

Meeting Minutes
Board of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources
SCDNR Headquarters
260 D. Epting Lane
West Columbia, SC 29172
September 11, 2026, 10:00 a.m.

The regular meeting of the Board of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources was held at 10:00 a.m. on September 11, 2026, at SCDNR Headquarters, 260 D. Epting Lane, West Columbia, SC 29172. Notice of the date, time, and place of the meeting was posted and mailed to the news media. Chairman Dr. Mark Hartley presided at the meeting. Board members present included Vice Chairman Mr. Duane Swygert, Mr. Mike Hutchins, Ms. Hope Blackley, Mr. Davy Hite, and Mr. Jerry Lee. Mr. Carlisle Oxner's absence was excused. Director Dr. Tom Mullikin and staff members of the Department of Natural Resources were present at the meeting.

1. **Call to Order**

Chairman Hartley called the meeting to order and welcomed all attendees.

2. **Invocation**

Director Mullikin offered the invocation.

3. **Pledge of Allegiance**

Vice Chairman Swygert led the group in the Pledge of Allegiance.

4. **Chairman's Comments**

Chairman Hartley noted that, since the previous Board meeting, meetings of the Heritage Trust Advisory Board and Waterfowl Advisory Committee had been held. He also recognized the successful conclusion of the SC7 Expedition and events involving Ducks Unlimited and South Carolina Hunters for the Hungry. Chairman Hartley commended the organizers and participants for the manner in which the meetings and events were conducted.

5. **Introduction of Guests/Constituent Comments**

Ms. Shannon Bobertz, Chief of Staff, introduced Ms. Laura Voyles, South Carolina Sporting Dog Association, and members of the Law Enforcement Advisory Committee. None of the guests requested to address the Board.

6. **Approval of Minutes**

Chairman Hartley asked if there were any additions, deletions, or corrections to the minutes for the August 6, 2026, and August 24, 2026, Board meetings. *Mr. Hutchins made a motion that the minutes of the August 6, 2026, and August 24, 2026, meetings be approved as submitted. Ms. Blackley seconded the motion and the motion carried unanimously.*

7. **Agency Reports/Updates**

Commendations:

Commend Mr. Joseph Woods and Mr. John Thomas of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries for their exceptional support during a dangerous late-night law enforcement operation at the Tom Yawkey Wildlife Center involving the apprehension of a wanted individual with a history of violence. They went above and beyond their normal duties by assisting with transportation, guiding officers through the property, helping identify locations for drone operations, and determining a safe approach to the suspect. Their professionalism and

teamwork demonstrate an outstanding commitment to their colleagues and the mission of SCDNR.

Commend FSGT Dillon Price, LCPL Jonathan Burnett, LCPL Chris Keller, CO Garrett Alexander, LCPL Brett Irvin, and PFC Andrew Hamlet for their exceptional assistance to SLED's Dogfighting Unit during the execution of a search warrant operation in Cherokee County. Despite challenging mountainous terrain, hazardous conditions, and extreme August heat, these officers worked tirelessly alongside SLED agents until the operation was complete, contributing significantly to the successful rescue of 40 dogs. Their dedication, teamwork, and willingness to exceed expectations reflect positively upon themselves and SCDNR.

Commend CPT John Bedingfield, LT Hogan Tyler, FSGT Steven Terry, LCPL Chandler Gray, LCPL Elliott Fralick, PFC Michael "Alex" Conaway, PFC William Medlin, and LT Andrew Godowns for their exceptional assistance to the FBI during the execution of a search warrant in Wagener. Their pre-operational drone support helped identify security hazards and other areas of interest. Their professionalism, teamwork, and willingness to assist, along with LT Godowns' coordination of the SCDNR drone, reflect positively upon themselves and SCDNR.

Commend Mr. Lee Kennamer of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries for his outstanding participation in a recent deer management workshop at Clemson's Edisto Research and Education Center. He delivered an informative presentation, effectively addressed questions from attendees, and represented the Department exceptionally well. His efforts contributed to the program's success and demonstrated a strong commitment to expanding SCDNR's outreach and engagement within the agricultural community.

Commend Ms. Holly Sommers and Mr. Kevin Swain of Marine Resources for their outstanding efforts in preparing the recent SCDES Section 319 Grant application to support the Murrells Inlet Watershed Plan. Their dedication, coordination, and ability to bring together multiple partners and local governments under a tight timeline were instrumental in completing the application. Their collaborative efforts reflect a strong commitment to building conservation partnerships and advancing important initiatives throughout the Waccamaw region.

