

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
From: Melissa Tucker, Director, Habitat and Species Conservation
Date: February 21, 2023
Subject: Proposed Rule – Skyway Fishing Pier State Park

Purpose: Obtain approval to publish proposed rule language for fishing regulations at Skyway Fishing Pier State Park (Skyway Pier).

Why: To address ongoing entanglement in fishing gear and associated injury and mortality of brown pelicans (pelicans) and other seabirds.

Top Points:

- 1) Pelicans are entangled in fishing gear at Skyway Pier at a higher rate than other fishing piers throughout the state, and severe entanglements often lead to death.
- 2) Though FWC, other state agencies, and private organizations have used education and implemented actions to reduce entanglements and improve rescue success, severe injuries to pelicans still occur in large numbers.
- 3) The proposed regulations are intended to address the most severe types of seabird entanglement.

Affected Parties: Anglers and visitors at Skyway Pier, the Pier concessionaire and tackle shops, wildlife rescuers and rehabilitators, and local and state government agencies.

Summary: Skyway Pier is an outdoor recreation area composed of a North Pier and South Pier, which are decommissioned portions of the original Sunshine Skyway Bridge. Together, the piers span over two miles into Tampa Bay and are unique due to their length and height. Florida Department of Transportation owns the piers, which are managed by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) as a state park. The location is a popular fishing site and receives up to 200,000 visitors annually. Fishing-gear entanglement of birds, primarily pelicans, has been occurring at Skyway Pier for many years, and volunteers have engaged in organized rescue efforts since 2013. FWC, local and state agencies partners, wildlife rescue entities, and other private organizations began active coordination in 2016 to address high incidences of seabird entanglements at the pier. A sharp increase in pier visitation during 2020 led to further increases of documented and reported pelican entanglement. Despite past actions by FWC, DEP, and the pier concessionaire as well as educational programs to address the issue, hundreds of pelicans and other seabirds are entangled in fishing gear at Skyway Pier each year, resulting in their severe injury or death.

To reduce the likelihood and severity of fishing-gear entanglement and to further seabird conservation at Skyway Pier, staff recommends establishing an education requirement for anglers, prohibiting the use of fishing rigs with more than one hook or a multiple hook from November 1 – March 31, limiting anglers to the use of two sets of hook-and-line gear in the state park, and prohibiting use of sabiki rigs year-round within a portion of South Skyway Pier. Staff also recommends reviewing these rules two years after implementation to determine whether they are appropriate or if they should be repealed or expanded.

Staff Recommendation: Approve the proposed rules for advertising and direct staff to return to a future Commission Meeting for final approval.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter: Jessica McCawley, Marine Fisheries Management, and Melissa Tucker, Habitat and Species Conservation.

Affected Rules: 68B-5, F.A.C.