

Fish, Wildlife, and Habitat Management Plan for Lake Okeechobee

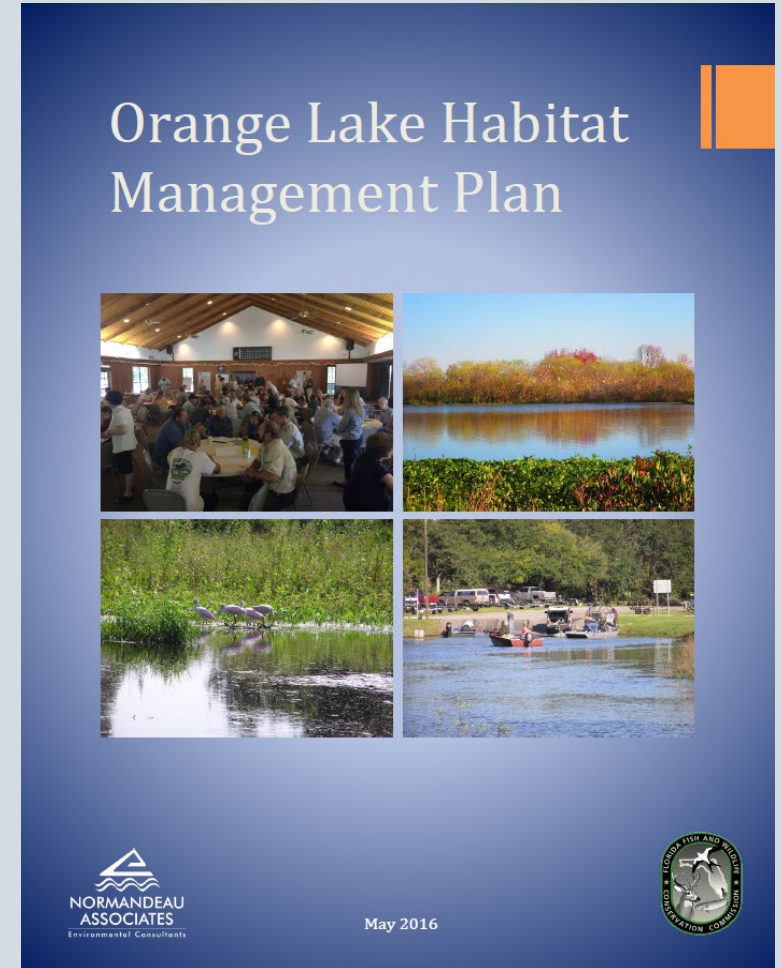


Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Mason Smith



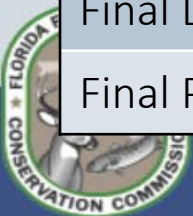
Management Plan

- ☐ Guide FWC's fish, wildlife, and habitat management on Lake Okeechobee.
- ☐ Involves stakeholders from the beginning of the process.
 - ☐ **Stakeholder**: any individual, group, or organization that can affect, be affected by, or perceives themselves/itself to be affected by FWC's management of Lake Okeechobee.
- ☐ Specific goals, objectives and actions
- ☐ Plans will cover management activities within FWC's jurisdiction while providing recommendations to partner agencies on items outside of that jurisdiction.



Project Schedule

Task	2020												2021												2022				
	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M
Public Meeting #1		✓																											
Interviews						✓																							
Input Workshops						✓																							
Surveys												✓																	
1 st Draft Plan																													
Public Meeting #2																													
Focus Groups																													
2 nd Draft Plan																													
Public Meeting #3																													
Final Draft Plan																													
Final Public Meeting																													



Stakeholder Input Workshops

- ❑ Completed July – August 2020
- ❑ 8 Input Workshops
 - ❑ 39 individual stakeholders
 - ❑ Various groups and NGOs represented
 - ❑ E.g., local and national fishing, waterfowl, and conservation organizations
- ❑ Key Takeaways
 - ❑ Vegetation Loss, Diversity of Habitat and Coverage, Fisheries Management, Wildlife Concerns, Concerns with treatment methods and management efficiency, Improved Communication Need



