

September 6, 2012

To: Members of the Harris Chain of Lakes Restoration Council

From: Dr. Daniel E. Canfield Jr., Member Technical Advisory Committee

Subject: Sport Fish Stocking Program

### **To Stock or Not to Stock – That is the Question!**

Last Friday, the question about the need to stock the Harris Chain of Lakes garnered the Council's direct attention, but given the tenor of the discussion I am sure some of you are unclear what the answer should be. I write this brief note (I will not be able to attend the October meeting) to provide some historical perspective and offer a possible way forward for the Council and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC).

The issues raised and debated by Mr. Goerner and the FWCC biologist (Brandon Thompson) have been debated for the last 100 years across the United States. The debates have not been resolved by professionals over the 100 years, and the Council shall not resolve them in the next few months, because the answers are yes, no, and maybe. Which answer you believe often depends on whether you are talking about people or fish.

My Perspective: The quality of a lake (s) is often judged by the public based on fishing. "Good" quality lakes are good fishing lakes and "bad" quality are poor fishing lakes. In the past, the Harris Chain of Lakes was judged by many anglers to be the "Bass Capital of the World." Yes, the designation was based on the fish population, but it also was based on a public relations campaign by the City of Leesburg and the word spread by large numbers of anglers.

When fishing was deemed great in the late 1960s and 1980s, FWCC's creel studies reported bass angling hours for Lake Griffin and Lake Harris of 50,000 to 80,000 angling hours per year. Lake Harris approached 110,000 bass angler hours per year in the mid-1980s. Both Lake Griffin and Lake Harris developed problems where bass angling hours declined precipitously. At Lake Griffin, FWCC reported bass angling hours under 1000 per year as we entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century and Brandon reported only about 43,000 bass angling hours for Lake Harris during FWCC's last creel survey.

The Council's strategic bass fishing goal for Lake Griffin and Lake Harris should be at least 50,000 bass angling hours per years. The one thing all sides agree upon in the stocking debate is bass fishing is a big business. If we consider bass fishing a

business, we must remember a business owner must advertise to build the business and advertise to keep its share of the business in the face of competition. If the premise of Brandon is accepted that stocking is only public relations, the Council should say we agree and whole-heartedly support the stocking of wild-adult largemouth bass into the Harris Chain of Lakes until FWCC's creel data indicate that bass angling hours at both Lake Griffin and Lake Harris exceed 50,000 angler hours per year.

But, what shall the cost be? FWCC and UF/IFAS recognize that bass fishery at Lake Griffin and Lake Harris are worth millions to the state and local economies. The UF/IFAS study of stocking wild-adult largemouth bass into Lake Griffin estimated that it cost about \$20 per fish (maximum estimate). However, in all cases the estimated return on the investment (RTI) was positive and in the millions.

The UF/IFAS stocking program supported by the Council was good public relations because many quality-sized (> 14 inches) fish (seen by anglers) were stocked into Lake Griffin, survived stocking, and were immediately caught by anglers (some times multiple times. FWCC's stocking of advanced fingerling bass demonstrated the survival of the stocked fish after one year is less than 2%. If FWCC is producing the advanced fingerlings at \$1 per fish the cost per fish by the time they reach the minimum size (8 inches) stocked by UF/IFAS is at least \$50 per fish. It also takes multiple years to reach the large sized bass stocked by UF/IFAS.

So, if we consider stocking as only a public relations effort, the money recommended by the Council is a good investment because the RTI will be positive and angling psychology at the Harris Chain will remain positive because they see quality-sized fish being put into the lakes and they catch many of these quality-sized fish.

The Council recommended the stocking program at UF/IFAS be funded at \$150,000. Given changes in UF overhead, personnel insurance, gas prices, and inflation, the ideal request should be \$225,000. This would also permit UF/IFAS to have sufficient resources to work with Brandon to try to answer some of the research questions that have been raised (Note; the first Council request for stocking was \$500,000 to be split evenly between UF/IFAS and FWCC).