

Fish and Wildlife Service Director's Report
Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council Meeting
Key Largo, FL – August 2008

- The Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) played a key role in helping to develop the Southeast Aquatic Habitat Plan, which was completed and published this spring by the Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership (SARP). The plan was developed as a joint effort of all the member agencies and partners of SARP plus many other stakeholders throughout the region. It is broad and regional in nature, given the geographic and biological range of the SARP's 14 member states. The plan has eight broad objectives focused on all aquatic habitats in the Southeast from headwater streams to marine waters. The full plan document, as well as a color booklet summary version, is available at <http://www.sarpaquatic.org>.
- A 90-day finding published in the *Federal Register* on March 25, 2008 found that the petition received by NOAA Fisheries Service and the FWS on November 15, 2007 to change the listing of the western North Atlantic loggerhead sea turtle population from threatened to endangered status under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) presented substantial scientific information indicating that the action may be warranted. Earlier in the year two FWS Southeast Region personnel were assigned to a Loggerhead Biological Review Team to advise the NOAA Fisheries Service and FWS on the status of loggerhead populations globally. The draft Atlantic Loggerhead Sea Turtle Recovery Plan was published in the *Federal Register* on May 30, 2008, and comments were accepted through July 29. The Kemp' Ridley Sea Turtle Recovery Plan is also in the process of being revised.
- Two meetings were held in Tallahassee, Florida on March 25 and May 21, 2008 to begin discussions for preparing a statewide coastal habitat conservation plan (HCP) for Florida. The lead agency for development of the plan is the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). Through completion of an HCP stakeholders/participants can be granted incidental take permits by the FWS under Section 10(a) of the ESA for construction or other activities that would otherwise be prohibited, provided certain conditions are met through provisions of the HCP.
- The FWS continues to work with the US Army, Corps of Engineers (CE) and other state and federal agencies in the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint (ACF) rivers watershed to deal with drought conditions in the river basin. During late 2007 the CE developed a plan for reducing water releases from the basin's reservoirs, primarily Lake Lanier in Georgia, which serves as the major water supply for the City of Atlanta. The FWS determined that the plan would not jeopardize the continued existence or critical habitats of the Gulf sturgeon, fat threeridge mussel and the purple bankclimber mussel. Proposed revisions to that plan this spring triggered the need for a revised biological opinion (BO) from the FWS on the plan's effects on those species as well as another mussel, the Chipola slabshell. The revised BO, released on June 2 stated that the plan revisions would not appreciably reduce the likelihood that the four listed species would survive nor preclude their future recovery. The revised plan provides for reduced flow down to 4,500 cubic feet per second (CFS) at Jim Woodruff Lock and Dam during periods of extreme drought. The revised plan provides some slight benefit to the Apalachicola River estuary in that it decreases the number of days per year of flows less than 16,000 CFS which would shorten some periods of high salinity in the bay.

- The FWS is seeking proposals from states under the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund grant program for 2009. These grants support efforts to acquire land or conduct planning for endangered species conservation. The 2009 President's budget request identified \$75.5 million for the program. Proposals must be submitted to FWS regional offices by September 22, 2008.
- The FWS this spring began publishing a quarterly magazine focused on the agency's Fisheries Program. The magazine titled *Eddies: Reflections on Fisheries Conservation* highlights the aquatic conservation work of the Fisheries Program and its partners. The new magazine is a key component of the FWS's efforts to better communicate with the public. It can be read online or subscribed to for e-mail alerts or print copies at www.fws.gov/eddies.