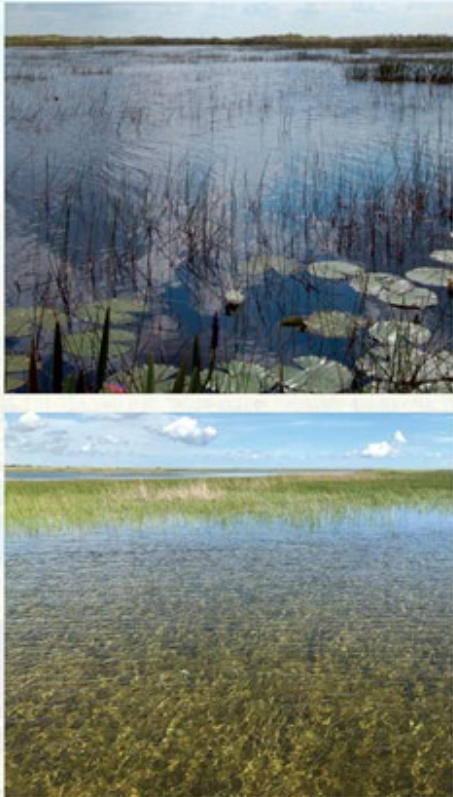
Agency/Business Interviews

- ☐ Completed August – October 2020
- ☐ 29 Stakeholder Interviews
 - ☐ 9 Commercial Businesses
 - ☐ 5 Local Government Representatives
 - ☐ 15 Management Agency Representatives
- ☐ Key Takeaways
 - ☐ Economic importance to local communities
 - ☐ Successful outcome of plan will be a healthy and balanced lake ecosystem
 - ☐ Declining quality of water, sediment, vegetation, and fishing and hunting success
 - ☐ High desire for muck removal, burning, and mechanical harvesting
 - ☐ Other interests: nonnative fish and plants, fishing and boating regulations, and improving access and communication



Online Survey

- ☐ Completed Winter 2020/21
- ☐ 2139 Respondents
 - ☐ Wide Diversity of Respondents
- ☐ Major Focus
 - ☐ General Interaction with Lake O
 - ☐ Aquatic Plant Management
 - ☐ Hydrilla Management
 - ☐ Fish Management
 - ☐ FWC Communication



Lake Okeechobee Management Survey!

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) is developing a comprehensive Lake Management Plan for **Lake Okeechobee**, and is seeking input from stakeholders.

We are asking members of the public to participate in this survey to help us develop a management plan!

Contact Mason Smith at 863-462-5190.

