

INFORMATION AND EDUCATION SESSION

LAKE OKEECHOBEE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A CONTROVERSIAL MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

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Abstract: This paper outlines procedures used in obtaining approval of a management program. After intense inter-division communication and cooperation, field personnel of the Fisheries, Law Enforcement, and Information-Education Divisions of the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission presented an outline of this controversial plan to respective division chiefs for review and refinement. The program was presented to the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission by the supervisory staff for approval. Local civic, conservation, and governmental bodies were contacted by field level personnel to provide general concepts of the program. Public meetings were held to assess public reaction to the plan. After economic analysis indicated feasibility of the program, enabling legislation was obtained to provide funds and additional personnel to supervise the program.

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The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission has recently implemented a liberalized commercial fishing program on Lake Okeechobee which allows for the harvest and sale of bluegill, redear sunfish, and black crappie. These species may be harvested in Lake Okeechobee in addition to catfish, bullhead, shad, and gar which are legally harvested commercially statewide. A number of inquiries have been made by other state administrators concerning how the program was developed and particularly what sequence of procedures were used for implementing the program. The objective of this paper is to discuss the sequence of procedures which resulted in the successful development and implementation of the management program rather than a discussion of the program itself. We believe other agencies planning such programs would benefit from our successes and mistakes. The sequence of procedures was not predetermined.

Lake Okeechobee is a shallow, freshwater, subtropical lake located in peninsular Florida with a surface area of approximately 189,150 ha (Florida Board of Conservation 1969, Brooks 1974). After several years of research on Lake Okeechobee by various investigators (Ager, et al. 1974 a, 1974 b, Ager and Kerce 1974, Davis and Marshall 1975, Joyner 1971 and 1974, and MacGill et al. 1976), the basic problem was identified, i.e., the rate of eutrophication of Lake Okeechobee had been greatly accelerated by flood control practices and subsequent land development centered around the lake (Statement from the Governor's Conference 1971, Marshall et al. 1972). Severe nutrient loading by various tributaries to the lake was identified quantitatively. In terms of the fishery resource, this problem of increased nutrient loading disrupted the normal food chains and subsequent production of desirable fish and resulted in the production of more and more undesirable fish (Dequine 1951 and 1953, Phillippy and Ager 1967, Marshall 1946). Increased nutrient input resulted in a manyfold increase in production of fishes, but lack of increased harvest compounded the problems (Ager 1972). Increased competition among species had also resulted in slower growth rates, decreased spawning success, and reduced fishing success for desirable species (Ager et al. 1974 a,b).

METHODS

Intra-Agency Coordination at the Field Level

Working with the biological objectives of (1) providing optimal utilization of the annually renewable resource through regulation and protection, and (2) removing

nutrients by harvesting fish, fisheries personnel assigned to the lake developed a summary of background information on the problems of the lake and its fishery resources. Procedures outlining additional gear and species for harvest were proposed. A fee assessment levied on the gamefish harvested was suggested to generate funds for the adequate supervision and monitoring of the program. With this program outline in hand, the fisheries personnel then arranged an informal meeting with the Law Enforcement and Information-Education personnel involved with matters pertaining to Lake Okeechobee. The program was presented to these personnel and the question posed, "Can the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission implement such a program from the standpoint of enforcement and public information responsibilities?" This precipitated many lengthy discussions aimed at clarification. These discussions resulted in a more thorough understanding of the problems, how this proposed utilization of the resource would help in solving the basic problem of cultural eutrophication, and its anticipated effect on the fish population.

As a result of the information gained from the informal meeting, a more detailed program was outlined specifying general regulations needed to effectively govern the harvest. Alternate procedures and regulations were also provided with recommendations as to their effectiveness and feasibility. This more refined, detailed program with alternatives was presented as a written proposal for review and comment to the supervisory staff of the 3 divisions involved. Someone at the field level of each division was available to discuss various aspects of the proposed program with the supervisory staff personnel to assure that they clearly understood the basic problem and how this proposed program might relieve the problem created. To the supervisory staff, we posed the same question of "Can the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission implement such a program from the standpoint of enforcement and public education responsibilities?"

Supervisory staff personnel provided additional refinement and more suggestions regarding specific procedures for program implementation and delineated available alternatives. This refined program plan included procedures to present the concept of the program to the general public to assess public reaction. We desired input from the public — more specifically, the sport and commercial fishing interests — on our proposed program.

