

Highlands County's boat ramps are getting some much needed repairs
By: Corine Burgess

Four guys who enjoy the hard work they do to serve the citizens of Highlands County are on the job keeping 37 boat ramps in good condition. For those who enjoy recreating on our beautiful lakes, having safe and well kept boat ramps is an important issue. Ron McClure, Steve Becker, Rex Caddell and Guy Culp all have a great work ethic and attitude when it comes to getting the job done. "They love to work, you can really count on these guys and they never argue. They're good guys and we are so blessed to have them," Ron McClure, Parks and Maintenance Supervisor said of his crew.

The entire process of installing a boat ramp takes about a month. The first step is the preparation. The muck, dirt and what ever else may be lying on the lake's bottom where the submerged portion of the ramp will be, needs to be dug out. "You've got to get in there and dig out – that's the hard part. You've got to get the right angle," stated Rex Caddell, one of the crew that maintains these ramps. Once all the digging is done, pipe must be placed at a 6.7degree angle, then a rock bed is spread at a minimum of 1 ½ feet deep. The rocks are then smoothed out by a piece of railroad iron by dragging it over the surface.

Once the submerged portion of the ramp is prepared, it's time to prepare the form board on dry land. The same angle used in the submerged portion is also used on the land. The slab, which is 14 by 30 feet, and 6 inches thick is poured once the forms are prepared. Then they wait for ten days for the concrete to cure and dry. Once all that is done, they push the dried slab in the water with a tractor. Then they form an approach slab, also 14 x 30 and 6 inches thick. Once the form is built, they pour concrete into it. After the concrete dries, the forms are stripped away and the submerged portion of the ramp is stabilized with rock on each side.

I was fortunate enough to watch the "pushing" portion of the process. On a beautiful August morning, I met the crew at the Lake Lelia (better known as Gator Lake by the locals) and watched them work. It was amazing how that huge slab slid so easily into the form they had prepared in the water. These guys know what they're doing.

Rex shared that they "hooked up with the state guys from Florida Fish and Wildlife when they were at Lake Letta." According to Ron, the two agencies shared ideas. "They had some great practices that they shared with us and we gave them some of our tips and ideas. We basically put our heads together and came up with this very successful technique. In the past, these boat ramps have blown out, but now because of these new practices, we expect them to last at least 20 years."

Rex proudly stated, "These used to be ten feet wide and most were done 30 years ago. They weren't very far in the water. Now, when you push a 14 x 30 foot slab in the water; now you've got something. We're doing a quality job now. This is the fourth one we've done this way. With this one, we had to take the old slab out because we couldn't build on it. What happens is the concrete that is already in place is at the wrong angle; it may have humps in it. It has to be straight."

Local's help out by talking to the crew and letting them know which boat ramps need fixing the most. Rex told me that "we listen to the local fishermen; they let us know where the worst ones are. It helps us prioritize. We don't want people tearing up their trailers and equipment by trying to launch on a bad ramp." From that word of mouth and their own inspections, the crew is working on prioritizing all the ramps and getting them in shape.

The funding for this enormous task comes from the Florida Boating Improvement Program (FBIP). When a vessel is registered with the Tax Collector's office, the County gets a portion of these state funds. These dollars must be used for recreational boating, such as ramps, buoys, signs and other projects that benefit the boater's recreational experience.

Considering the expertise, labor and time involved in installing a boat ramp, Highlands County is indeed fortunate to have such professionals on the job. Ron is a state certified general contractor. Rex, a residential contractor, Steve and Guy all have vast knowledge and experience not only in carpentry, but most any job that comes up. They build buildings, fix washouts, repair parking lights, fix broken bathrooms, install drainage pipes, pour driveways, and perform any other tasks that come up on a daily basis. As Ron says, "When things get broke, we fix them."