

Minutes

142nd Meeting of the South Carolina Aquatic Plant Management Council

SCDNR Wateree Range Classroom & WebEx

14068 Garners Ferry Rd. Eastover, SC 29044

Wednesday, March 8, 2023, 10:00 am

Attendance:

Council Members: Julie Holling, Willie Simmons, Chad Altman, Bill Marshall, Casey Moorer, Stacy Scherman, Chris Stout, Adam Leaphart, Tammy Lognion

Guests: (in person) Emily Cope, Matthew Puckhaber, Jay Tenney, Brian Lynch, Bob Perry, Matt Wongrey, Allan Stack, (WebEx) Billy Dukes, Levi Kaczka, Carl Bussells, Billy Chastain, Ken Tuck, Rachel Rosenstein, Travis Swanva, Rob Backer, Phillip Messina

1. Call to Order of the 142nd Meeting

Chairman Holling called the 142nd meeting of the South Carolina (SC) Aquatic Plant Management Council (Council) to order at 10:07 am. Notice of the meeting was posted and distributed as required by law. After a few reminders about how the meeting would be run and that it was being recorded in several ways, she welcomed everyone and thanked everything for attending today's meeting whether in person or via Webex. She had everyone in the room and on Webex introduce themselves.

2. Review and Approval of the minutes of the January 10, 2023 (141st) Council meeting

Ms. Holling noted that she was aware of one correction to make in the minutes of the 141st meeting on January 10, 2023. When Mr. Bussells was speaking, the dates for multispectral and drone footage were swapped. The multispectral footage was in August and the drone footage was done in November. She asked if there were any other corrections.

Ms. Moorer said that on page 16, 2nd paragraph, in the discussion about the 12,000-grass carp, the number of fish between that and the maintenance stocking number should have been 900+, not 700. She clarified that the number recommended by other Council members for grass carp stocking were thought over and studied. It was part of previous presentations showing how different stocking levels would decrease the population when we were trying to do that. She also noted that on page 4, paragraph 4, the term hyperspectral should have been multispectral.

Mr. Bussells asked that an "l" be added to his first name in the attendance list.

Ms. Moorer made a motion to approve the minutes with the changes and clarifications discussed. Mr. Simmons seconded the motion. Ms. Holling called the motion to a vote, and it passed unanimously.

3. Public Comment Period

Ms. Holling said a couple of people had requested to speak during the public comment period. She first turned the floor over to Mr. Perry.

Mr. Perry thanked Ms. Holling, the members of the Council and guests for the opportunity to speak against the increased stocking of carp in lakes Marion and Moultrie. He noted that he has an extensive background in private waterfowl and wetlands management and service with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), which included time on this Council. He is the owner of Palmetto Natural

Resources, LLC and is the chairman of SC Waterfowl Advisory Committee created by SC House Bill 4177. At their last meeting, the Committee had prepared a resolution opposing the increased stocking rate of grass carp in the lakes, but he delayed that vote. He recommended that no more than 5,000 sterile grass carp be stocked in Lakes Marion and Moultrie in 2023 and is opposed to the 12,000 sterile grass carp stocking. He stated his concerns about increasing the number sterile grass carp based on observations and not on science-based reports of increased *Hydrilla*. He noted that *Hydrilla* can be an important resource for waterfowl. He stated the waterfowl wintering numbers are dwindling and the resources are not what they used to be or what we want them to be, in his opinion. He suggested that future meetings be in the evenings so waterfowl hunters can attend in person and better accommodate their work schedules.

Ms. Holling thanked Mr. Perry for his comments and gave the floor to Mr. Lynch.

