

Waterfowl Advisory Committee
May 3, 2023
Meeting Minutes – Approved August 8, 2023
Santee Coastal Reserve
210 Santee Gun Club Road. McClellanville, SC 29458

Members Present:

Chairman Bob Perry, Vice Chairman John Hilton, Jerry Lee, Stuart Cochran, and Ernie Wiggers.

Members Absent:

Bill Mace – Excused absence.

DNR Staff Present:

WFF Chief of Wildlife Billy Dukes, Assistant Chief of Wildlife (Regions 2 & 4) Sam Chappellear, Assistant Chief of Wildlife (Statewide Programs) Will Dillman, Statewide Waterfowl Biologist Molly Kneece, Upper Coastal Waterfowl Project Leader Achi Treptow, Regional Coordinator (Region 4) Alicia Farrell, Technician Ovidiu Caradinta, Program Manager (Aquatic Nuisance Species) Julie Holling, and WFF Senior Administrative Assistant Kelsey Huffstetler.

Constituents Present:

Casey Moorner, Chad Holbrook, Randall Ward, Phil Wilkinson, Michael Prevost, Mark Johnson, Rick Kaminski, Thomas Ragsdale, Brian Lynch, Jody Tamsberg, Jim Hills, Jim Clark, Adam Moyakis, David Gant, David Dukes, Hayes Williams, and Bruce Gallup.

Call to Order

Chairman Perry called the meeting to order at 9:00AM, with notice that the date, time, and place of this meeting was posted on the DNR website in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act.

Introductions and Constituent Comments

Staff and constituents were welcomed and introduced themselves.

Constituents who wished to speak included:

- **Marc Johnson** – Mark gave a brief presentation on the history, objectives, and activities, of the Palmetto Waterfowl Project. The organization hopes to assist in efforts to improve wintering waterfowl populations by establishing inviolate sanctuaries to develop local site-fidelity for wintering waterfowl.
- **Phil Wilkinson** – Phil provided positive feedback on the progress of infrastructure repairs at Santee-Delta WMA.

Approval of Minutes

Vice Chairman John Hilton moved to approve the minutes of the February 7, 2023, Waterfowl Advisory Committee meeting (seconded by Stuart Cochran). The motion passed unanimously.

Comments from DNR Leadership

Billy Dukes gave an overview of ongoing and completed contract projects, including progress on Murphy Island, Santee-Delta, Beaverdam and Clemson waterfowl areas. Contract work on Beaverdam is ongoing with changes to water control structures, re-topping dikes, and ditch cleanout. Billy extended his gratitude to the members of the committee who were present at the evaluation of Bear Island West. Billy made the committee aware of plans to implement a waterfowl season survey to gain public perspective on potentially restructuring waterfowl season dates. A landowner meeting is planned for June 7 at Samworth WMA (note: this meeting was later changed to August 22, 2023).

Overview of the 2022-2023 Waterfowl Season

Molly Kneece gave an overview of the 2022-23 waterfowl season stating that preliminary data indicate hunters had an average season. The final USFWS estimated harvest numbers will not be available until the fall. There were 10 Category 1 sites in 2022-23. Harvest numbers were relatively unchanged for most Category 1 properties. A total of 800 people hunted Category 1 areas this year, with most of those hunters utilizing Santee Coastal Reserve and Bear Island (83% of total harvest, and 84% of hunters). Green-winged teal comprised 34% of harvest birds at those properties, 16.4% were gadwall, 12.4% were blue-winged teal, 10.1% were Northern shoveler, and 8.3% were Northern pintail. Inland WMAs include Sandy Beach, Wateree, Broad River, and Beaverdam, which comprised 17% of total harvest and 16% of Category 1 hunters. The most harvested ducks at those properties were wood ducks (43.5%), green-winged teal (17.2%), mallard (12.9%), ring-necked ducks (9.8%), and gadwall (7.9%).

