

Waterfowl Advisory Committee Meeting Summary

Date: May 12, 2026

Time: 9:35 am

Location: Santee Coastal Reserve WMA, 210 Santee Gun Club Rd, McClellanville, SC

Committee Members Present: John Hilton (Chair), Ernie Wiggers (Vice Chair), Stuart Cochran, Dr. Mark Hartley, Bill Mace.

Committee Members Absent: Bob Perry (excused)

Attendees: Will Dillman (Deputy Director, WFF), Sam Chappelle (Assistant Chief Regions 2 & 4), Van Whitehead (Deputy General Counsel), Zadok Moss (Region 4 Assistant Coordinator), Willie Simmons (Assistant Chief Regions 1 & 3), Billy Dukes (Chief of Wildlife), Molly Kneece (Statewide Waterfowl Biologist), Patty Castine (Administrative Coordinator)

• Call to Order and Introductions

- Meeting called to order at 9:35 am.
- Notice of the date, time, and place was posted on the DNR website.
- Attendees introduced themselves.
- Brief logistical comments (location, restrooms, etc.), reminder to silence cell phones.

• Constituent Comments

- There were no constituents present.

• Consideration and Approval of Past Minutes

- Chairman Hilton requested a motion to approve the minutes of the March 12, 2026, Waterfowl Advisory Committee meeting. Vice Chairman Wiggers made a motion to approve the minutes. The motion was seconded by Stuart Cochran and passed with unanimous approval by the Committee.

Committee Updates, Agenda, and Announcements

- DNR staff welcomed committee members to Santee Gun Club.
- Noted a short agenda due to the annual cycle being on schedule.
- Field Tour: Originally planned for Cedar Island but shifted to Cape due to contractor delays on Cedar Island project.

• South Carolina Duck Summit Debrief

Purpose and Structure of the Summit

- The Duck Summit was conceived as a new outreach event, not research or habitat management focused, but intended to gather cross-sectional feedback from various waterfowl hunting interests.
- Invitation targeted legislators, private landowners/managers, staff, and attempted to represent public hunters.
- Noted shortcomings in public hunter representation; recognized ongoing challenge in identification and targeted communication.

Outreach and Communication Challenges

- Discussed difficulty of identifying and involving public water hunters.
- Need to balance targeted invites with risk of alienating uninvited constituents.
- Emphasis on maintaining structure to prevent meetings from devolving into unproductive complaint sessions.
- Discussion of ways to improve outreach, including technical workshops and potentially targeted social media engagement.

Summit Content and Recommendations

- Positive feedback overall but suggestions for improvement:
 - Incorporate a "crash course" component on habitat management—upland, tidal, moist-soil, planted-and-flood, green-tree management, etc.
 - Provide practical handouts for attendees to use as references.
 - Consider further tailoring presentations to audience (e.g., more technical/management information for private land managers; Cat 1 status for public hunters).
 - Acknowledge differing informational needs for private plantation managers versus public hunters.

Issues on Committee Authority and Legislative Recommendations

- Debate on the Committee's authority to make recommendations, particularly regarding mallard management and putting issues before the legislature.
- Van Whitehead clarified the committee's authority per its enabling legislation (management, development, protection, propagation, and prioritizing expenditures from Migratory Waterfowl Permit sales revenue).

- Consensus that the committee can discuss and recommend actions within the scope of their legislative mandate, especially tied to the use of funds (e.g., duck stamp revenue).

Extended Discussion: Mallard Genetics, Mallard Propagation, and Legislative Role

- Extensive debate on the scientific and management implications of farm-reared (captive-bred) mallard release and the potential genetic impact on wild populations.
- Reference to Dr. Lavretsky's presentation: Outstanding data gaps regarding:
 1. Productivity of hens with high captive gene markers,
 2. Migratory patterns of those birds,
 3. Direct effect on the wild mallard gene pool.
- Plan to follow up with new research and consider inviting Dr. Lavretsky/Dr. Jim Anderson (Clemson) to present updates and address knowledge gaps.
- Discussion on whether SC should take the lead on potential bans of captive mallard release, even if the problem is larger in other states.

