Dade. At these full day workshops, all of the agencies at all levels participated to work toward a solution. She has not seen anything like focused on solving the problem for Florida Bay. The bay seems to be the red-headed step child that is getting no attention. The District needs to start paying more attention and along the way, the federal agencies. They really haven't seen this concerted effort.

On the Modified Waters issue, she is glad that project is moving forward. It is critical because it will be able to deliver water when it is dry. Another example occurred when deer were drowning due to high water in the Everglades. That was enough of an emergency to remedy that situation quickly, but when Florida Bay was in a drought situation, nothing happened. There really hasn't been much attention at all in terms of how things can be addressed in the short term. She thinks it would be very helpful to have a short term analysis and the agencies coming together to look at how to get water into Florida Bay when it is dry; not just when Conservation Area 3A has too much water. We need to know when we have a drought how the water is going to get to the bay. The minimum flow levels were a critical point that someone made. This is a collapsed ecosystem now and with only a couple of exceedances and one violation, the whole Florida Bay ecosystem collapsed. That is something that definitely needs to be reevaluated so that the trigger/exceedance of violation occurs before the whole ecosystem collapses. Again, she thanked Matt Morrison for his presentation. She hopes this is an issue that the District, the federal agencies and the SAC will continue to work together to address because unfortunately, it is not going away.

Joyce Newman, Last Stand

Ms. Newman stated that she lives in Big Pine Key and is speaking on behalf of Last Stand. She and Julie did not compare notes. Ms. Newman's shared that her notes refer to "a big piece missing.... a huge treatment area south of the lake/EAA/Sugarland". She stated that this body needs to formulate a resolution for approval at its June meeting that will express a sense of urgency. She doesn't know to whom it should be sent, maybe everybody. She emphasized that this issue is not getting the attention or the speed of action that needs to happen here. Over 20 years ago, some of the same people that are here today were sitting around the table then when she was speaking for Clean Water Action. We discussed restoring the natural flows, timing, distribution levels of clean water into the Everglades and Florida Bay. Now, 20 years later there has been a lot of talk, some action, but not nearly enough. This is about ecosystem health, the livelihoods of the people who work and live in the Florida Keys and the quality of life for everyone. Thank you.

Dottie Moses, Island of Key Largo Federation of Homeowner Associations

Ms. Moses spoke on behalf of the Island of Key Largo Federation of Homeowner Associations, which represents over 2,000 property owners. In Key Largo the Florida Bay is literally the island's backyard and is in serious trouble. A year ago in January 2015, the federation wrote a letter to the South Florida Water Management District asking them to take more assertive action in restoring the freshwater flows through the Everglades so that the Florida Bay could return to its previous diverse and abundant existence. Everyone knows what happened after that; Florida Bay actually collapsed. Since then things have gotten worse. Key Largo residents have done their part by installing wastewater. Key Largo residents actually pay the highest rates and assessments on that wastewater and have the expectation that anyone else contributing to the degradation of the nearshore environment would also be expected to do their part improve water quality here. The sanctuary has a Water Quality Protection Program that has directed programs for restoration. They are asking the council to write a resolution to whomever with very strong language to escalate and enhance Everglades restoration so that the Florida Bay can again be robust as the system was in the past. There are concerns about getting water south to Florida Bay and storage south of the lake seems to be a big area that needs to be addressed, along with stormwater.

Charles Causey, Florida Keys Environmental Fund

Mr. Charles Causey stated that it has been twenty years since he was a member of the Board of Directors of the South Florida Water Management District. He was only on the board a year or so having had to step down for health reasons. This situation is déjà vu all over again. Someone sent him an article from a newspaper in 1993 that had a picture of a board meeting with irate citizens shaking their fists because there was no freshwater in Florida Bay. Now it's come up again and there are the usual solutions, but....The thing that really concerns him more than anything is the longer term part of the system. The storage areas north of the lake are mostly for storage for agricultural interests, not Florida Bay. Storage south of the lake is really needed, which they are not addressing. Hopefully, this can be discussed in the near future and get them to change that position. The most important thing to him is that we can not afford to have another seagrass die-off in Everglades National Park Florida Bay. There are estimates of 25,000 to 50,000 dead seagrass acres there. Pete Frezza brought it up earlier and Matt addressed it briefly; a way absolutely has to be found to get water to Florida Bay when it is needed in case this happens again. This winter the Keys had their own water and didn't need extra water. Why should the bay's "fury animals" drown as opposed to the "fury animals" in Conservation 3A? When the water is needed, it is in needed and that is in the summer. High salinities are what kill seagrass and they occur in the summer, not the winter. The fishing in the areas of seagrass die-off is nonexistent. The area is a wasteland. If there is no storage for 10 years south of the lake, that means there are 10 years of being "naked" in the event of another very dry season in the summer. This can't be afforded. The bay is already going to have an algae bloom. He has been told that there are signs of it already. So, short term solutions are needed. He is told by some very experienced scientists who work in this field that this past winter there was enough water (not a lot) to get some water to the bay in May and June. Their names will not be mentioned. The real chore is to find a way if this happens again on a timely basis to move water in the summer when it is needed or there will be another event. It will be 10 years before storage at best exists south of the lake. That water is clean. Don't worry about the quality of the water. By the time it goes through the Water Conservation Areas it is practically drinkable. It's more important to be concerned about the quantity.