Mr. Lynch agreed with Mr. Perry that the overstocking of grass carp is detrimental to the system and needs to be avoided. The large stockings that were approved by past Councils, including motions made by Mr. Perry, have taken years to recover from. He noted that the Council looks to approve a more balanced and conservative approach to grass carp stocking. Santee Cooper (S-C) recommended stocking a little over 11,000 fish to maintain the same number of fish that are currently in the system. Despite the increase in *Hydrilla*, we want to maintain the number of fish and see how the environment reacts to that stocking. It is a conservative approach that is not a detriment to our system. The cycles of overstocking and stopping stocking caused the annihilation of our native vegetation. There has been a resurgence of native vegetation in recent years, which is beneficial to the waterfowl, fisheries, and other wildlife. We want to continue that conservative approach. He noted that S-C has a federal mandate to control invasive species and cannot be alleviated of this responsibility. He appreciates the Council providing the appropriate tools to manage the resources at S-C as it strives to create a balanced approach to meet all the stakeholders' needs to the best of their ability in a balanced, economical fashion. He appreciates all the support and the balanced approach the Council has taken to make data and science driven decisions. There is no data to stock anything other than the 11,000 that S-C has recommended.

Ms. Holling thanked Mr. Lynch and asked if anybody else wanted to speak. Mr. Wongrey asked to speak, and Ms. Holling gave him the floor.

Mr. Wongrey said he has been an avid waterfowler and hunter in SC for over 50 years. He was concerned about the declining numbers of ducks seen in the S-C system over the years, especially in the S-C swamp where the amount of vegetation has decreased. There was a decrease of mallards when *Hydrilla* showed up in the S-C system, which may have been due to factors outside the state. There were other species available for a while, but there has been a gradual decrease in the duck populations. He voiced concern about the amount of giant salvinia on the S-C system, which has closed off some of his favorite spots. He commended the S-C staff for their treatment of giant salvinia and their continued efforts to try to control it. He has assisted S-C staff with conservation efforts on the system and wishes to continue doing so. Ducks need food, water, and rest. He encouraged a balanced approach to providing those things. He agreed that Mr. Perry's suggestion to have evening or weekend meetings would allow duck hunters and others to attend these meetings.

Ms. Holling asked if anyone on WebEx wanted to speak. Mr. Messina asked what organization Mr. Perry was affiliated with. Ms. Holling repeated Mr. Perry's affiliations.

4. Discussion of and Response to Public Comments on the 2023 Draft Aquatic Plant Management Plan

Ms. Holling said the Council has copies of the comments, which will be posted with the final plan. There were 7 positive comments, 1 negative comment and 6 comments that were neutral. The neutral comments were based on where they lived on the S-C lakes, or other vegetation or recreation issues. The negative comment was that we were ruining aquatic vegetation at the expense of wildlife.

There were several comments on Lake Wateree's algae issues and the Council is aware of this. Duke Energy is responsible for decisions on vegetation on Lake Wateree and DNR assists them as requested. The Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) and Duke have been working together on locating the source of the algae problems.

The Lake Greenwood comments were on the presence of *Vallisneria* and concerns about treating it because it is a native. The Council is aware of this. The lake is under the control of Lake Greenwood County Management and DNR assists as requested. Treatments are generally done only where there are navigation or access issues, not in areas that are undeveloped. DNR makes sterile grass carp stockings in the lake to help control the *Hydrilla* in the system.

The comment of a canal on Lake Moultrie being clogged was reported to S-C staff.

Several comments were regarding *Phragmites* in Georgetown County. Most of that vegetation was on private property and cannot be treated by DNR according to the law pertaining to our program.

There were several comments about grass carp on S-C Lakes. She reviewed some information from the assistant hatchery coordinator regarding grass carp testing. All grass carp distributors are required by federal law to test 100 percent of their grass carp for sterility before shipment. When shipments arrive at DNR, a random 5% sample of the carp, up to 120 fish, gets retested for sterility. If a single diploid fish is found, the whole shipment must be euthanized on site or be transported back to the supplier across state lines with a law enforcement escort. Of the 1,132 shipments, only 9 have failed, which is a less than 1% failure rate.