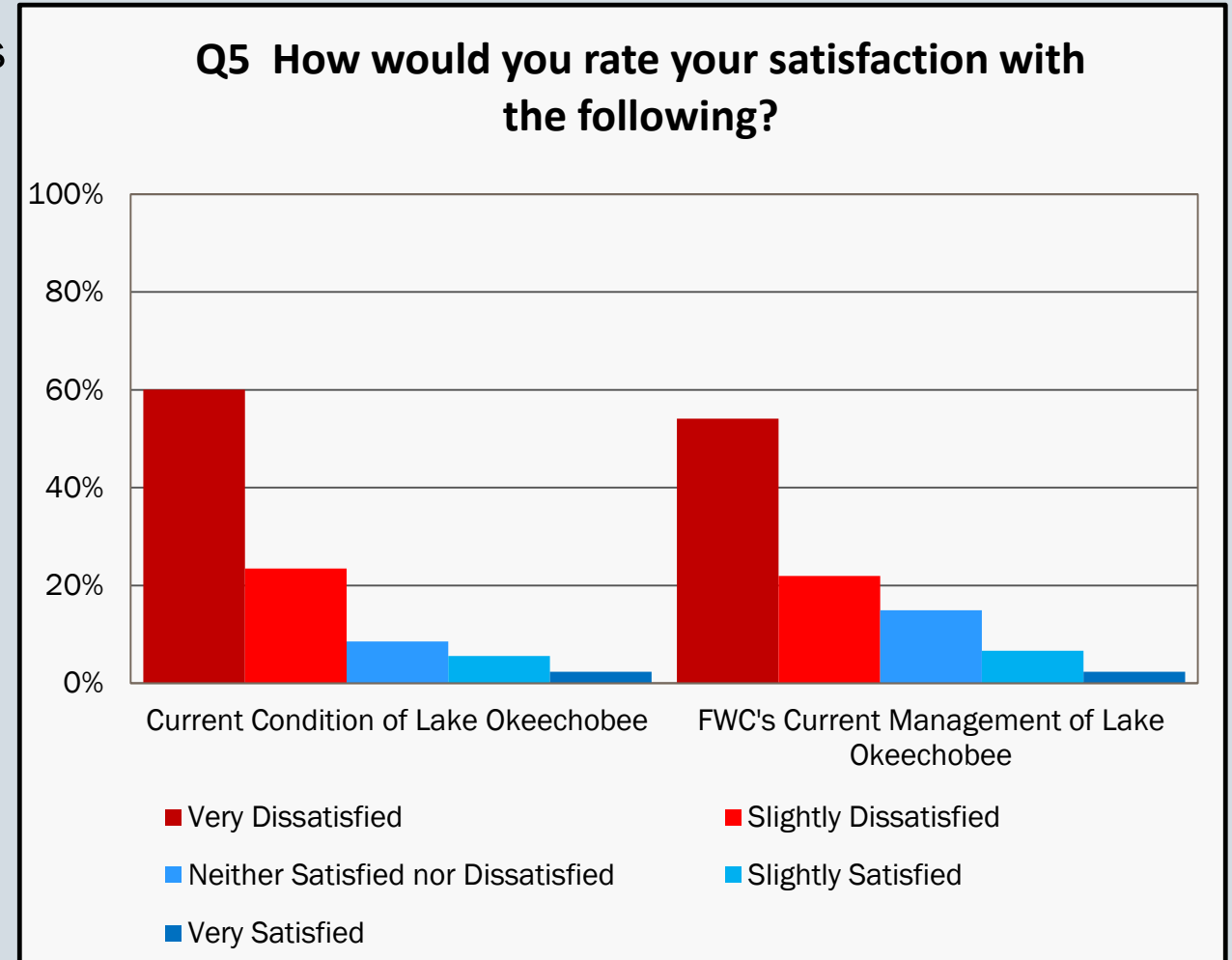
Scan the code to fill out the survey or go to [MyFWC.com/LakeOSurvey](https://myfwc.com/LakeOSurvey).





Online Survey

- ☐ Measuring Success
- ☐ Dissatisfaction in current condition and FWC's management of Lake Okeechobee
 - ☐ Progress to be made in this plan
- ☐ Highest preferred measures of success: submersed and emergent vegetation
- ☐ Other preferred measures of success
 - ☐ Wading bird abundance
 - ☐ Floating plant coverage
 - ☐ Sportfish abundance
 - ☐ Access & navigation
- ☐ Additional interests under authority of our partner agencies
 - ☐ Water quality/nutrient loading
 - ☐ Lake levels/discharges