Commend PFC Edwina Wait for her exceptional response and compassionate assistance to a child found walking in the center of a roadway. Recognizing the immediate danger and the child's unique needs, PFC Wait demonstrated patience and sound judgment in safely removing him from harm, locating his home, and reuniting him with his family. PFC Wait's actions exemplify her dedication to protecting and serving the citizens of South Carolina.

Special Recognition:

Deputy Director Colonel Chisolm Frampton presented PFC Wait with an Excellence in Policing Award in recognition of her actions. Colonel Frampton reported that the child's father had contacted the agency and written letters expressing his appreciation for the compassion and respect PFC Wait demonstrated while assisting his child.

8. Advisory Committee Reports

A. Waterfowl

Mr. Billy Dukes, Chief of Wildlife, reported that the Waterfowl Advisory Committee met on August 13, 2026, at the McKenzie Field Station. He thanked the Marine Resources Division for hosting the meeting.

The Committee received reports concerning waterfowl habitat management, infrastructure improvements, wood duck management initiatives, tidal impoundment research, and policy matters. Staff reported that substantial habitat and infrastructure work had been completed on Category I waterfowl areas throughout the state. Dry summer conditions provided unusual opportunities to access and manage normally wet areas through mowing, disking, roller-chopping, ditch cleaning, dike repair, vegetation control, and related improvements.

The \$6.8 million Cedar Island renovation project at the Santee Coastal Reserve is among the largest ongoing projects and is expected to require approximately 12 to 18 months to complete. Third-party reviews of the Broad River, Beaverdam Creek, and Clemson waterfowl areas have been completed, with reports forthcoming.

Mr. Mark McAlister, Biologist at the Tom Yawkey Wildlife Center, presented information concerning the frequency with which low tides provide sufficient drainage for managed tidal impoundments. Available evidence indicated that the frequency was decreasing, and preliminary projections suggested that drainage opportunities could decline substantially over the coming decades.

Staff provided an update on a new wood duck box monitoring database intended to improve wood duck production estimates. A box recipient survey is also being developed to evaluate box maintenance, barriers to participation, and educational needs. The agency is implementing a fee of \$50 per unit to recover program costs and provide additional funding for waterfowl area habitats and maintenance.

The Committee approved a motion recommending that SCDNR formally petition the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to require Santee Cooper to follow its guide curve from November 15 through January 31. The Office of Environmental Programs and the Legal Office are reviewing the recommendation and will provide their analysis and recommendations.

The Committee also discussed proposed changes to drain-tile setback requirements near protected wetlands in the Prairie Pothole Region. SCDNR submitted comments opposing the proposed changes through the Federal Register comment process and directly to the Director of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

The next Waterfowl Advisory Committee meeting is scheduled for November 5, 2026, at SCDNR Headquarters.

B. Governor's Cup Billfishing Series

Ms. Blaik Keppler, Deputy Director of Marine Resources, reported that the Governor's Cup Billfishing Series Advisory Board met on Friday, August 28, 2026, in Charleston.

The Advisory Board reviewed the Tournament Committee report and approved the 2026 series winners and recipients of the Mate of the Year Award and the Carroll A. Campbell Award.

Five tournaments were held during the 2026 series, with 182 boats participating. Participants encountered 96 blue marlin, 11 white marlin, one spearfish, and 385 sailfish. All billfish were released, resulting in a 100% release rate with no billfish landed.

The Advisory Board reviewed plans for the awards reception scheduled for September 25, 2026. It also discussed, but took no action on, the proposed 2027 and 2028 series schedules, 2027 sponsorship information, and nominations for new Advisory Board members.

The next Governor's Cup Billfishing Series Advisory Board meeting is scheduled for November 13, 2026, in Charleston.

C. Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries

Mr. Hutchins reported that the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Committee met on September 3, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. in the SCDNR Board Room.

Ms. Megan Levinson, GIS and Data Manager, provided an overview of the Heritage Trust database and updates concerning the GIS program. Ms. Sarah Pesi, Small Game Biologist, presented an overview of dove monitoring practices in South Carolina and the resulting data. Mr. Bill Post, Diadromous Fish Coordinator, provided a report on Sturgeon Awareness Month and related outreach efforts. Mr. Will Dillman, Deputy Director, provided staff updates, including new hires and retirements.

The next Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Committee meeting is scheduled for November 17, 2026, at SCDNR Headquarters.

9. Item(s) for Board Information

A. Greenville Office Update

Mr. David Tarrant, Chief Operations Officer, reported that SCDNR had secured office space at the Piedmont Center in Greenville near the intersection of Interstate 385 and S.C. Highway 291, commonly known as Pleasantburg Drive.