Richie Gomez, Key West Charter Boat Association

Mr. Gomez commented on what a good presentation was given by the first gentleman earlier in the day. Until then, he hadn't realized how much impact the boats such as his and others put on these low water areas, especially when moving through the narrow channels. He always assumed that if the boat didn't run aground that it didn't cause damage. Now, he understands that constant wake from vessels

can actually have a larger impact. He agrees that each area should be looked at separately and each area should have its own set of rules. For example, in the lakes area, there are some very narrow cuts that large vessels such as his charter boat have moved through over the years. He used these channels not as shortcuts but more to protect themselves from high seas on the outside of the islands. If he were forced down to an idle speed just in these narrow cuts, he would stop using them. He believes that large vessels cause more damage and agrees that each area should be looked at separately with its own special rules.

As far as derelict vessels left offshore as part of the Cuban situation, Mr. Gomez thinks it is absurd that Coast Guard would have to leave those boats offshore. They should be sunk immediately or removed immediately. They become not only a hazard to navigation, but an eyesore on shore with their own pollution problems.

Mr. Gomez referred to the economic impact study that is underway right now. He would like to say that after attending numerous sanctuary meetings, including this one and the recent reef resilience symposium, he continues to disagree with any more closures of Keys fishing grounds. Eighty to ninety percent of the studies had conversation had to do with much larger issues such as big business and progress. Fishermen understand that there are huge problems on the reef and ecosystem in general. When the sanctuary or any other conservation group speaks of “we” as in “we need to do this” and “we need to stop that”, people need to understand that fishermen are a part of that “we” and want everything that everyone else wants. Responsible fishermen such as those in the charter boat industry and the commercial industry want to help in all ways possible, but when they are singled out as the group that must suffer for a higher cause...They are just one more group suffering from the impacts of big business and some governmental procedure. The fishermen who are waiting for this big economic impact study to be over so that they can find out what new price they will have to pay for this. He asks that the council keep in mind that the fishermen are also “we the people” and must also be protected by the council. What seems like a small area to the council might be a huge impact to the fishermen. Fisheries management is working hard to protect the fisheries. He added that in many cases, it is the fishermen themselves that raise the red flag when it comes to problems with any species in the fishing industry. They are raising the flag and working with all fisheries managers and continue to want everything that everyone else wants. Thank you.

Steve Leopold, Charter Fisherman

Captain Leopold is a charter fisherman. He SCUBA dives and most importantly likes to jump in the water and see lots of fish. He came before the council at about this same time last year just a few weeks later. He mentioned what a huge success the grouper closure was after five months of a closed fishery. They saw high numbers of fish being caught and released and it was a healthy healthy fishery. One day of fishing with the bag limit as it stands now and will be when the season reopens on May 1st means.... For example, he is allowed to catch by law from his charter boat eight black grouper and hang them on a fish wrack. He can catch, kill and display these groupers. He thinks this is wrong because it is legal to have a catch of mature groupers. Someone should take the time to go down and see these fish. They may not be following the calendar and may still be spawning. He will not be going there on opening day this year because it is too upsetting to see what he saw. It is difficult to even speak about it. This will probably happen again on May 1st, but not on May 2 or 3 because a lot of them will be wiped out. He urged people to take a closer look at the situation and maybe do something about it if they feel the same way. He is here today to gather support and create awareness to address this bad situation.

Comments/Discussion (council members)

Andy Newman expressed the idea that South Florida Water Management District should have a seat on the advisory council because of the importance of getting water into Florida Bay. Superintendent Morton explained that any agency is more than welcome to attend and participate in the council meetings. The District used to have a council seat when they maintained an office in Marathon. Matt Morrison drove down today from the main office in West Palm Beach.