The S-C management plan strives to use integrated pest management to manage lakes Marion and Moultrie, including continuing education, cooperative groups, and professional training to ensure all stakeholders' and user groups' concerns are addressed. We do not want to stock too many grass carp in the system and have them become detrimental to the system again. We need enough to control *Hydrilla* growth, but not become a detriment to native vegetation. We do not want to repeat the large stockings of the past that were detrimental to the system. Maintenance stockings, done on an annual basis, is the goal in S-C system. We also want to have the option to adjust that number based on what is being seen on the system. She recommended 12,000 fish, which is slightly higher than the maintenance rate. She based this on the multispectral surveys showing increased *Hydrilla*, clear water and other surveys done by S-C staff. Although more intense ground surveying would be helpful, those require more money and staff than is currently available. The past six years of stocking 10,000 carp per year was done to slowly lower the total number of fish, while diversifying the age structure and taking advantage of the high feeding rate of the younger fish. It also allowed the Council to respond more easily to changes to the system. The current grass carp population, based on our estimates, is 1 carp per 4.6 surface acres. The goal is to have enough carp in the system to control the *Hydrilla* without impacting the natives.

Ms. Holling asked if the Council members had any further responses to the public comments.

Ms. Moorer asked for more information about Lake Wateree and Duke Energy's responsibilities according to their Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) license. Ms. Holling was not sure what they were but was under the impression that most FERC licenses included some requirement to control invasive vegetation. Ms. Moorer said she might follow up with Duke Energy staff about it.

She addressed the concerns about the S-C lake system. She agreed with Mr. Perry and Mr. Lynch that overstocking of grass carp is a detriment to the S-C system. Those stockings have been done several times in the past, and were voted on by the Council, based on factors at the time. She placed no blame. The Council made the best decisions they could with the data, tools, and research they had at the time. The Council has changed. The S-C leadership, lake management team, and goals have changed. She wished the staff had more opportunities to educate the public about all the changes that have taken place. That was one of the reasons we attended the SC Waterfowl Advisory Committee meeting, although we were not invited by the Committee.

The percentage of *Hydrilla* increase was not included in the plan, so the increase in the grass carp may have been perceived as being based on the opinion of the staff. It was not. She encouraged everyone to reach out to her or the S-C staff with questions. It was presented at the last Council meeting that the multispectral imagery survey indicated a 48% increase in *Hydrilla*. We have shifted from hyperspectral imagery to multispectral imagery surveys to provide more consistency. The hyperspectral often had gaps or inconsistencies in the data, which required additional boat surveys that introduced subjectivity. To be more consistent, only multispectral data is included in the reports since we started using it. While the total acreage of *Hydrilla* may be lower than in the past, it is a result of our methodology and how we are reporting. The S-C staff thinks it is best for a third party to collect and analyze the data, and for S-C staff to make decisions based on that data. We continue to do boat surveys, do ground truthing of the multispectral survey, and collect drone footage, but we are not quantifying that data or adding it to the information presented to the Council. While the multispectral imagery is not perfect, it provides more flexibility to work around weather events that impact the system. She thinks this has been communicated well with the Council but has not been as accessible to other groups and the public.

Some of the information she heard at the SC Waterfowl Advisory Committee meeting was not representative of what is occurring at S-C. She thinks the staff is accessible and has offered tours of the system to see the native vegetation, which has greatly increased in the past six years. That is also being reported by recreational fisherman, boaters, and landowners, as well as what staff is seeing and in the multispectral data. S-C works with a diverse group of stakeholders and listens to all their concerns to achieve management goals that provide the best balance of the stakeholders' needs. Waterfowl and fishery habitat has been at the forefront of our management objective over the last 5-6 years. We have done habitat enhancement work and reduced grass carp numbers on the system. We are encouraged by the amount of native vegetation out there. We want to have enough carp in the system to keep pressure on the *Hydrilla* while limiting the impact on the native vegetation. The goal of the S-C staff is not to eradicate *Hydrilla*, but to keep a mix of good, submersed vegetation out there and balance our lake user needs. Giant salvinia is now on the system and a lot of resources are being used to control it. She has seen some incorrect information on public forums. She encouraged better communication by having stakeholders reach out to S-C staff with questions and comments. She thinks that S-C has been conservative in their management approach. Their grass carp stocking recommendation was to keep the population steady and at a relatively low number. We are trying to build relationships with stakeholders, so they understand our goals and we understand their concerns.