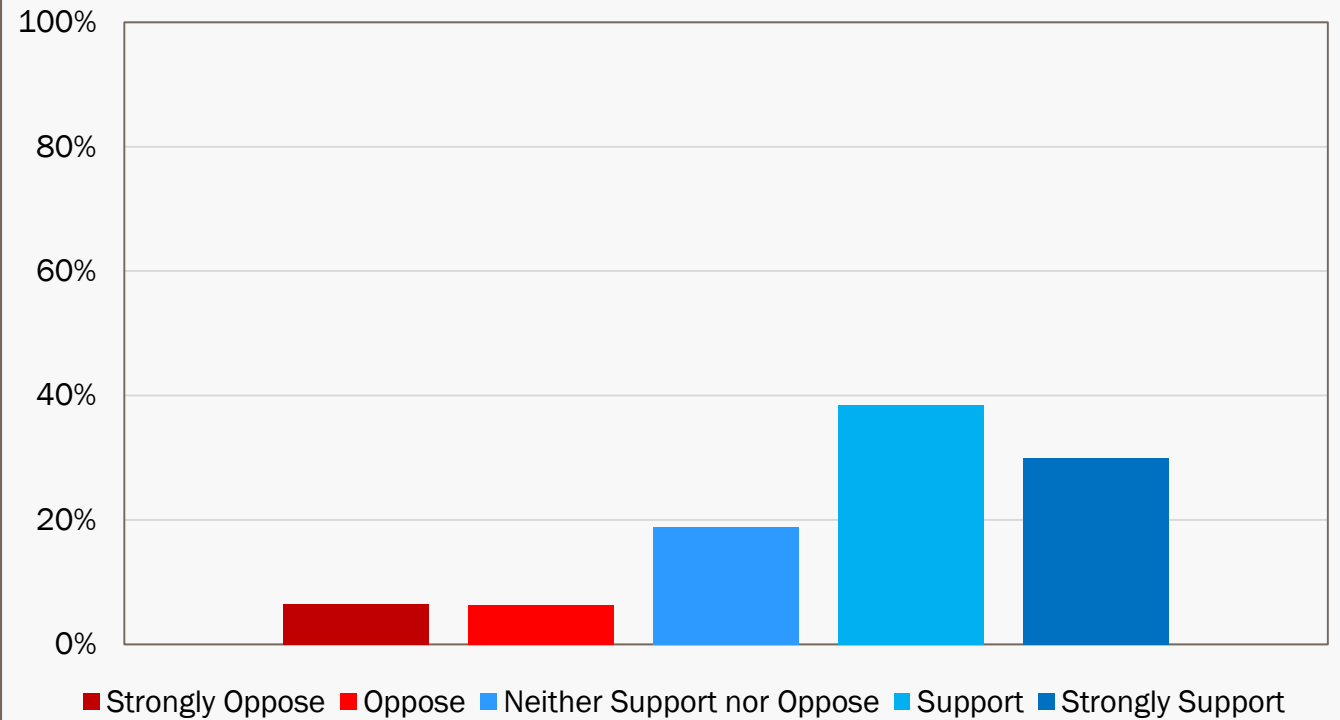
Online Survey

☐ Habitat Restoration

- ☐ Highly preferred habitats: bulrush, cattail, eelgrass, hydrilla, and Kissimmee grass
- ☐ High support for prescribed fire management
- ☐ Mixed opinions on managing dense cattail and torpedograss when combining herbicide and prescribed fire



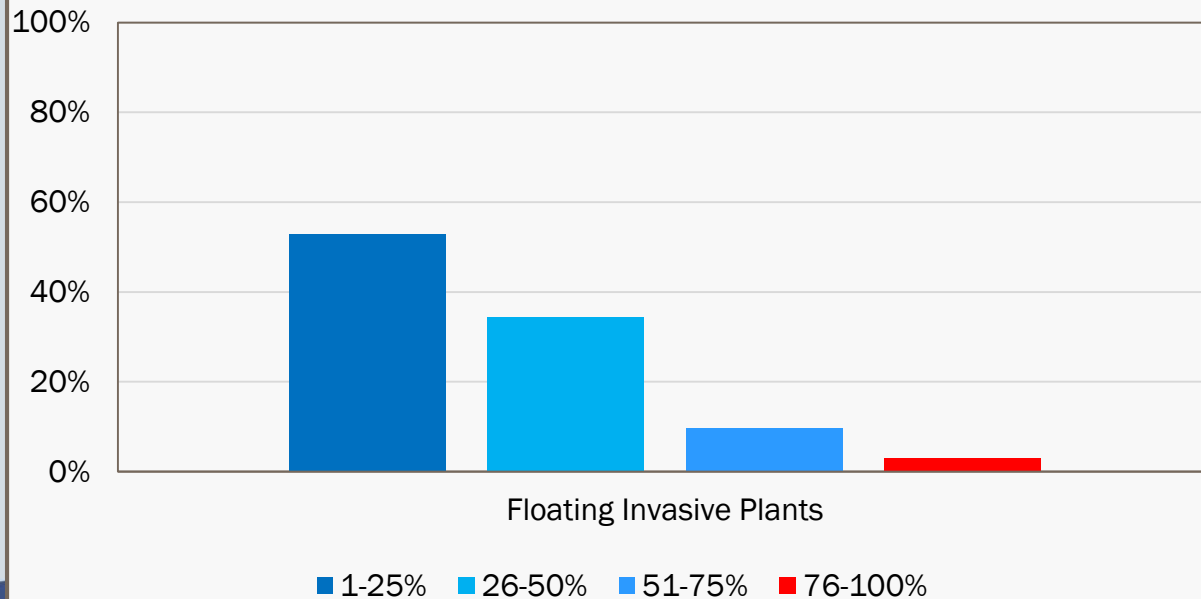
Q19: To what extent would you support the use of prescribed fire to manage the marsh on Lake Okeechobee?