Presentation to Commission

The proposed program containing background, objectives, procedures, necessary regulations, and recommendations to provide public information was prepared for the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission staff. The staff made a formal presentation to the Commissioners at a regular meeting. The Commissioners, acting upon staff recommendations, approved the program in principle and directed the staff to pursue the public information and legislative segments of the program. One segment called for a series of public meetings to present the proposed plan. The other segment called for the drafting of legislation that would establish permit fees for gear and an industry tariff on gamefish harvested. The staff was directed to report to the Commission the public reaction obtained at these meetings including recommendations and a time schedule for implementation.

Public Presentations of General Intent

A program panel consisting of divisional field representatives and staff representatives having responsibilities for the Lake Okeechobee area, was selected. Public meeting places and dates were established and advertised to promote attendance from both sport and commercial fishermen. Area field personnel made numerous contacts and appearances before civic and conservation groups as well as presentations to local county and city governmental bodies briefly outlining the background, objectives, and general procedures of the proposed program. Written endorsement or opposition was requested. Presentations at public meetings were conducted by panel members. Typically, staff representatives made introductions and provided some brief informative remarks concerning the general purpose of the meetings and the intent of the Commission subsequent to holding these meetings. The background of the program and the objectives were presented by field level fishery personnel on the panel. A Law

Enforcement supervisor presented the proposed regulations which would provide procedures to accomplish objectives while holding resource competition between sport and commercial interests to a minimum. Field level Information-Education personnel prepared a brief summary of the background, objectives, and regulations for distribution at these public meetings. The public was given the opportunity to make statements after the formal presentation. Special note was made of the topics and questions posed by the public. At the end of these planned meetings, this noted information was compiled and analyzed by the panel to determine information needs and necessary program modifications to provide for public acceptance.

RESULTS

Analysis of Public Presentations

Analysis of the statements received at the public presentations indicated 2 items of need: (1) additional public information material was needed to explain the basis of the program and the general procedures for accomplishing the objectives, and (2) market and economic analysis was required to provide a projected feasibility of the proposed operation. Information-Education personnel provided additional informational material while field personnel assisted in disseminating the information to the public. A research contract was negotiated with an economic consultant to conduct a feasibility study. The study (Dasse et al. 1976) was completed for the Commission within a 5 mo. period. Completion of the economic feasibility study allowed the program panel members to prepare a detailed plan for implementation with specific regulations to govern the operation and a schedule for implementation to present to the public at any of the meetings. Information-Education material was prepared from both analysis of public reaction obtained at the first series of meetings and the information gained from the economic feasibility study.

Enabling Legislation and Personnel Authorization

Liaison with area legislators was accomplished by staff personnel. With the cooperation of a few of these legislators, necessary legislation was introduced to enable the legal sale of game fish and provide funding for the program. Gamefish to be sold require a tag supplied by the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission. Funding was provided by specifying the cost of gear permits and establishing a maximum tariff to be assessed the commercial industry based upon numbers of tags supplied for gamefish harvested. Authorization for additional enforcement and technical personnel for supervision and monitoring of the program was specified in the legislation. As a result of prior public contact concerning the program and its predicted benefits, legislative approval was obtained with little opposition.

With the enabling legislation in hand, another series of public meetings was scheduled to provide the final details of program implementation. The panel prepared detailed program procedures and outlined regulations to permit program implementation. A schedule for implementation was defined including a minimum specified interval to allow for adequate program evaluation. Although opposition to the program was encountered from the beginning, no organized overall opposition materialized during the 18 mo. period of program presentation. However, certain facets of the program received substantial opposition and modification of procedures and regulations was necessary to gain majority acceptance of the program by the public. procedures and regulations necessary to gain majority acceptance of the program by the public.

DISCUSSION

Initiation of the management program concept at the field level allowed for input to program development from those persons in a position of practical field experience in the area. The development of the program concept became an inter-division project of area field personnel. Without involvement and support from field personnel, development and implementation of such a program would have been more difficult to achieve. Lines

of communication were opened between inter-divisional personnel in the pursuit of a common objective. This provided for the exchange of ideas and awareness of procedural problems previously unknown to personnel of other divisions.

As development of the program concept evolved to include supervisory staff personnel, communication procedures were defined to allow for exchange of information between field personnel and supervisory staff. Notoriously, this communication between field personnel and staff is in the form of directives to the field personnel with little input from the field in the formulation of these directives. This exchange of information resulted in greater decision-making authority at the field level, once the problem had been adequately defined. This greater decision-making authority requires direct communication between supervisory field personnel and staff personnel with frequent exchange of information.

The successful development and implementation of this program has been a result of establishing good inter-divisional and field to staff communications. These lines of communication have allowed all personnel concerned to be involved in the development of the program and assist in its implementation. The future success of the program will depend upon the agency's ability to maintain these lines of communication and, most importantly, to maintain communication with the public who ultimately benefit from the program.

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