Mr. Perry asked if he could respond to Ms. Moorer's comments and Ms. Holling gave him the floor. He said the SC Waterfowl Advisory Committee has established a standard quarterly meeting schedule and the next meeting is in May. He gave Ms. Moorer a standing, open invitation to future meetings and would put her on the agenda for presentations in the future whenever she would like.

5. Discussion of and Changes to the 2023 Draft Aquatic Plant Management Plan for Final Approval

Ms. Holling asked if anyone wanted to make changes to the plan.

Ms. Moorer noted that after the previous comments, she does not think the 12,000 grass carp included in the plan was reactive and was an increase of approximately 900 fish from the original request across the 160,000 acres of the S-C lake system. In an effort to maintain and build more trust with their stakeholders, S-C would like to default back to the original recommendation of replacing mortality. That would be 11,025 fish and would hold the population to the level they were in 2022.

Although there was a 48% increase in *Hydrilla*, she reminded everyone that the S-C system is a flowing system that is easily impacted by environmental events such as hurricanes. She does not want to see a high turbidity, high water event that reduces or wipes out the submersed vegetation, especially the natives. However, it may be another clear water year, with another increase in *Hydrilla*. She would like to keep the population where it is and see how the system responds to a true maintenance stocking. There has been some misunderstanding of the stocking terms. A maintenance stocking is a replacement of mortality during a year. That was S-C's recommendation, and she was open to any comments and concerns from people. She noted that monitoring of *Hydrilla* levels across S-C will continue and spot treatments of *Hydrilla* will focus on navigation and blocked access areas.

Ms. Moorer made a motion to change the S-C grass carp stocking rate from 12,000 to 11,025 prior to approval of the plan. Mr. Simmons seconded the motion to return to the maintenance stocking level, which DNR supports. He expressed concerns about everything continuing to be watched. We want it balanced for duck hunters, fisherman and other users. He reminded everyone that in addition to mortality, we have to keep in mind that the older carp do not eat as much as the younger ones.

Ms. Holling asked if there was any discussion.

Ms. Lognion supports S-C's request to lower the number of grass carp. With the mild winter, there is a potential for lots of new growth in the system. She agreed with Mr. Simmons' concern about the older carp. She stressed the need to stay focused on controlling the vegetation in the system and not falling behind in that control.

Mr. Kaczka noted, as discussed in previous meetings, we continue to try to get a handle on feeding rates, mortality rates and updated numbers of grass carp each year as we continue to collect carp. The most consistent data we collect is that the older fish, those over 10 years old, are consistently in poorer condition than the younger fish. We do not suspect these older fish are contributing much to vegetation control in the system. The Council should keep in mind that there is a portion of the population that is aging out of their prime consumption years.

Ms. Moorer asked if there was the option for making changes, such as adding a fall carp stocking, if there was a major increase in *Hydrilla*. Ms. Holling said there is the option for the Council to review issues on any waterbody in the plan and address those issues in the middle of the year.

Mr. Messina wanted to reiterate Mr. Wongrey's concerns about the dwindling resources for waterfowl in SC. He believes the state is losing the opportunity to recruit new people to waterfowl hunting and losing revenue due to the shrinking waterfowl hunting opportunities in SC.

Ms. Holling asked if there was any additional discussion regarding the motion to change the number of grass carp put into the S-C system from 12,000 to 11,025. There were none, and she called it to a roll call vote. The motion passed with seven in favor. Mr. Stout and Ms. Holling abstained. Ms. Holling noted that she would abstain unless she needed to break a tie.

Ms. Holling asked if there were any additional changes that needed to be made to the draft plan before final approval. There were none and she asked for a motion to approve the plan with the proposed changes. Mr. Simmons made a motion to accept the plan with the reduced number of grass carp to 11,025 in the S-C system. Ms. Lognion seconded the motion.

