

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Board of County Commissioners

May 21, 2025



DESTIN
FORT
WALTON
BEACH
FLORIDA

World's Largest Lionfish Tournament Succeeds in Removing Over 20,000 Invasive Species

This annual event has now removed over 100,000 lionfish since 2019.

Okaloosa County, Florida – Destin-Fort Walton Beach experienced another successful Emerald Coast Open and Lionfish Festival with the removal of more than 20,000 lionfish and plenty of lionfish-inspired dishes, music and informational booths for the public to enjoy at the 2025 event.

“This event has brought a lot of awareness to the invasive lionfish species and created a festive atmosphere for the enjoyment of our visitors and residents, while fostering prosperity for our local businesses,” said Okaloosa County Board Chairman Paul Mixon. “I enjoy seeing the success and the legacy of this event as it continues year to year.”

Divers from across the country participated in the event, that included a pretournament where divers harvested a total of 7,180 lionfish. The main two-day tournament yielded 13,322 lionfish captured by divers. Lionfish were measured and weighed behind AJ’s Seafood and Oyster Bar, with the nearby Lionfish Festival hosted by HarborWalk Village.

Divers competed for nearly \$175,000 in cash and gear prizes provided by event partners. Categories included smallest lionfish, largest lionfish and most lionfish caught. Local restaurants also competed for best lionfish cuisine during Restaurant Week, leading up to the main tournament. Winners include:

- **Most Lionfish:** Deep Water Mafia 1 (DWM), (2,038)
- **Smallest Lionfish:** Team Lookin’ Back, (73 millimeters-2.8 inches)
- **Largest Lionfish:** Team In the Clouds, (438 millimeters -17.2 inches)
- **Restaurant Week Winner:** Laz Paz (third year in a row)

“While this event continues to flourish, the opposite is happening for this invasive species,” said Natural Resources Chief Alex Fogg. “The public is beginning to realize the impact of the lionfish on our ecosystem and because of the divers and our amazing partners, we are able to make a difference for our environment in Gulf waters.”

Lionfish are an invasive species with few known predators in the Gulf. Due to their leisurely nature, hook and line fishing is not as effective as a diver armed with spears.

Learn more about the tournament at <https://emeraldcoastopen.com/>

###

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER NICK TOMECEK AT 850.651.7321

NTOMECEK@MYOKALOOSA.COM