A question was asked of Steve Leopold as to where one can witness the fishing situation he mentioned. Steve agreed that any marinas, charter shops or any places where recreational fishing or charter fishing is taking place. He added that people should also look at the dive operations that allow spearfishing. Sometimes they may have 15 spear fishers. At the dock, check out what they have caught and pay attention to the sizes of the fish. There is no slot limit and sometimes fifty pound groupers are caught. It's a real eye-opener and can be very upsetting.

VI. SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT, REGIONAL DIRECTOR'S REPORT AND AGENCY REPORT HIGHLIGHTS: DEP, FWC, NOAA NMFS Southeast Region, NOAA OGCES, NOAA OLE, NPS, USCG, USEPA, USFWS, and U.S. Navy

NOAA Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Report, Sean Morton

- Staff is continuing to work on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and will be through the summer. They are working with the different agencies, specifically the Fish and Wildlife Service, which is the sanctuary's partner on the federal side in developing this document. He hopes to have a draft by mid-summer and to share in the fall.
- Nicole Uibel is a new member of the FKNMS education and outreach team. He also introduced Jen Lochia, who is based in the headquarters Office of National Marine Sanctuaries and will be serving as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) coordinator. She will be working on the documents that are produced for the program as part of the review.
- Recruiting for the research coordinator position is underway. The FKNMS communications coordinator Rachel Pawlitz left recently to take a position in Oregon.
- The director position is currently being advertised for ONMS. The former director Dan Basta left last December.
- The national marine sanctuary program is currently drafting its strategic plan. Developing the plan has meant lots of work from headquarters. Superintendent Morton is on the planning team and at some time will share the information with the advisory council. This will have information about the vision, core values and other mission related information.
- Summer field work for FKNMS, working closely with FWRI, includes aerial overflight boater use surveys, coral and fish surveys and annual *Nancy Foster* research cruise.
- Superintendent addressed the option of having or not having a June council meeting. This is a heads-up that the council may not have a June meeting, but will work toward a meeting in August. More public meetings may be held later in the year.

Joanna Walzack, Florida Department of Environmental Protection

Ms. Walzack reported for DEP's Florida Coastal Office. She missed the last SAC meeting because she was attending the United States Coral Reef Task Force (USCRTF) meeting in Washington, D.C.

- Highlights from the USCRTF include continuing to work on a handbook for planned and unplanned coral reef impacts. The handbook will articulate what the current federal authorities are across all of the agencies that have oversight of coral reefs issues and has the goal of

providing a first step towards consistency in dealing with permitted and unpermitted impacts across the U.S. coral reef jurisdictions.

- The USCRTF is working on a strategic plan to prioritize what can be pushed forward at the national level. They hope to have a draft out in the next month.
- The USCRTF is also working on legislative issues for coral reefs, including the reauthorization of the Coral Reef Conservation Act, which has not been reauthorized since 2000, which means that the authorization from Congress has not changed since then. This is top priority and is the primary way U.S. jurisdictions get money from Congress through the NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program.
- There is a bill currently in Congress called the Coral Reef Sustainability through Innovation Act. This is a zero funding bill that will involve an “X-Prize” or innovative concept type of award for projects to improve coral reef resilience. Zero funding means that it would take money from the existing pot.
- The Florida Coastal Management Program is having its first annual meeting in May in Tallahassee. This program focuses a lot on supporting the Aquatic Preserves and local municipalities (from beach flags and warning signs to coastal resilience issues). Discussions will focus on progress thus far and goals for the future.
- DEP South District (Gus Rios)
 - Staff participated in the April 11th, Monroe BOCC workshop on canal water quality restoration
 - The County is moving forward with the construction of the canal culvert project between Warbler and Killdeer lanes in Big Pine Key that is partially funded by FDEP.
- Florida State Parks
 - John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park Manager Paul Rice wants everyone to know that the Port Bougainville next phase of restoration project started on March 14. This portion of the restoration project will remove all of the structures and scattered remnant asphalt from roads, the entrance road after the circle will only be reduced to a 12’ wide multiuse path to maintain ADA accessibility. Janice Duquesnel can speak to the specifics of these projects.
 - The public meeting for the Unit Management Plans for Curry Hammock, Bahia Honda and Long Key is scheduled for June 9th. The meeting will be held in the Marathon Government Center from 5:00 pm – 8:00 pm. Information will be provided in local papers as the date approaches (Janice Duquesnel).
 - DEP Parks is moving forward with the wetland restoration project at Bahia Honda. This project is funded through the Keys Restoration Fund (Janice Duquesnel).
 - DEP Parks is moving forward with the seagrass restoration project at Lignumvitae. This project is funded through the Keys Restoration Fund (Janice Duquesnel).
 - Nesting shorebird season has started. Monthly surveys are being conducted throughout the Keys by members of the Florida Shorebird Alliance. Most surveys are concentrated on rooftops where least terns nest, but several state parks are conducting ground surveys. Other focal species are Wilson’s plovers and roseate terns (*Janice Duquesnel*).