Ms. Holling asked if there was any additional discussion to accept the plan as amended. There was none and she called it to a roll call vote. The vote passed with seven in favor. Mr. Stout and Ms. Holling abstained.

6. New State Parks for Addition to the 2024 Aquatic Plant Management Plan

Ms. Holling gave the floor to Ms. Scherman to discuss new state parks that we are considering adding to the 2024 plan.

Ms. Scherman said the SC Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism (PRT) has acquired several new state park properties this past year. Two have ponds and are relevant to the Council. Ramsey Grove is 3,800 acres along the Black River in Georgetown and has a 10-acre pond to be used for bank fishing, canoeing, and kayaking. Misty Lake is 192 acres between North Augusta and Aiken. It has a 7-acre pond to be used for bank and pier fishing, and possibly canoeing and kayaking. Neither property is open to the public yet but are being worked on so they can be opened soon. DNR has visited both sites, and the ponds will likely need treatment in the summer of 2023, and we would like to add them to the 2024 plan.

Ms. Holling discussed the vegetation they saw on the two ponds, most of which was native. Some treatment would be needed on both ponds to allow for bank fishing.

Ms. Scherman asked if anyone had questions about the properties.

Mr. Wongrey asked if Ramsey Grove could be changed to a Category 1 Wildlife Management Area instead of a state park and be used for youth hunts.

Ms. Cope responded that DNR has been working closely with PRT and the Governor's Office. The plans came from the Governor's Office. Both PRT and DNR are trying to honor the Governor's vision for the property. DNR has agreed to run some waterfowl hunts on the impoundment at Ramsey Grove and they will be specialized hunts. This is a roost shooting impoundment and is not what people normally expect from our Category 1 impoundments. It is very small. Specialty youth hunts will occur and will probably be run through our Take One Make One program or other youth outreach programs.

Ms. Moorer asked, for clarification, if the treatment dates were for summer 2023 or summer 2024. Ms. Scherman stated that it would be summer 2023.

Ms. Holling asked Ms. Scherman if she would like to make a request to do treatments for 2023. Ms. Scherman made a motion that any necessary treatments for 2023 be done and both parks be added to the plan for 2024. Mr. Altman seconded the motion. Ms. Holling asked if there was any additional discussion regarding the two park locations. There being none, she called it to a roll call vote. The vote passed with eight in favor. Ms. Holling abstained.

7: Topics and Dates for 2023-2024 Council Meetings

Ms. Holling expects the next meeting to be scheduled for October to mid- November 2023. She will do a poll on potential meeting dates. She asked for thoughts on changing the time of the meetings.

Mr. Simmons is okay with changing the time to allow more public access.

Ms. Moorer was willing to have an afternoon meeting or have a separate public comment session to allow for public interactions if we cannot change the meeting time or place. She noted that it might be easier to have a separate comment session than try to pack it all into one meeting.

Mr. Messina thanked the Council for allowing him to attend.

Mr. Marshall thought it would be better to have a public meeting for the public to come and talk about their concerns. That would also allow for interactions with biologists and staff members that know the systems.

Ms. Holling said options for late afternoon meetings will be considered, as well as separate evening meetings for public comment.

Ms. Holling noted some topics she would like to include for the next Council meeting, including waterfowl harvest numbers and surveys, grass carp health studies for S-C, game fish harvest and surveys, and water quality information for S-C.

Ms. Holling said she was going to change the minutes from the almost verbatim format to more of an overview of what is discussed. That is due to the amount of time needed to do the verbatim minutes. We will have video and audio recordings available for anyone that wishes to review the meetings.

8: New Business

Ms. Holling asked if anyone had any new business. There was none.

9: Adjournment

Ms. Holling requested a motion to adjourn the meeting. Ms. Moorer made a motion to adjourn, and Mr. Simmons seconded the motion. Ms. Holling called the motion to a vote, and it passed unanimously. She thanked everyone present and on WebEx for attending. The meeting adjourned at 11:24 a.m.