Update on Samworth, Beaverdam, and Clemson WMAs Repairs and Habitat Management

Billy Dukes, Molly Kneece, Alicia Farrell, and Achi Treptow presented an update on repairs and habitat management at Samworth, Beaverdam, and Clemson waterfowl areas. Staff at Samworth have worked to repair equipment breakdowns, as well as conduct burns and mow impoundments at Samworth, and are looking into herbicides treatment options to control white marsh and aquatics in perimeter canals. Steps are being taken to spray the canals with drones. Drawdown at Samworth began in March, and the property was dry by the last week of March, excluding Lower Middleton, which was dry by mid-April. The committee expressed concern about the staff's ability to take on the workload at such a logistically challenging property. Billy explained staffing structure, and reassured the committee that all staff present at Samworth were well-utilized and capable. Staff at Beaverdam are considering alternatives to the current stationary fixed blinds, including floating blinds, and small boats. Billy Dukes met with the Clemson Extension Service director to discuss solutions to the feral hog issues on the property and obtained approval to fence the property in with hog panel. Permission was also granted to plant switch grass to provide more vertical cover around the perimeter of the impoundment. Plans are in place to re-core and raise the dike on 18-Mile Creek and to perform additional ditch cleanout.

2023 South Carolina Aquatic Plant Management Council Decision

Committee members Bill Mace and Ernie Wiggers participated in a recent site visit to the Santee Cooper lakes with Casey Moorer and her staff. Ernie Wiggers gave a report on the methods being used to control vegetation on the areas of concern, including biological methods, and survey techniques. Ernie acknowledged efforts are being made by the Santee-Cooper Management team to gather data and produce accurate reports, despite various challenges.

Casey provided background on Santee-Cooper lakes and user groups and FERC license requirements including drinking water intakes, recreation access, and power generation. Casey currently is working to gather waterfowl data as it pertains to the lakes. The Santee Cooper team uses a third-party company for satellite imagery with multi-spectral analysis, which allows for aquatic vegetation data collection regardless of weather conditions. The team also utilized drone and boat surveys. The current priority is research and data collection relating to giant salvinia. Last year over 6,000 acres were treated by airboat spraying. The team continues to look for new species, as well as support fish spawning habitat and maintain public access. Management practices include biological control with weevils and triploid grass carp, as well as public outreach, chemical control, and selective herbicide application. When making recommendations to the South Carolina Aquatic Plant Management Council, they include guiding policies, water quality data, triploid grass carp condition factor, lake user input, environmental concerns, economic impact, and public perception.

Proposed Changes to Wood Duck Box Program

Billy Dukes gave a brief background on the Wood Duck Box Program. The program currently is set up on a lottery system. Approximately 1,200 boxes were available last year; each applicant can request up to 3 boxes. Recommendations are to change the box dimensions from the current 12" square, to a 9" square. This change would be more cost-effective, make the boxes more portable, and allow the production of more boxes. Another recommended change would be to use a metal logo tag, in place of the hot-iron brand or painted logo. The tag would potentially include a QR code for reporting data. Additional considerations are to switch from pine to

cypress lumber, and to charge a fee for the boxes. The committee expressed support for the proposed changes and requested staff to collect data as it may be effectively done, and to report those data.

Proposed 2023-24 Duck Stamp Budget

Billy Dukes provided an outline of the Duck Stamp budget request. The following duck stamp budget is proposed by staff:

Chairman Perry indicated that since the inception of the Duck Stamp program in 1982, he is unaware that actual annual duck stamp expenditures at the end of the fiscal year has ever been published. The committee requested staff to report how the duck stamp budget was utilized at the conclusion of this budget year, and thereafter, so that this information can be included in the Committee’s annual report to the General Assembly. Since the Waterfowl Advisory Committee legislative authorization also increased the cost of the state duck stamp, such a report is even more important. In the future, staff should document that duck stamp funds have resulted in the intended success criteria as per the budget request and allocation.

Stuart Cochran made a motion to recommend the staff budget request to the DNR Board for approval (second by John Hilton). The motion was approved unanimously.