Tom Matthews, FWC Fish and Wildlife Research Institute

- FWC commission meeting was just completed in April 13-14 in Jupiter. A decision was made to increase incentives from removing lionfish that include adding an extra lobster to the sport season bag limit. This practice was tried during last years’ season and resulted in greatly increasing the public awareness of the lionfish issue among lobster fishers.

- The next FWC meeting will be held on June 21 in Apalachicola.
- In terms of research, FWRI will be conducting field studies at Riley's Hump in a couple of weeks to continue tagging fish to movement patterns of black grouper. Scientists are also conducting research on sponges to support sponge restoration in Florida Bay and documenting boater use patterns in the sanctuary.

Captain Dave Dipre, FWC Division of Law Enforcement

- In January one manatee strike occurred with one rescue.
- A suspect fleeing at night eluding capture was arrested.
- They made cases for undersize lobster (commercial violations), over the bag limit mackerel, and over the limit blue crabs.
- Two pelicans rescued after being hooked by fisherman who refused to change the rigging of his gear to prevent such an incident. Fisherman was cited and his gear was seized.
- Officers have been targeting the bridges. Lots of people are leaving fish for dead and there are littering, alcohol related violations.
- In February, vessel inspection revealed numerous derelict vessels in the Boot Key area. They are number of salvage operators that try to buy up derelict vessels and not do anything about them. They have been cited.
- While conducting nighttime boating safety details in February, they found that many people were operating at night without their gear. Thirty safety violation citations and 100 warnings were issued.
- *Operations Live aboard* was underway from Key West to Key Largo and was very successful. Unfortunately, they found a lot of open MSD lines, which doesn't make sense since the county has an excellent pump-out program. But, officers are still finding and giving citations for MSD violations.
- Officers attended to a couple of boating accidents and assisted the Monroe County Sheriff's Office with a homicide investigation of a baby allegedly thrown from the Seven Mile Bridge.
- Six BUI arrests and two DUI arrests were made over the quarter.
- Individuals were arrested after catching bonnethead sharks and allowing them to die on the bridge. Discarding fish in this manner and not putting them back live is a second degree misdemeanor.
- Lieutenant Peters, Investigator Bingham, Officer Messier and Officer Foell assisted the Coast Guard with the rescue of 32 migrants stranded on an island. FWC frequently helps the Coast Guard with shallow water incidents and has done so at least three times this past quarter.
- FWC conducted an outreach meeting at Boot Key Harbor that was attended by two-hundred fifty residents.
- Officer Garrison and Officer Wilkins worked with 150 kids at two fishing clinics.
- FWC assisted with the arrest of a man for possession of marijuana and cocaine. He was also littering and had undersized fish.
- Investigator Cox and Officer Rubenstein broke up a fight in a state park and cited the participants for alcohol consumption.
- Individual fishing that was arrested for throwing bottles in the water was found in possession of marijuana. He had to fishing license, undersized fish and was in possession of prescription narcotics.

Heather Blough, National Marine Fisheries Service

- Since the last SAC meeting, the following management actions have been taken:

- Gulf Council approved new measures to eliminate the commercial yellowtail snapper circle hook requirement and modify the commercial and recreational yellowtail seasons to begin August, and increase the red grouper catch limit by about 35%, which is expected to support a year-round recreational fishery
- South Atlantic Council approved five new Spawning Special Management Zones (including Warsaw hole in the Florida Keys).
- Both Councils approved new measures to establish fixed boundary between the Atlantic and Gulf at the Dade-Monroe County line for king mackerel and delegated management of the mixing zone to the Gulf Council. They will also increase the recreational bag limit to 3 fish per person for mackerel.
- NOAA Fisheries will be requesting public comments on each of the actions mentioned above in the coming weeks/months.
- South Atlantic Council continues to consider substantial new rebuilding measures for the Florida Keys hogfish stock and is looking at catch reductions of 75% or more. They are also continuing to look at mutton snapper regulations where they may be following the state's lead. The Council is also beginning to consider recommendations that came out of their recent visioning project, including adjusting the seasonality of the shallow-water grouper closure and modifying recreational bag limits. This is a good time to provide input on bag limits, etc.
- Joint Spiny Lobster review panel met last month via webinar last month to discuss recent overages. Landings have exceeded the catch target for three years running and exceeded the catch limit in two of those years (current year overage based on projections). NOAA Fisheries agency guidelines recommend the councils review catch limits and accountability measures if catches exceed the limit more than once within a 4-year period, so the review panel proposed several new catch limit alternatives for the council's consideration. The Advisory Panel will meet April 25 at Key Largo Marriott to weigh in on this topic and examine the information Tom and Gabby presented the February SAC meeting. They will also address the new coral habitat areas of particular concern recommended by the Council's Coral Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and Advisory Panels (AP) for the Councils' consideration.
- Earlier this month, NOAA Fisheries finalized in collaboration with the Fish and Wildlife Service a Fisheries rule to divide the green sea turtle population into 11 distinct segments and down list the status of the Florida (N. Atlantic) breeding population from endangered to threatened.
- NOAA Fisheries has reorganized its protected resources division to form a new coral branch that will help address the heavy ESA consultation backlog and also lead other coral-related ESA efforts. The new Branch Chief Mark Lamb came on board early last month. He has over 30 years of experience with the Coast Guard, EPA, and private-sector in environmental consulting and compliance. NOAA Fisheries is very pleased to have him onboard and looks forward to the benefits this organizational change will bring to the agency's coral work and relationships with the sanctuary and other partners.

