

Florida

Setting the Stage Statewide for Cohesive R&R Partnerships

SUMMARY

In 2005, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission received a \$15,000 HHP grant to help fund a survey and planning efforts for the 2005 Summit on the Future of Hunting in Florida (Florida Hunting Summit). The survey obtained input from licensed hunters to identify issues and challenges about hunting; results guided summit working groups. The summit united agency staff, hunters and hunting organizations to develop an action plan to advance recruitment and retention efforts throughout the state.

KEY AGENCY	Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
EXTERNAL PARTNERS	More than 20 entities, including NSSF, provided financial support or expertise to this event. A total of 213 Florida stakeholders participated in the event. Three contractors were hired to coordinate logistics, facilitate the event and complete the survey.
INTERNAL PARTNERS	Help was agency wide, including staff from habitat and species conservation, law enforcement and community relations. The agency's executive office supported the summit from its inception.
PROJECT DATES	June 2005-November 2005
CONTACT	Nick Wiley, director, Division of Hunting and Game Management, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, (850) 488-3881, Nick.Wiley@MyFWC.com
RESOURCES	HHP final report; web site at www.wildlifefoundationofflorida.com/hunting/index.htm features final reports and transcripts.

BACKGROUND: Why this effort?

Hunting in Florida is facing troubled times. Hunter numbers have declined, and Florida's landscape and population are changing rapidly in ways that are not good for hunting and hunters. The Florida Commission spearheaded the summit and survey to identify hunters' needs and join hunting and conservation groups to develop an action plan to further recruitment and retention projects.

Survey objectives:

- A random survey of hunters would identify major issues, barriers, needs and motivations.
- Survey results would guide summit working groups through a prioritized list of action items to address key issues.

Summit objectives:

- Rally the hunting community and hunting organizations to develop and adopt a statewide action plan to address recruitment and retention issues in Florida. This effort should create cohesiveness in the hunting community to address critical issues.

- Challenge all hunting organizations and groups to become actively involved in this long-term initiative.
- Be a starting point to involve more Floridians in hunting and wildlife conservation.

What was delivered?

Survey: The Florida Commission hired a market research firm to mail surveys to a random list of licensed Florida hunters in March 2005. Respondents were invited to send the survey by mail or complete it online. In total, 465 Florida hunters completed the survey (an approximate 40 percent return rate). The random survey was used to develop breakout session topics for the summit.

Summit: The summit took place on August 11 and 12, 2005, with 213 registered participants, capturing major organizations and agencies involved with hunting in Florida.

SUCSESSES AND OUTCOMES

Survey: Findings include:

- Hunters are generally pessimistic about the future of hunting. Key reasons are that there is less land available for hunting, less game, more hunters, and more hunters who are behaving badly.
- Hunters recommend that more land be made available and more accessible for hunting. The lack of private and public lands is an issue.
- Key issues for hunters include: erosion of hunter ethics and associated negative perceptions of hunters; the impact of anti-hunting and animal rights activists; excessively restrictive federal land management policies and practices; building a unified and politically strong coalition of hunters in Florida; and providing adequate hunting opportunities for new hunters.
- On private lands, top issues are the cost of private hunting leases and development that encroaches on hunting lands.
- On public lands, top issues are crowded public hunting areas, lack of opportunity to harvest high quality game, and hunting enjoyment reduced by the inability to see and harvest game.

Summit: The event advanced these efforts:

- A draft Florida Hunting Accord modeled after the North American Hunting Accord is being finalized.
- The Florida Summit Action Plan is being refined, providing a prioritized list of action items.
- Stakeholders are pursuing public relations strategies to communicate key messages with target audiences.
- The Summit Steering Team is pursuing ideas to provide increased hunting opportunities with emphasis on small game.
- The summit resulted in a private lands working group to address ways to increase hunting opportunity.
- The Steering Team is identifying strategies to frame hunting as a family activity and deliver mentoring programs for new hunters.

RESEARCH

Research was shared extensively among staff and stakeholders to build the summit's agenda and breakout sessions. In addition to the hunter survey, staff referred to the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, Responsive Management's hunter research, literature searches, Proceedings from the 7th Governor's Symposium on North America's Hunting Heritage, and internal data about hunting license sales, economics and hunter demographics.

COMMUNICATION

Florida rallied partners by building their ownership in the summit. "We never touted the summit as an agency event," says Nick Wiley, director, Division of Hunting and Game Management. "This was their event, and its success rested in their hands. Approaching the summit this way raised the stakes and empowered them."

Florida staff met with and issued invitations to leading partners who already had an interest in hunting heritage issues. More than a dozen partners sat on the Summit Steering Team.

In addition to standard agency outreach, Florida relied heavily on organizations to use their communications channels to reach members.

Web site: A summit Web site was posted with support and cooperation of the Wildlife Foundation of Florida. It provides a portal for all summit information and a forum for broader involvement in summit initiatives and action items (www.wildlifefoundationofflorida.com/hunting).

EVALUATION

Main measures of evaluation were:

- To determine if the summit was completed successfully and identified major issues affecting the future of hunting
- The total number of participants in the summit and the quality of presentations to advance the effort
- Florida leaders identified 13 major deliverables pertaining to the survey and summit, and developed evaluation mechanisms to rate their success
- The effectiveness of breakout sessions to identify action items
- The feasibility of implementing action items and how readily participants adopt and implement action items
- A polling or exit survey of summit participants.

PARTNERS

More than 20 entities, including NSSF, provided more than \$92,000 to fund the survey and summit. Partners also sat on the Summit Steering Team and provided volunteers and expertise. A total of 213 Florida stakeholders participated in the event, exceeding all expectations. Florida leaders are developing a pledge to formalize commitment and partnerships for summit participants to implement specific action items.

"Growing hunters is all about tapping partners with resources and initiative," Wiley says. "An agency can only do so much. Without good partners, you're not going anywhere. It's important to take time and nurture these relationships. The summit is just the start."

LESSONS LEARNED

The Summit Steering Team noted several lessons learned from planning and hosting this event:

- Meeting planning, facilitation coordination and fund raising should begin at least one year in advance of the event. A facilitator and process for capturing results are essential.
- A survey of hunters is highly recommended; the Florida survey was instrumental in designing a program to focus on key issues.
- The audience should be able to participate and ask questions after each speaker or group of speakers. It should not be necessary to rush speakers through their presentations.

CURRENT STATUS

Wiley says that hunter outreach efforts are proceeding, but more slowly than he would like. The Steering Team is raising funds to hire a full-time coordinator to keep the effort on track.

"We want to hold a series of regional summits to get more people involved," Wiley says. "Many hunting groups that are active locally aren't part of the bigger picture. We want to reach hunters who are fragmented and not communicating along organizational lines."

"We recommend that states use a summit approach to jumpstart partners. It gives partners buy-in and rallies them effectively," adds Wiley. "The summit is just the beginning. It is not a one-shot deal, and it can't be allowed to wither on the vine. The Summit Steering Team continues to make sure that the effort advances within a reasonable timeframe."