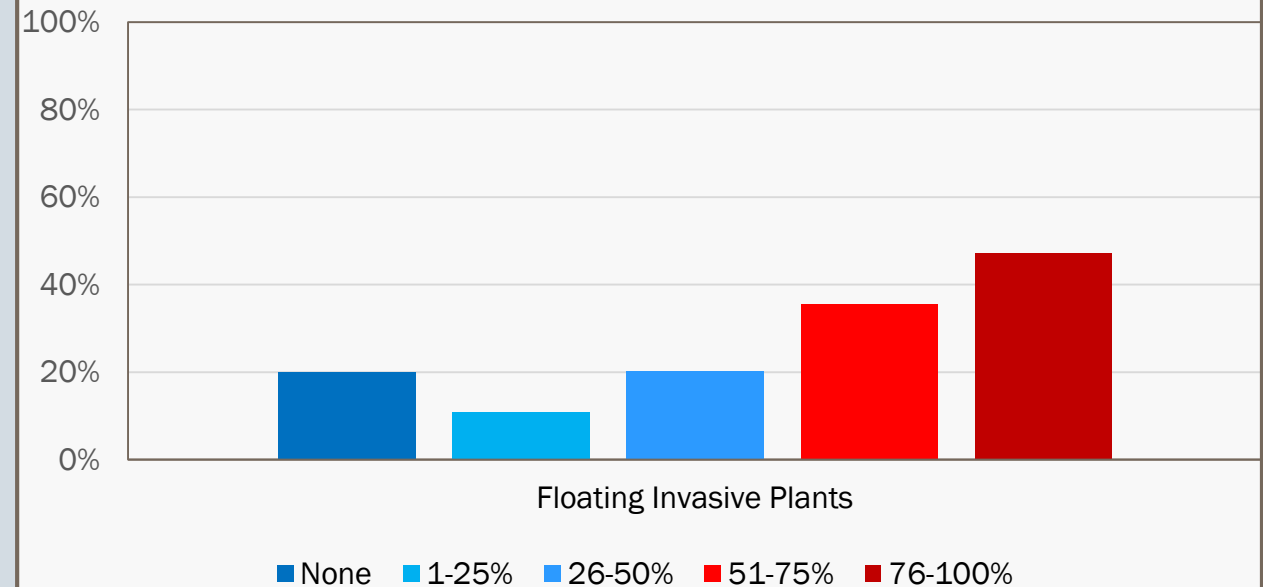
Online Survey

- ☐ Floating Plant (Water Hyacinth and Lettuce) Management
 - ☐ Mixed opinions on ecological impacts
 - ☐ Ideal coverage 50% or less, with highest preference for 1-25%
 - ☐ Support for treatment grows with the percent coverage

Q8: Please select the option that reflects your ideal amount of floating plant coverage for Lake Okeechobee