Everglades and Dry Tortugas National Park Service, Chris Kavanagh

- The Park appreciates the Florida FWC for removing the derelict sailboat from Ramshead Shoal last week.
- A boat grounding took place recently on Ramshead Shoal in the vicinity of the derelict sailboat. The vessel was a 38' triple engine recreational vessel.
- The Park's boater education course will be implemented this summer. The course is an online, hour-long course. Both the course certification (free) and a permit (fee-based) will be required to operate a motor vessel in Florida Bay within Everglades National Park.

- The course is being implemented per the recently authorized General Management Plan in parallel with expansion of the Poll and Troll Zones to cover approximately 100,000 acres of Florida Bay within the Park, which is beginning this year.
- Update on the seagrass die-off:
 - As a whole, Florida Bay is not dead; however, the park’s natural resources sustained a serious injury with effects on seagrass and fish.
 - Current conditions in the bay indicate that salinities are low due to the record winter rainfall that began in December. Some recovery with new seagrass growth was observed in fringe areas of the die-off (including shoal and turtle grass).
 - A cooperative effort among the Park, FWC, and SFWMD has obtained fixed-wing aerial photography of the affected area, which will be analyzed to describe the extent and pattern of living and injured areas of seagrass. At this point, the estimate is that 20,000 acres of seagrass died.
 - Concerning algae blooms, none have been observed, although elevated levels of chlorophyll a, (indicative of a higher phytoplankton density), have been measured in some basins and bights (Whipray, Garfield, and Terrapin).
 - FY16 money has been budgeted to monitor water quality, seagrass health and recovery, and fishery status in the seagrass die-off zone.
 - The situation in South Florida in the last year, with the inversion of wet and dry seasons, is unusual, but extremes due to climatic influences and variability can be expected to occur more frequently in the future. Florida Bay cannot sustain another injury of this scale without suffering ecosystem collapse. Things need to be done differently (more, faster, better) to prevent collapse.
 - The South Florida Natural Resources Center has produced a fact sheet on the Florida Bay seagrass die-off, which will be made available to the SAC.

Mathew Martin,* U.S. Navy

- The U.S. Navy Naval Air Station in Key West (NASKW) fuel contractor conducted a “worst case” discharge scenario fuels spill in conjunction with partners on Trumbo Point. They had participation from NOAA, FDEP and FWC.
- In conjunction with Save-A-Turtle and over 30 volunteers, the U.S. Navy kicked off their 12th plus year of sea turtle beach nesting surveys on NASKW shorelines.
- The University of Florida will conduct their second quarterly survey for American Crocodiles on the NASKW this month, with a focus on identifying nesting habitat areas.
- The US Fish and Wildlife Service is finishing a presence/absence survey for the endangered Silver Rice Rat on NASKW properties. Preliminary results indicate the presence of this species only on Saddlebunch Keys at this time.
- The 2015 Annual Lower Keys marsh rabbit survey results indicate population on NASKW stable.
- In March, prior to roseate tern nesting season, the Navy installed 35 tern nesting boxes on roofs of buildings on Truman Annex (Key West) to offset loss of nesting substrate when gravel roofs were replaced. Boxes potentially will support ~173 pairs of terns.

*Matt Martin was recently hired as the NAS Key West Resource Manager and attended in place of Ed Barham.

VII. CLOSING REMARKS/ADJOURN

Chairperson Nedimyer reminded everyone to look for an email regarding the June advisory council meeting.

ADJOURN