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FWC: FLORIDA WILDLIFE IN GOOD HANDS

TALLAHASSEE- - Working closely with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) continues to monitor the coast and prepare for the potential arrival of oil from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

“We are hopeful the oil spill may miss Florida’s beaches,” said Rodney Barreto, Chairman of the FWC. “However, you can rest assured Florida will be prepared to address any threats to our precious fish and wildlife resources.”

There have been no impacts on Florida’s fish and wildlife at this time. The FWC has strong conservation management strategies in place, and continues to work closely with partner agencies and conservation organizations willing to contribute time and resources to this effort.

Approximately 70 FWC staff are involved in a variety of oil spill response-related activities, including conducting pre-impact assessments and coordinating with other agencies. FWC staff are on duty at the Incident Command in Mobile, Ala. and St. Petersburg, as well as at the Emergency Operation Center in Tallahassee. Dozens of staff are working behind the scenes to coordinate all activities and communications.

“We continue to be thankful for all the offers of support and assistance pouring in from concerned citizens and conservation organizations across the state,” Barreto said. “We want to assure the public that good plans are in place for recovery and rehabilitation of all wildlife.”

Oiled birds, reptiles and other wildlife will be handled by Tri-State Bird Rescue & Research. Tri-State and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) will coordinate all recovery and rehabilitation efforts for wildlife impacted by the oil spill in Florida with FWC’s assistance and support.

The FWC asks everyone to please be aware that all wildlife rescue efforts must be coordinated in a safe manner by trained personnel. Rescued wildlife will be taken to approved zoological facilities for rehabilitation so they have the best chance of survival. Also, handling oiled wildlife may pose a serious health and safety risk to rescuers and

the animals they are trying to rescue. The chemicals in oil are toxic and only trained personnel with appropriate protective gear and equipment should handle and treat oiled animals.

Even though opportunities for untrained volunteers are limited, the public may, call Volunteer Florida at 866-448-5816. Potential volunteers will be added to the Incident Command database. Offers of assistance are appreciated; however, it is important to note that callers may or may not be contacted to assist because of the hazardous nature of the response.

The FWC is working closely with the Joint Incident Command and all critical partners, which include BP, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Coast Guard and USFWS. FWC biologists are advising on strategy for placing booms – the tubing that contains oil spills – which requires careful planning when placed in environmentally sensitive areas, such as estuaries and inlets. These areas are a priority because these habitats support many of Florida’s wildlife and fish species.

“We are working with the very best agencies and staff in the country,” Barreto said. “We are all working together here in Florida, and we are ready for whatever may come.”

The FWC is coordinating with the USFWS and NOAA regarding response for potentially impacted marine mammals and sea turtles. Several FWC staff have been conducting aerial surveys over possible impact areas from Destin to Pensacola to survey manatee, sea turtle and dolphin populations. This information will assist in planning response strategies, should oil impact the bays and estuaries of the western Panhandle region.

Sea turtles, shorebirds, wading birds and other wildlife are vulnerable to exposure to oil in nearshore waters and on the beaches. The network of volunteers, rehabilitation facilities and veterinarians is preparing to handle any oiled animals found on Florida’s beaches. Nests and hatchlings will be monitored and protected on their nesting beaches by trained personnel.

Numerous FWC staff are conducting pre-impact assessments. FWC biologists have been deployed to Mobile, Ala., and the Florida Panhandle area to provide expertise in marine fish, sea turtles, shorebirds and other wildlife.

On Wednesday, the FWC and the University of South Florida’s College of Marine Science deployed the RV Weatherbird II to conduct a multi-day scientific research study to obtain information on fisheries resources and plankton in the Gulf of Mexico near the Florida Panhandle. Six FWC staff are onboard the vessel, along with staff from USF, to collect data, which will create baseline data prior to impacts from potential oil spills.

The FWC's regional offices are inventorying equipment available for the response, so they can quickly mobilize when needed. This includes trucks, trailers, ATVs, boats and other equipment, as well as personnel. For more information, call the Florida State Emergency Information Line at 800-342-3557. Other important numbers include:

- To report oiled wildlife, call 866-557-1401
- To discuss spill-related damage, call 800-440-0858
- To report oiled shoreline, call 866-448-5816
- To request volunteer information, call 866-448-5816

Visit MyFWC.com for more information and links to oil-spill related websites.

For the most up-to-date information on Florida's Deepwater Horizon response, as well as health and safety tips, visit www.dep.state.fl.us/deepwaterhorizon, follow us on Twitter at www.Twitter.com/FLDEPAlert or contact the Florida Emergency Information Line at 800-342-3557.

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