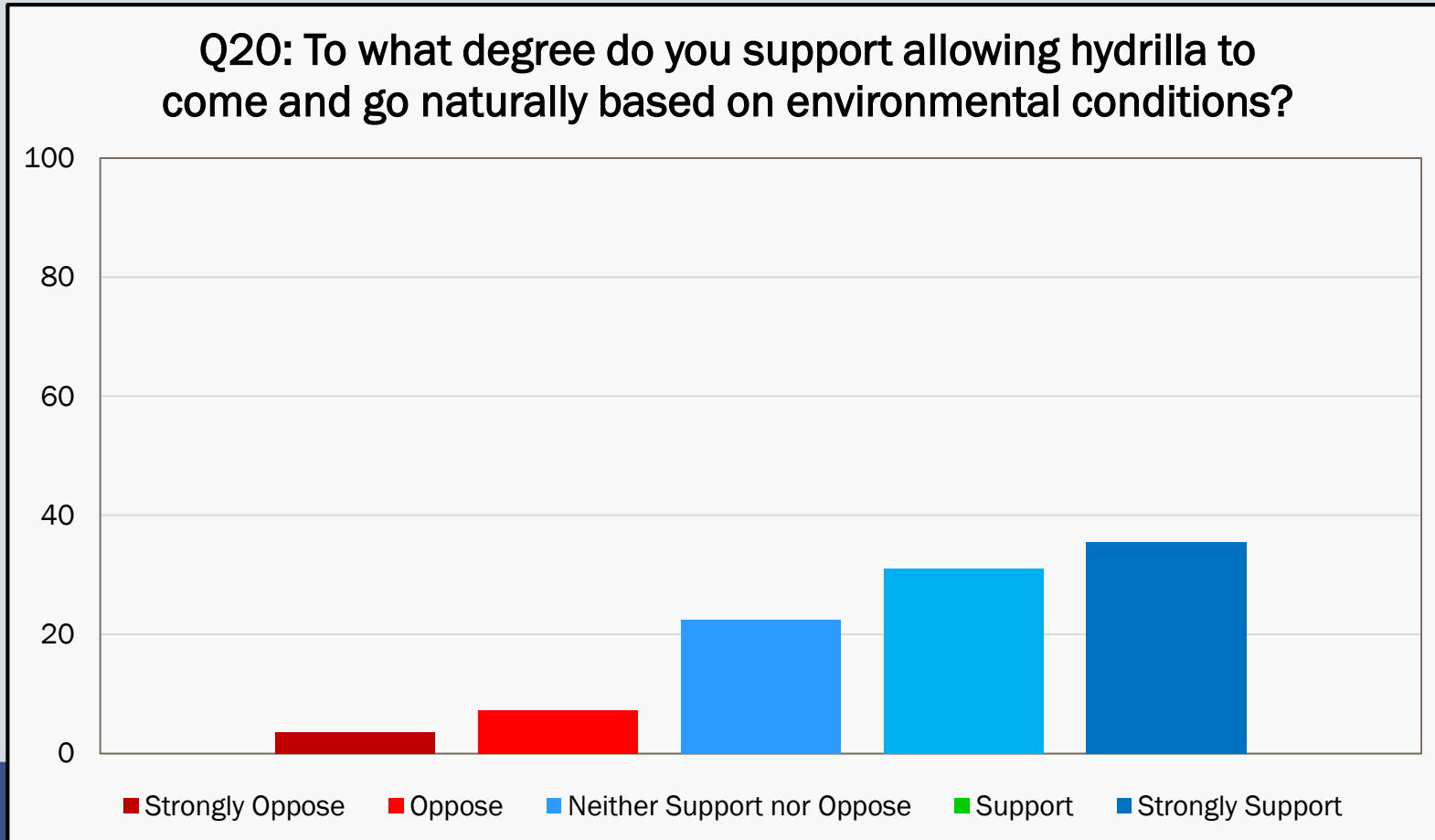
Q9: Please select the vegetation coverage level you think would need to be treated with herbicide or mechanically removed. Check all that apply