Report on Bear Island West

Mike Prevost gave a presentation on the findings of the review of Bear Island West. The review team included Mike Prevost, Bob Perry, Lew Crouch, and Bill Mace. The purpose of the review was to consider recent down-trending waterfowl harvest, examine waterfowl hunt management, assess habitat, and determine if recommendations have potential to improved wintering waterfowl numbers and hunter harvest opportunity. The review process was supported by the current management plan, previous external review, waterfowl harvest data, DNR staff input, site visits, and literature review. There are multiple limitations to management control, that include climate change, Atlantic Flyway and North American waterfowl “BPOP” numbers, local waterfowl energy needs, site disturbance from neighboring public-water hunting as well as large well-managed properties nearby, and bathymetric variation influencing habitat. The team suggested other success factors be considered, such as total experience enjoyment, number of shots fired, lost ducks, regular survey sampling of numbers of ducks, and science-based modeling. Bear Island competes with large properties that utilize carefully structured hunt management practices, and likely has a negative impact on Bear Island daily waterfowl utilization. Recommended changes to hunt management structure include combining units for hunting purposes and reducing hunt days from the current 3 to 2, while continuing to accommodate the same number of hunters on a weekly basis. The team also recommends establishing 1 sanctuary on each Bear Island unit, based on adequate size, ability for effective habitat management, adequate buffering from human disturbance, and central location provided positive duck use including adjacent managed tidal impoundments. Bear Island West MTIs are managed under typical brackish marsh management, with the target species being widgeon grass, muskgrass, dwarf spikerush, and saltmarsh bulrush as well as invertebrates. Current management involves April/May drawdown, followed by re-flooding and water circulation through the growing season. Suggest alternative management strategies for Bear

Island West focus on combating competing emergent vegetation, use of fire and mechanized equipment, strategies to deal with summer algal growth, creating a hemi-marsh effect, avoiding condition of excess soil acidity, and the best management practices for season water-level management. The review team recommends a 2nd full-sized trunk to be installed in Off Island, to manage water volume more effectively, as well as external spillway boxes, and additional trunks and spillways. Staffing recommendations made by the team include hiring a highly qualified Tech IV to assist in the lead role on comprehensive water and wetland management. Billy Dukes expressed his appreciation to the review team for their research and recommendations.

Report on Rehabilitation of Santee-Delta WMA

Achi Treptow provided an update on Santee-Delta WMA repairs. Santee-Delta West is comprised of 436 acres of managed wetlands, and Santee-Delta East is comprised of 1,012 acres of managed wetlands. Problems with the areas include eroded dikes resulting in water-control issues. Santee-Delta East repairs include the replacement of 11 water control structures, re-topping of 22,000 feet of external and, 1,600 feet of internal dike, construction of 4,000 feet of new dike, and 25,000 feet of canal clean out, all of which are nearly completed. Santee-Delta West repairs include the replacement of 5 water control structures, 19,000 feet of canal clean out, 6,000 feet of interior dike re-topping, 10,000 feet of exterior dike re-topping, and the installation of a new pump. Canal clean-out, and dike construction on Santee-Delta West currently is ongoing. The habitat management plan includes dewatering, improving drainage, maintaining circulation, and keeping the area as dry as possible.

Proposed WAC Anchoring Documents

Chairman Perry asked Billy Dukes to consider a mission and vision statement for the Statewide Waterfowl Project, return to publishing an Annual Waterfowl Status Report and develop a statewide waterfowl management plan.

Date, Time, and Location of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Waterfowl Advisory Committee will be held at 9:00 AM, on Tuesday, August 8, 2023, at the Love Farm WMA Cabin, 1900 Vanboklen Road, Eastover, S.C. 29044. The Committee will conclude the meeting with a tour of the Wateree River HP/WMA waterfowl management area.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 1:53 PM. A site-visit of Santee-Delta WMA was conducted after adjournment.