

**Waterfowl Advisory Committee**  
**November 12, 2024**  
**Meeting Minutes – Approved February 6, 2025**  
**SCDNR Wateree River Shooting Range – Meeting Room**  
**14068 Garners Ferry Road, Eastover, SC 29044**

**Members Present:**

Chairman Bob Perry, Vice Chairman John Hilton, Stuart Cochran, Bill Mace, Ernie Wiggers

**Members Absent:**

Jerry Lee (Excused)

**DNR Staff Present:**

Chief of Wildlife Billy Dukes, Assistant Chief of Statewide Projects Will Dillman, Assistant Chief of Wildlife (Regions 2 & 4) Sam Chappellear, Statewide Waterfowl Biologist Molly Kneece, Region 4 Coordinator Biologist Alicia Farrell and Administrative Coordinator Patty Castine.

**Constituents Present:**

There were no constituents present.

**Call to Order**

Chairman Perry called the meeting to order at 9:30AM, with notice that the date, time, and place of the meeting was posted on the DNR website in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act and welcomed everyone present.

Ernie Wiggers made a motion to amend the agenda to include a round table discussion at the end of the meeting since no field trip was planned. Bill Mace seconded, and the motion passed with unanimous approval by the Committee.

**Introductions and Constituent Comments**

Committee members, staff and constituents introduced themselves and provided their background and interests.

**Consideration and Approval of Minutes**

Chairman Perry asked if there was any discussion regarding the August 20, 2024, Waterfowl Advisory Committee meeting minutes. Chairman Perry requested to make a change to page 2 of the Waterfowl Management Status report by Biologist Kneece. Chairman Perry recommended the first sentence stay the same and made a motion to amend to approve the following sentence, “However, Molly reported the annual waterfowl status report document is delayed due to other priorities assigned to her.” Chairman Perry asked Biologist Kneece if that was a correct statement in which she replied that at the time the statement was correct. Vice Chairman Hilton seconded the motion to approve the minutes as amended. Chief Dukes asked for clarification that the waterfowl management program status report was a status report on activities of the waterfowl management program. It did include activities of the program, however, on August 8, 2023, the committee moved with a unanimous vote for staff to produce a draft status report by May of 2024 with a final available by August 2024. In the minutes of the May meeting, they were correctly presented that Biologist Kneece said it was delayed, and the Committee is just clarifying that it was still delayed in August of 2024. The motion is to approve the minutes as presented with this one sentence addition as read. After already being seconded, the motion passed with unanimous approval by the Committee.

### **Comments from the Chair**

Chairman Perry stated he was looking forward to a very productive meeting and was ready to move forward.

### **Comments from DNR Leadership**

Chief Dukes welcomed everyone and gave a quick review of the Wateree River shooting range.

### **Project Updates, Infrastructure and Status of Cat I Waterfowl Habitat 2024**

Assistant Chief Sam Chappellear gave a PowerPoint presentation showing the damage from Hurricane Helene to Broad River, Santee-Delta East and West, and Santee Coastal Reserve WMAs. There was significant flood damage to Broad River and Santee-Delta, but Sandy Beach WMA was spared.

Biologist Kneece thanked Assistant Chief Chappellear, Biologist Tom Harkins and Region 4 staff/airboat crew for their help with wood duck banding.

### **Empirical Evaluation and Trends of Cat I Waterfowl Habitat 2024**

Biologist Kneece presented Ducks Unlimited Wings Over Water video. A survey has been created for waterfowl hunters at Hickory Top. Staff are now using digital reporting. She reviewed rapid habitat assessments covering WED (Waterfowl Energy Days) a unit of measure relating to how many waterfowl one acre of a given habitat can support for one day. Chairman Perry requested that Biologist Kneece add a data column that will show the percentage of what's available versus what was surveyed and computed. Chairman Perry noted that the data show that Cat I WMAs have enough high-quality forage resources to winter a minimum of 243,134 ducks every day for 115 days (Nov 15-Feb 28); this is exceptional and important data. Chairman Perry thanked Biologist Kneece and all staff for assembling these data and conclusions. Members agreed and were complimentary of this new "yardstick."

### **Cat I Lottery Hunts 2024-2025 Update and Trends**

Chief Dukes gave an update and shared results of the Cat I waterfowl lottery hunts. Chairman Perry indicated the Committee should be pleased with the increase in slots and hunts and the upward trends. Members agreed.

### **SCR and Wateree/Love Farm Peer Review Reports**

Biologist Kneece presented the peer review reports for Santee Coastal Reserve and Wateree/Love wildlife management areas. Committee members were complimentary.

### **Evaluation of Duck Stamp Expenditures 2023-2024**

Chief Dukes gave an evaluation of duck stamp expenditures. Chairman Perry asked how duck stamp funds benefit individuals who buy duck stamps. Chief Dukes replied that duck stamp funds are used to improve habitat by means of control of undesirable vegetation, plantings, maintenance, equipment and agricultural supplies. The expenditure of funds for the wood duck box program is the largest single line item in the budget. Chairman Perry requested additional information on how duck stamp funds benefit the waterfowl management program and the duck hunting public. Chief Dukes offered to provide that additional information as soon as possible. Chairman Perry requested an estimate of the total number of available duck stamp funds in the account to include funds that are rolled over in accordance with statute; Chief Dukes provided an estimate.

### **Waterfowl Management Program 2023-2024 Status Report**

Chief Dukes informed Chairman Perry that the delay of the 2023-2024 status report is due to his busy schedule, and he hasn't been able to edit Biologist Kneece's draft but assured the Chairman that he would have it completed in a few weeks. Chairman Perry requested that the Committee be provided a draft electronic copy of the status report before it is finalized.