The office will provide full-service licensing and watercraft services and will house approximately seven additional staff members. Some employees will relocate from SCDNR Headquarters and Clemson, while other positions will be filled through new hires. One of the new positions will provide endpoint technology support for general help desk needs in the Upstate and body camera support for the Law Enforcement Division.

Mr. Tarrant anticipated that employees would begin moving into the office in approximately eight to 10 weeks. Full licensing and watercraft services are expected to begin in January of 2027 after new employees complete training.

B. Climate Update

Dr. Hope Mizzell, State Climatologist, provided an update on the continuing drought affecting South Carolina. She explained that widespread rainfall was needed because scattered thunderstorms had not provided sufficient relief. Photographs documented exposed shoreline at Lake Hartwell and drought-affected pastures in Laurens County.

The Drought Response Committee met on September 8, 2026. Anderson, Abbeville, and McCormick counties returned to moderate drought status. Greenville, Spartanburg, Union, and Cherokee counties improved to incipient drought status, while Charleston County improved from severe to moderate drought. The classifications for the remaining counties did not change. The Committee's next meeting is scheduled for October 13, 2026.

The September 2025 through August 2026 period was the driest such 12-month period in 131 years of statewide records. South Carolina received approximately 33 inches of rainfall during the period, approximately 14.5 inches below normal and approximately 70% of the normal rainfall total.

The climatological summer, consisting of June through August, was both hot and dry. Charleston experienced its 10th-driest and third-warmest summer in 97 years of records. Columbia experienced its seventh-driest and sixth-warmest summer in 79 years. In 127 years of records, Greenville experienced its third-driest summer, and its average temperature tied for eighth warmest. Statewide, the summer ranked as the eighth driest and tied for fourth warmest.

Rainfall during the preceding 30 days was normal to slightly above normal in portions of the coastal counties. Portions of Anderson, Abbeville, and McCormick counties and the Catawba-Wateree Basin received only approximately 25% to 30% of normal rainfall. The 90-day totals were somewhat improved but remained below normal across a substantial portion of the state.

Streamflow briefly improved following rainfall but declined quickly afterward. Very low streamflows continued in portions of Greenville and Spartanburg counties and throughout the Savannah River Basin. The Rocky River near Starr was in the 10th percentile, Twelvemile Creek near Liberty was in the third percentile, McTier Creek near Monetta was in the 11th percentile, and the Coosawhatchie River was experiencing extremely low flow.

Lake Blalock remained stable, allowing some water restrictions to be eased. Lake Murray was approximately 1.61 feet below full pool and was expected to be lowered further for management purposes. Exposed shorelines were reported at lakes Marion and Moultrie. Lake Jocassee was approximately 12 feet below full pool, Lake Hartwell was approximately 9.36 feet below full pool, Lake Thurmond was approximately 8.2 feet below full pool, and Lake Wylie was approximately one foot below full pool. Lake Wateree remained relatively stable. Groundwater levels were below normal or very low across much of the state.

Lake Hartwell was projected to continue declining through the fall. Dr. Mizzell noted that October and November are climatologically among the driest months in South Carolina. Developing El Niño conditions could increase the likelihood of normal to above-normal rainfall during the winter, which would be needed for significant drought recovery.

No tropical activity was expected during the next seven days. Five named storms had formed during the season, all of which had remained tropical storms. As of the meeting date, the 2026 season was approaching the satellite-era record for the latest formation of the season's first Atlantic hurricane. Dr. Mizzell explained that developing El Niño conditions had produced wind shear and dry, stable air unfavorable for hurricane development. She cautioned that tropical systems could still form closer to the Gulf or Atlantic coast later in the season.

The seven-day forecast indicated rainfall totals of approximately 0.75 to 1.5 inches, with isolated higher totals possible. Dr. Mizzell noted that approximately one inch of rainfall per week was needed to offset evaporation. Above-normal temperatures were likely from September 15 through September 19, while confidence in the precipitation forecast remained low. The September-through-November outlook indicated the potential for above-normal precipitation, with a possible pattern change beginning in mid-October or November.

Dr. Mizzell clarified that the current drought ranking applied specifically to statewide rainfall from September through August. She noted that approximately 11 or 12 stations were used to develop statewide averages during the early 1900s, compared with approximately 70 stations currently. She stated that the droughts of the early 2000s and 2007-2008 produced more severe impacts on lake levels and groundwater wells, although the current drought was the most severe in approximately 10 years and was significantly affecting agricultural producers.

Dr. Mizzell also reported that the South Carolina Forestry Commission responded to approximately twice the normal number of wildfires during August and that the total acreage burned was approximately three times the normal amount. The Commission was concerned about the potential for increased wildfire activity during the fall if dry conditions continued.

