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May 11, 2016

Chair Yablonski, FWC Commissioners and Executive Director Wiley
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
620 South Meridian Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1600

Dear Chair Yablonski, FWC Commissioners and Executive Director Wiley:

Having personally met with FWC staff in January 2016, and having had a number of follow up conversations pursuant to review of last year's bear hunt, please note the following suggestions as you consider actions for this year.

- 1) Prior to determining allowable take of bears by licensed hunters, we recommend ensuring that that each Bear Management Unit (BMU) has gone through biologically sustainable demographic analysis using the most modern methodology as to population, reproduction, and all mortality factors, including impacts of an increasing human population.
- 2) If take of black bear is to be allowed in 2016, please consider
 - a. shortening the hunt period to less than one week, possibly to one weekend.
 - b. allowing take only when the bear and the hunter are not less than 200 yards from any feeding station or artificial bait. We also believe it would be beneficial to consider temporarily prohibiting the use of deer feeders on lands where bears are to be hunted (mandate removal of deer feeders 30 days prior to the bear hunt). Use of deer feeders could resume post bear hunt.
 - c. charging the maximum allowable fee for the hunt permit and using those funds to lessen bear-human interactions (bear proof trash cans, etc.) and to support education and outreach dedicated to reducing the habituation of bears to human food sources.
 - d. creating bear sanctuaries where no bear hunting is allowed within core bear habitats in hunted BMUs (e.g., the three national forests, Big Cypress National Preserve, other public lands). This tool could become increasingly valuable as a long-term bear conservation strategy for the state's remaining wilderness areas as future

development and roads are built, likely leading to increased road mortality of bears and habitat fragmentation.

- e. limiting the number of bear tags to be issued to the number of bears identified as the harvest objective in each BMU somewhat like FWC does with alligators. Existing alligator harvest rules may provide guidance for this method.
- f. authorizing the Executive Director to immediately close any BMU when the harvest objective is met.
- g. increasing efforts on behalf of habitat connectivity between the larger bear sub-populations and the smaller more vulnerable bear sub-populations, especially to benefit the Highlands County, Chassahowitzka and Eglin area bears.

Florida's quickly increasing human population, in conjunction with our valuable fish and wildlife resources, often makes for challenging management decisions. The Florida black bear has, as FWC recently documented, experienced population increases in a number of BMUs. The Commission has also documented significant increases in bear road kill mortality and the need to euthanize bears who have become habituated to human feeding. We understand that staff has concerns that some of the bear subpopulations may continue to grow, leading to an increase in human-bear conflicts. At present however, we urge the FWC to be very conservative in considering proposing bear hunts in 2016 or 2017.

We commend the FWC for its bear research and urge the continuation of the collection of data needed to understand bear population dynamics as you consider future bear harvest. We also believe it is critical for the Commission to continue to educate the public about the status of each bear subpopulation and to continue to promote bear- wise human behavior.

Lastly, please note we offer the above recommendations in acknowledgement of the fine work of FWC biologists and law enforcement, whom we recognize for their efforts not only towards the conservation of the black bear, but for hundreds of other wildlife species.

Sincerely,



Manley K. Fuller, III
President