

Florida Survey:

Sportsmen Say Major Bush Administration Policies Wrong on Conservation

State's hunters and anglers praise full funding for Everglades restoration, but say reduce mercury emissions; don't drain wetlands

ORLANDO, FL - A Florida Wildlife Federation-National Wildlife Federation poll released today reveals that most Florida hunters and anglers - who voted for President Bush by better than a three to one margin in 2000 - oppose major administration policies that destroy critical wetlands and roll back key environmental protections.

The nonpartisan poll finds that Florida sportsmen overwhelmingly oppose draining natural wetlands for development, and by a 5-1 margin they want a strong regulation to require coal-fired power plants to cut mercury emissions, which are contributing to Florida's mercury fish consumption advisories for popular sport fish.

"Florida sportsmen and women are concerned that the Bush administration's priorities are on the wrong track on several key conservation issues," said Jenny Brock, chair of the Florida Wildlife Federation. "When it comes to cleaning up pollution and protecting wildlife habitat and water resources in Florida, hunters and anglers clearly are not happy with proposals this administration favors."

Locally, Florida hunters and anglers believe in restoring the Everglades Agricultural Area to its natural state to enhance hunting and fishing opportunities and they believe officials should first consider the potential effects new water supply and sewage sludge disposal projects will have on fish and wildlife habitat before allowing new development permits.

"This survey makes clear that when it comes to protecting Florida's precious water resources and wildlife habitat, hunters and anglers value conservation ahead of corporate profit," said Brock, an avid angler. "They also strongly support the administration's proposals to fully-fund Everglades restoration."

Brock was joined in Orlando by Steve O'Hara, an attorney from Jacksonville and a member of the board of the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), to release poll findings.

"Hunters and anglers helped to elect the president," O'Hara said. "Nationwide, they give his administration credit and blame where it is due. On key administration policies that affect conservation, a majority of hunters and anglers oppose the administration's position."

The poll was conducted by Bellwether Research and Consulting, an Alexandria, Va.-based polling firm, during the period from June 8 - June 20, 2004. The poll scientifically sampled 284 Florida hunters and anglers, all registered voters.

The poll finds that:

- 85 percent of Florida hunters and anglers favor, and 64 percent say they **strongly** favor, conducting environmental studies to assess the impact that the new water supply and waste disposal will have on fish and wildlife habitat before allowing a permit for development.
- 84 percent of Florida hunters and anglers say they favor, and 66 percent say they **strongly** favor, requiring coal-fired power plants to reduce mercury pollution by the maximum extent possible with current technology.
- 72 percent of Florida hunters and anglers believe power plants should be required to remove mercury pollution by the end of this decade.
- Only 22 percent of Florida hunters and anglers feel that the Florida sugar industry is entitled to have extra water stored in Lake Okeechobee to irrigate sugarcane fields during droughts.
- 72 percent of Florida hunters and anglers believe natural wetlands should not be filled or drained in most cases, even if developers replace them with manmade wetlands, because manmade wetlands do not replicate all the important functions of natural wetlands.
- Only 20 percent of Florida hunters and anglers believe the best way to address America's energy needs is to drill for more domestic oil and gas, including areas within wildlife refuges and other public lands.

In contrast, Florida hunters and anglers give the administration high marks in areas where it has chosen to support conservation programs. For example, 84 percent favor, and 55 percent **strongly** favor, the administration's decision to provide full funding for Florida Everglades restoration. The project is the largest conservation restoration effort in the nation's history.

The poll finds that the administration's doubling of funding for the Forest Legacy Program and expansion of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program garnered similar levels of support.

The poll finds that among the least favored of the administration's policies is its proposal to give coal-fired power plants flexibility to meet a national goal to reduce mercury pollution using a cap-and-trade plan that may result in higher mercury pollution in many communities. This summer, the Florida Department of Health is expanding its mercury advisories to include snook, gag grouper, redfish, pompano and flounder.

The impact of the administration's mercury power plants proposal will be the main agenda topic for a National Wildlife Federation summit to be held July 23 in Tallahassee. The angler summit will bring together NWF affiliates from throughout the region, combining educational seminars with activist training.

Mercury can accumulate in the fish people catch and eat and, in excessive amounts, has been associated with delays in walking, talking and developing fine motor skills in children.

The National Wildlife Federation's national hunter/angler poll affirms the existence of a widespread feeling among hunters and anglers that the energy industry holds the Bush administration's ear on matters of conservation.

Nationally, 49 percent of hunters and anglers said the oil and gas industry has the "most say" with the administration when deciding on matters of conservation, hunting and fishing. When asked who *ought* to have the most influence with the administration on these issues, 38 percent said hunters and anglers, 25 percent said scientists, and 23 percent said conservation groups.

"These findings are a clarion call to the administration to change its policies that don't reflect the strong conservation values of America's hunters and anglers," O'Hara said. "Their opinions, not industry's, should count more with the administration."

The poll results are notable because hunters and anglers are a traditionally conservative constituency, a characterization supported by the data: 65 percent of those surveyed in Florida said they are somewhat or very conservative, 64 percent said they voted for Bush in 2000, and 47 percent said they are Republican.

"Florida's sportsmen are saying the administration is on the wrong course on the central conservation issues of wetlands protection, reducing mercury pollution, and conserving prime wildlife habitat," said O'Hara. "The administration does not have to wait one single day to make decisions that will make a positive difference for wildlife conservation."

The poll finds that 82 percent of Florida sportsmen say that conservation issues will be somewhat or very important to them as they cast their vote this fall.

The Florida poll has a sampling error of plus-or-minus 5.7 percent at a 95 percent confidence level.

For more information about the poll, including the national and state-based results and methodology statements, www.nwf.org/news.

The <u>Florida Wildlife Federation</u> is a private, statewide, non-profit citizen's conservation education organization composed of thousands of concerned Floridians from all walks of life who have a common interest in preserving, managing, and improving Florida's fish, wildlife, soil, water, and plant life.

Protecting wildlife through education and action since 1936, the <u>National Wildlife</u> <u>Federation</u> is America's conservation organization creating solutions that balance the needs of people and wildlife now and for future generations.

Immediate Release: July 14, 2004 Contact: Jerry Karnas – 850-597-2748 Christine Dorsey – 202-797-6806