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Wal-Mart FLW Tour, FishAmerica Announce Conservation Partnership

Florida

GILBERTSVILLE, Ky. --(BW SportsWire)--Jan., 20, 2000--Seven of the nation's premier fisheries will benefit from a \$35,000 donation and partnership announced today between the Wal-Mart FLW tour, the world's foremost professional bass fishing series, and the FishAmerica Foundation, the conservation arm of the American Sportfishing Association.

"As an industry leader, we are proud to take this extra step toward the preservation of our nation's fisheries," says Charlie Hoover, chief executive officer of Operation Bass Inc., the organization responsible for running the Wal-Mart FLW Tour. "These irreplaceable natural resources provide habitat for largemouth bass and a host of other wildlife species. They also benefit local communities and millions of outdoor enthusiasts nationwide."

First among the beneficiaries is Lake Okeechobee, where the FLW Tour and FishAmerica will assist the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in deployment of artificial habitat and reintroduction of native aquatic plants that have been adversely affected by high water.

"Lake Okeechobee is nationally recognized as supporting a high quality largemouth bass fishery," says Tom Marshall, managing director of FishAmerica. "The FLW Tour and FishAmerica want to do our part to ensure that all anglers have an opportunity to enjoy the great fishing on this lake for years to come."

The first stage of the habitat restoration project will be the June deployment of 100 Reef Balls - hollow, dome-shaped concrete

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Pods riddled with holes - along five half-acre sites around the lake. The balls, which each weigh about 1,800 pounds, measure 4 feet in diameter and stand 3 feet tall, will be placed by the Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps of Engineers also is matching funds raised by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission for expansion of the habitat restoration project.

Since 1993, Reef Balls have been used as an environmentally friendly alternative to sinking old tires, cars, airplanes and ships to provide new homes for game fish and coral in the world's oceans. More than 40,000 of the balls have been deployed in over 400 projects worldwide. The Lake Okeechobee habitat restoration project, however, will mark the first freshwater use of the technology.

"We are excited to be involved with Florida Fish and Wildlife and the Wal-Mart FLW Tour on this project," says Karen Estock, chief of field operations and readiness section, Army Corps of Engineers. "The structures will be a haven for small fish and a place for larger fish to feed. They also will give the average angler a new place to fish and allow for more scientific studies of our various fish species."

The second stage of the project is planting native aquatic vegetation along a five-acre site between Indian Prairie Canal and Pearce Canal. Torpedograss and cattail now dominate the site, which was once home to giant bulrush that provided a critical spawning ground for black bass and other fish species. Plants to be reintroduced to the site by mid-August are bulrush, eelgrass, peppergrass and knotgrass.

"Sustained high water levels have definitely had an effect on the lake's ecology," says Don Fox, biological administrator for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. "Increased water levels have permitted high energy waves to build and move across the lake, uprooting submerged and emergent plant communities in the process." The waves also stir up sediments that can bury seedlings and prohibit light penetration into the water, both of which affect the growth of new vegetation, Fox explained.

In 1984, bulrush covered 9,808 acres of Lake Okeechobee. A 1994 study by the Florida Department of Natural Resources, however, estimated that bulrush coverage had dropped to 733 acres on the lake, which ranks second only to Lake Michigan in terms of surface area of lakes entirely within the United States. When coupled with declines of other plant species, significant amounts of vegetation have been lost.

Loss of vegetation translates into a decrease in spawning habitat, protective nursery grounds and foraging areas used by black bass and other fish species as well as waterfowl and manatee. It also compromises the lake's water quality.

The lake supplies water to the Everglades Agricultural Area, Everglades National Park and Florida Bay as well as Palm Beach, Broward and Dade counties. It also provides flood control, navigation, fish and wildlife conservation, and recreational opportunities.

Lake Okeechobee's recreational and commercial fishery is valued at more than \$100 million. Recreational fishing alone contributes \$26 million to local economies, and annual expenditures for bass tournaments top \$4.2 million according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. The lake and its waterway received more than 6.9 million visitors in 1999. More than 555,000 of the visitors stayed at Corps of Engineers managed campgrounds.

Other fisheries receiving help from the Wal-Mart FLW Tour and FishAmerica are the Pascagoula River in Mississippi, Lake Murray in South Carolina, Beaver Lake in Arkansas, the Mississippi River in Tennessee, Pickwick Lake in Alabama and the Red River in Louisiana.

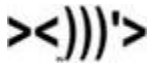
For more information about the Wal-Mart FLW Tour, visit www.flwtour.com. For more information about the FishAmerica Foundation, visit the American Sportfishing Association's Web site at www.asafishing.org.



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