10. Item(s) for Board Action

A. Approval of Expenditure from Lake Hartwell Fish Habitat Enhancement

Mr. Ross Self, Chief of Freshwater Fisheries, reported that SCDNR received approximately \$2.8 million from the Lake Hartwell Natural Resource Trustees through a Lake Hartwell PCB settlement. The Board approved the first allocation from the funds in October 2012 for reservoir habitat enhancement.

Mr. Self explained that the initiative was originally proposed as a 10-year project. Cost savings and careful stewardship by Region 1 staff had extended the project to approximately 15 or 16 years. The requested allocation of \$203,000 represented the final allocation from the funds currently held in the account. SCDNR was also consulting with the Lake Hartwell Natural Resource Trustees concerning the possible reallocation of approximately \$200,000 in other funds, which could extend the project by an additional one or two years.

Mr. Hite made a motion that the SCDNR Board, upon the recommendation of SCDNR staff and the Director, approve the budget of the Lake Hartwell Fish Habitat Enhancement Project for FY 2026 and 2027 and the expenditure of \$203,000 from the South Carolina Recreational Fishing Compensation Plan Funds, a sub-account of the Mitigation Trust Fund of South Carolina. Mr. Lee seconded the motion and the motion passed unanimously.

11. Executive Session

Mr. Lee made a motion that the SCDNR Board go into executive session pursuant to S.C. Code Section 30-4-70(A)(2) to discuss contractual matters related to Items for Board Action B, C, and D. Ms. Blackley seconded the motion and the motion passed unanimously.

12. Open Session

Mr. Lee made a motion that the SCDNR Board return to open session, noting that no action was taken during executive session. Ms. Blackley seconded the motion and the motion carried unanimously.

13. Item(s) for Board Action

B. Revised Final Approval of Property Acquisition in Jasper County (C-TH)

Vice Chairman Swygert made a motion that the SCDNR Board, upon the recommendation of the Heritage Trust Advisory Board, SCDNR staff, and the Director, grant final approval and the expenditure of \$280,000 from the Heritage Land Trust Fund for the acquisition of approximately 635 acres in Jasper County to be dedicated as a Heritage Preserve and placed into the corpus of the Heritage Trust. Mr. Lee seconded the motion and the motion passed unanimously.

C. Preliminary/Final Approval of Property Acquisition in Charleston County (SS)

Mr. Hutchins made a motion that the SCDNR Board, upon the recommendation of the Heritage Trust Advisory Board, SCDNR staff, and the Director, grant preliminary/final approval and the expenditure of up to \$20,000 from the Heritage Land Trust Fund for the acquisition of approximately 76 acres in Charleston County to be dedicated as a Heritage Preserve and placed into the corpus of the Heritage Trust. Mr. Hite seconded the motion and the motion passed unanimously.

D. Final Approval of Property Acquisition in Hampton County (C-OSI)

Vice Chairman Swygert made a motion that the SCDNR Board, upon the recommendation of SCDNR staff and the Director, subject to standard due diligence, grant final approval for the acceptance of a property donation of approximately 1.7 acres in Hampton County adjoining Coosawhatchie Heritage Preserve and Wildlife Management Area. Ms. Blackley seconded the motion and the motion passed unanimously.

14. Comments

Mr. Hite recognized the 25th anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. He thanked first responders, law enforcement officers, and members of the military for protecting the nation's freedoms and liberties.

Ms. Blackley concurred with Mr. Hite's comments and thanked SCDNR employees, particularly members of the Law Enforcement Division, for their service.

Mr. Lee reminded attendees that deer season was open and encouraged experienced hunters to introduce a child to hunting. He also reminded motorists to watch for increased deer activity as cooler weather and the breeding season approached.

Chairman Hartley reported that the Conservation Voters of South Carolina would honor Governor Henry McMaster with a Lifetime Conservation Leadership Award at the upcoming Green Tie Awards Luncheon. The award recognizes elected and civic leaders who passionately defend South Carolina's air, land, and water in the General Assembly and within their own communities. Chairman Hartley stated that he would attend the luncheon on behalf of SCDNR and provide a report to the Board.

Deputy Director Colonel Frampton reminded attendees that the SCDNR Law Enforcement Officer of the Year Luncheon would begin at 1:00 p.m. at the Phillips Market Center following the adjournment of the Harry Hampton Wildlife Fund Board meeting.

15. Time and Location of Next Board Meeting

The Board's next meeting will be held Thursday, October 22, 2026.

16. Adjournment

Mr. Lee made a motion that the meeting be adjourned. Mr. Hutchins seconded the motion and the motion carried unanimously.