Online Survey

☐ Hydrilla

☐ High support for allowing hydrilla to come and go naturally



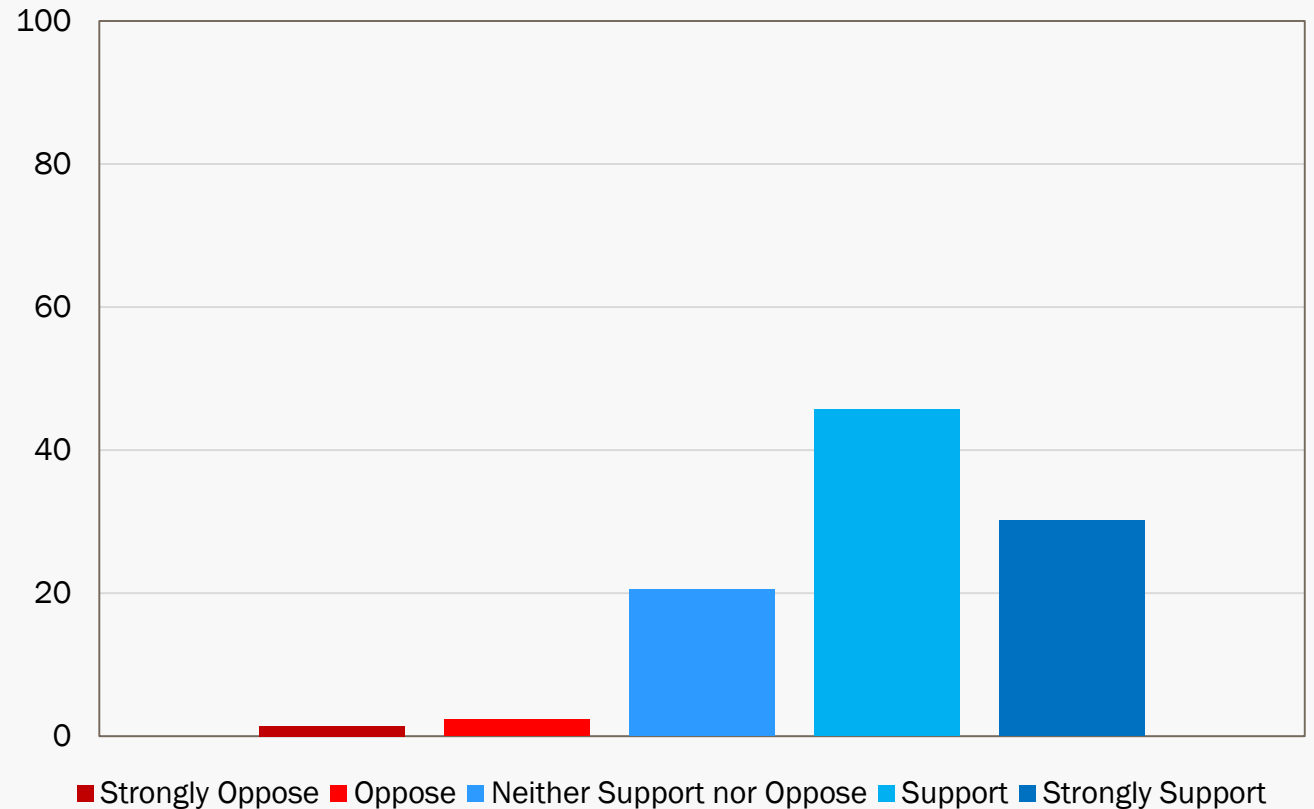
Online Survey

☐ Fisheries and Other Wildlife

- ☐ High concern for nonnative fish and wildlife, with high support for removals, including sponsored events
- ☐ General support for current fishing regulations; however, some concern with the resulting harvest of bass and crappie
- ☐ Stakeholder preferences lean toward large, abundant, and diverse fishery targets with more broad opinions on keeping fish for dinner
- ☐ Mixed support for current hybrid striped bass stocking



