**How ‘Fred’ Inspires the Florida Keys**

A welcome sight impacts the emotions of weary Florida Keys locals returning home this week after Hurricane Irma struck the beloved Keys on Sept. 10. His name is “Fred.”

He’s a salt-sprayed Casuarina, known locally as an Australian pine tree. Fred is growing out of a roadbed on the historic Seven Mile Bridge, built in 1912 as part of the famed Florida Keys Over-Sea Railroad.

And Fred survived Irma.

Other post-Irma survivors Key West and Key Largo are rebounding quickly. Key West International Airport is open, a cruise call is set for Sunday in Key West and Keys hotels are working to reopen. Attractions, restaurants and bars are digging out as well to soon welcome back visitors.

But Fred, a non-native species, symbolizes the strength of Keys residents determined to restore what Irma tried to blow away.

Fred may have sprouted from droppings of a migrating bird or local osprey, according to a 2013 story in *Keys Weekly.*

The tree is “only reachable by parachute, jetpack or by scaling a 100-year-old pylon from a boat bobbing in the water more than 20 feet below the roadbed,” the story states.

A smaller tree, just to the south of Fred, has been dubbed “Fred Jr.”

During the December holidays, locals decorate Big Fred with lights.

In-the-know locals and visitors post Facebook comments to Fred, and Fred comments back. Among recent comments to Fred:

“You’ve got some good roots.”

“You are a Warrior.”

“Fred is Keys strong.”

This, you see, is how Fred inspires Keys residents as they continue cleanup and restoration.

“Can’t wait to see you lit up for Christmas!”

And, “If Fred can survive, we can all survive and prosper.”

###