### **Status of Requesting Permit Condition Modification for Stoney Bay**

Assistant Chief Chappellear stated he has been in contact with DHEC which is now the Department of Environmental Services regarding Stoney Bay, a unit of Sandy Beach WMA. They have received approval from the Corp, but require approval from Santee Cooper and do not anticipate any issues with them. The goal is to have a complete drawdown in the growing season of 2025, apply prescribed fire and other treatments, and flood it in the fall of 2025. Chairman Perry asked if we would do this on an annual basis or every two to three years and is the staff opinion. Chappellear responded that it is too early to determine frequency of treatments until we see results from this year. Members were pleased with this report.

### **Analysis of Recruitment of Wood Duck Boxes Across Multiple States**

Biologist Kneece gave an analysis of recruitment of wood duck boxes across multiple states. Stuart Cochran stated he would like to reemphasize the use of QR codes to collect data. Biologist Kneece stated there is a new metal tag with a QR code that has just started, and this will be the second year. The QR code has been very underutilized. She is considering using social media to promote the program, how to maintain the boxes and generate some baseline data. The interest of people for wood duck boxes now versus twenty years ago, people's time go to so many things now, she said we would be lucky if 50% of the boxes are erected each year. Chairman Perry stated there used to be a pledge on the wood duck box application that the applicant would install the boxes they were given. Assistant Chief Dillman stated we could update the application. There is a tremendous amount of interest when the application process opens. We have thousands of people who apply each year. We are limiting individuals to three boxes each. When it comes to distributing the boxes, which requires people come to a place on a given day to pick them up, approximately 1/3 of the boxes aren't picked up despite reminders and make-up days. Chairman Perry stated there should be more dialogue to see if the money used to fund the program is worth keeping the program going.

### **Update on Mallard Genetics and Mallard Release Programs**

Biologist Kneece gave an update on mallard genetics and mallard release programs. Private landowner group Palmetto Waterfowl is in the second year of mallard genetics research with Phil Lavretsky and Clemson University. This is not a DNR project. We're not contributing funds, but they did ask us last year to help collect samples. Chairman Perry asked if there is an opportunity to work on the partnership and get into an arrangement such that funding could be going to the project? Chief Dukes responded that we would have to look at it based on its merit, but we have not seen a proposal for this, and we evaluate all research projects in the same manner. He referred to the earlier question about how it benefits a public waterfowl hunter, and we would use that as one of the criteria to evaluate the worthiness of a project of this nature. Chairman Perry asked the committee members if they received a request for a monetary contribution for the project by Palmetto Waterfowl and encouraged the Committee members to donate.

### **Update on Plantersville Solar Farm**

Chairman Perry stated he had been receiving updates from local landowners regarding the Plantersville Solar Farm project but has not received any updates recently. DNR's involvement has been limited to a September 9, 2024, letter to the zoning commission offering considerations for rezoning the property and providing Best Management Practices for solar farms. DNR has not had any official requests for comment. There have been no permits issued, and DNR is of the understanding that the company responsible may be revising their proposal.

### **Roundtable Discussion**

Chairman Perry opened the floor for discussion for things the Committee members consider to be high accomplishments that stood out during the calendar year 2024. Ernie Wiggers stated that he was very impressed with the biologists that manage each site have a passion for their work. It was good to see as

an outsider that each one of those DNR employees most associated with individual waterfowl areas take a personal interest in management of those areas and work extremely hard to make them productive and provide quality waterfowl hunting experiences.

Vice Chairman Hilton was very impressed with the habitat assessment survey and feels it is going to be a great tool to measure success and management progress and to defend staff when criticized. He feels that when coupled with pictures that staff are taking, it is indisputable evidence that the work we're doing is paying off. Chief Dukes replied that across the board we have a group of highly motivated individuals from our technicians all the way up through the ranks. What Biologist Kneece is doing is helping them focus on the goal.

Chairman Perry asked if staff might contemplate a recommendation from the Committee to have another outreach workshop for landowners that would have to sign up and possibly pay a fee. Chief Dukes replied that a general waterfowl management workshop like the Samworth workshop is something we can certainly consider. At that meeting we had hoped that and that some private landowners might step forward and agree to host future workshops and allow us to assist. We can certainly go back to the drawing board and consider future outreach efforts like that. Bill Mace stated it would be beneficial to have around the state and Chairman Perry suggested a Midlands area outreach.

Stuart Cochran commended the progress at Clemson and Beaverdam Creek Waterfowl Area and noted the positive changes that have occurred at those areas. He mentioned that subtle changes can make a big difference in habitat quality, and managers should be motivated and encouraged when they are able to implement and observe positive changes.

Bill Mace was impressed with the DNR for the quick response when there is a natural disaster such as flooding from torrential rainfall or direct impacts from a major storm.

Chairman Perry commended staff for their quick response to catastrophes and for what they have done to improve resilience of coastal waterfowl areas.

Chairman Perry requested a long-term plan to prepare for the eventual loss of current waterfowl areas along the coast. He requested the Committee and staff work on a report that would anticipate the preliminary recommendations in order to assess baseline conditions, develop cost projections, a timeline, objectives and priorities. He noted that world-wide, climate disasters have increased from 75 during 1994-2003 to 356 during 2014-2023; that is a four-fold increase over a 30-year period. The Committee agreed that an action plan is warranted. Chief Dukes indicated that a significant effort on this is already underway under coordination with the Marine Resources Division.

### **Date, Time, and Location of Next Meeting**

There was discussion regarding changing the regular meeting schedule from the second Tuesday to the first Thursday of each quarterly meeting. The next meeting is tentatively scheduled for Thursday, February 6, 2025.

### **Adjournment**

Chairman Perry made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Stuart Cochran seconded the motion, and the meeting was adjourned at 1:51 PM.