Emphasis on careful interpretation of data, avoiding premature conclusions, and focusing on evidence-based recommendations. Cat 1 Area Updates at the Summit

- Noted absence of negative public comments about Cat 1 areas at the summit—an unprecedented achievement attributed to staff efforts and recent management improvements.
- Positive feedback on leadership continuity provided by Molly Kneece in the Waterfowl Program Manager position.

Ongoing Value and Future of the Duck Summit

- Broad agreement from the Committee on the importance of making the Duck Summit an annual event.
- Consideration of optimal timing (summer may be less disruptive despite not aligning with peak duck hunting season).
- Recognition that those highly invested will attend regardless of season.
- Noted that public hunter perceptions about private/public area interplay (e.g., whether impounded crops support public hunting) could benefit from better communication and possibly GPS tracking data.

• Cat 1 (Category 1) Status Updates

Regions 1 and 3 (Willie Simmons)

- Staff at Beaver Dam and Clemson Waterfowl areas making significant progress with moist soil and agricultural crop management.
- Improved water and beaver management (USDA contracts in place for dam removal and beaver trapping).
- Deer and hog exclusion fencing (notably at Love Farm WMA) increasing crop survival rates drastically.
- Infrastructure improvements (pumps, grading, water control) contributing to enhanced habitat conditions.
- Progress at Wateree's Cook's Mountain and Green Tree Reservoir; NAWCA Partner Agreement is in place for the Greentree Reservoir Enhancement Project.
- Many positive comments from hunters at Wateree—especially about youth opportunities and tangible habitat improvements.

Regions 2 and 4 (Sam Chappelle)

- Some continued challenges (beaver-induced dike breaches at Broad River WMA, water control structure needs, seasonal drought, staffing shortages).
- Major ongoing and upcoming projects:
 - Samworth: Berm & dike enhancements, continue to improve moist soil moisture management, drone spraying for noxious vegetation, drought allowing for fieldwork efficiency by using tractors instead of marshmasters.
 - Santee-Delta West/East: Detail-oriented management increasing effectiveness of habitat upgrades, notably improvement in desired vegetation via mowing, burning, and disking. Drought has allowed for the use of tractors in most impoundments.
 - Bear Island: Major habitat reset—resetting via equipment-intensive manipulation and habitat work; focus for upcoming year. Two additional marshmasters and associated implements have been rented for use on the area.
 - Donnelley: Targeted management for problematic species (e.g., Cuban bulrush); additional fine-tuning and continued habitat resets.
 - Coosawhatchie: Continue to fine tune where crops should be planted and what areas work better for moist soil management.
 - Bonneau Ferry: Conversion of a fishing lake into moist soil management for waterfowl use. Installed new water control structure in Split field.
 - Ramsey Grove: Completed fencing of impoundments to keep deer out and allow for cultivation of planted crops.
- Cross-staff collaboration and adaptive management highlighted as key to recent successes.
- Some project delays (Cedar Island, Carr complex) due to contractor equipment failure and Federal (NAWCA) funding releases.

Summary/Conclusions

- Drought has benefited some sites, enabling equipment access, but may become problematic if rain does not return.
- Committee members expressed optimism for an excellent upcoming waterfowl season given current habitat conditions and progress.

• Conduct for Boards and Committees (Van Whitehead)

- Annual review covering the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act and public meetings.
- Emphasized:
 - Proper public notice and agenda detail.
 - Inclusion of notice in meeting minutes.
 - Rules for field trips/workshops as meetings (quorum triggers requirements even for non-traditional gatherings).
 - Posting of agenda and limitations for last-minute amendments.
 - Executive sessions are rare and restricted.
 - Recordkeeping and transparency practices.
- Committee praised for current adherence to requirements.

• Next Meeting – Determine Date and Site

- Target date: **August 13, 2026**
- Location: Donnelly Lodge, with possible tour of Bear Island and Donnelley WMAs.

• Meeting Adjournment

- Meeting adjourned at 11:20 AM

• Tour of Santee Coastal Reserve WMA

Project Biologist Joachim Treptow provided a tour of the impoundments on The Cape.