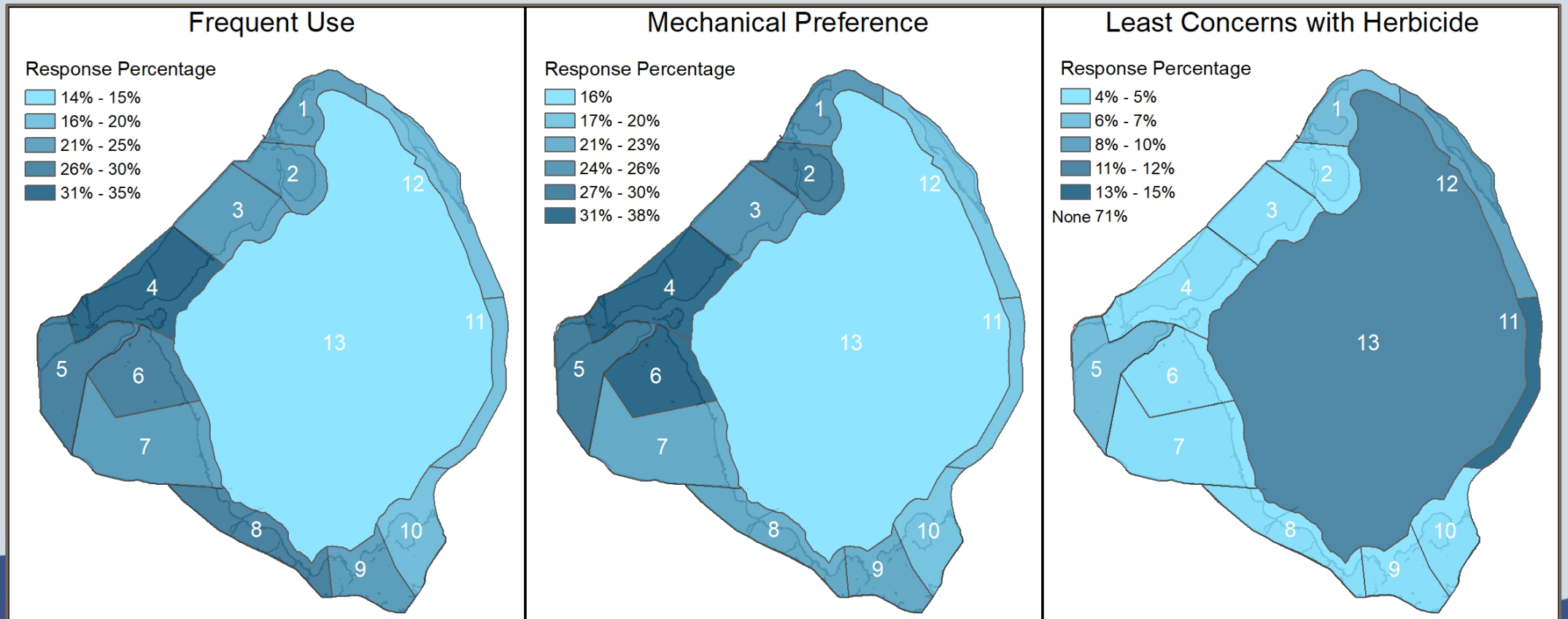
Q32: To what extent do you support or oppose the removal of nonnative fish from Lake Okeechobee?



Online Survey

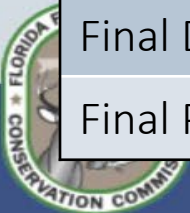
☐ Spatial Use and Preferences

- ☐ Preference of mechanical harvesting aligns largely with spatial use patterns
- ☐ Of those that selected an area, there was less concerns for herbicides on the eastern shoreline and open middle



Project Schedule

Task	2020												2021												2022				
	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M
Public Meeting #1		✓																											
Interviews						✓																							
Input Workshop						✓																							
Surveys												✓																	
1 st Draft Plan																													
Public Meeting #2																													
Focus Groups																													
2 nd Draft Plan																													
Public Meeting #3																													
Final Draft Plan																													
Final Public Meeting																													



Upcoming Stakeholder Engagement

☐ Focus Group Meetings

- ☐ Planned for June – July 2021
- ☐ Guided discussion with 5 – 12 individual stakeholders per meeting
- ☐ Present information/data on stakeholder engagement
- ☐ Gather feedback on 1st Draft of Plan, including Goals and Objectives
- ☐ Feedback will be used to prepare 2nd Draft of Plan



Contacts

Mason Smith

Fisheries Resource Biologist
Division of Freshwater Fisheries

Mason.Smith@MyFWC.com

Ryan Hamm

Section Leader | Project Manager
Division of Freshwater Fisheries

Ryan.Hamm@MyFWC.com

Ben Shepherd

Consultant Project Manager
Inwood Consulting Engineers, Inc.

BShepherd@inwoodinc.com

Brendon Hession

Regional Invasive Plant Biologist
Division of Habitat and Species Conservation

Brendon.Hession@MyFWC.com

<https://myfwc.com/conservation/management-plans/lake/okeechobee/>

