

Waterfowl Advisory Committee February 6, 2025
Meeting Minutes
Santee Coastal Reserve WMA
210 Santee Gun Club Rd, McClellanville, SC 29458

Members Present:

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

DNR Staff Present:

Chief of Wildlife Billy Dukes, Assistant Chief of Wildlife (Region 1 & 3) Willie Simmons, Assistant Chief of Wildlife (Regions 2 & 4) Sam Chappelle, Statewide Waterfowl Biologist Molly Kneece, Region 4 Assistant Coordinator Zadok Moss, Wildlife Section Administrative Coordinator Patty Castine.

Constituents Present:

Robin Inabinet

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. Vice Chairman Hilton gave the invocation.

Introductions and Constituent Comments

Staff and a constituent introduced themselves and provided their backgrounds and interests.

Constituents who wished to speak: Robin Inabinet discussed his concerns regarding the release of hand reared mallards and his concerns over the continued adoption of a liberal hunting season framework in South Carolina.

Approval of Minutes

Chairman Perry requested a motion to approve the minutes of the November 12, 2024, Waterfowl Advisory Committee meeting. Stuart Cochran moved to approve the minutes; second by Bill Mace; the motion passed unanimously.

Comments from the Chair

Chairman Perry welcomed everyone with the hope that all had experienced a successful waterfowl hunting season. He thanked Mr. Inabinet for attending and speaking and agreed releasing hand reared mallards is harming wild mallard genetics. He stated there is no compelling authority to require the propagators and sellers of ducklings to provide information. It's a legal and unregulated activity. Vice Chairman John Hilton suggested a meeting with SCWA to discuss released mallards. Chairman Perry agreed. Mr. Cochran indicated he would like to participate. After comments by Chief Dukes, Chairman Perry indicated any meeting to discuss released mallards with SCWA and others would include only 2 members of the Committee.

Comments from DNR Leadership

Chief Billy Dukes advised Deputy Director Cope was not able to attend due to having to attend a legislative subcommittee meeting. Dr. Tom Mulliken has been confirmed as DNR Director by the Senate and will start on Monday, February 10th. DNR has moved to the new headquarters at the State Farmer's Market. Chief Dukes shared that he just returned from a North American Waterfowl Management Plan Committee meeting in Denver and reported that the 2024 revision of NAWMP plan is complete and available on their web site at [www.http://nawmp.org](http://nawmp.org). Chief Dukes reiterated that DNR has no legal authority to prohibit releasing mallards except the limited authority granted under the Shooting Preserve

regulations, which would not help the situation being discussed. Chief Dukes also reminded all in attendance that the annual harvest of ducks in South Carolina is a miniscule part of the continental harvest and a decrease in the bag limit would only hinder opportunity for South Carolina hunters.

Project Updates, Infrastructure and Status of Cat I WMAs

Assistant Chief Sam Chappellear reported that some hunts on Broad River, Beaverdam, Clemson, Murphy Island, Cedar Island, and Bear Island WMAs were canceled due to bad weather conditions. Where that happened, applicants' preference points will be restored, and they will be given an additional preference point. He reviewed highlights of work being conducted on various WMAs. Costs and funding for improvements were discussed. He presented data regarding boat counts at Samworth WMA. He reported that numerous positive comments were received from duck hunters hunting Samworth WMA and the surrounding public waters. Chairman Perry stated all should be pleased that DNR is now getting good reviews regarding duck hunting at Samworth and the Pee Dee-Waccamaw Delta.

Assistant Chief Willie Simmons reported that Beaverdam and Clemson WMAs were spared damage from Hurricane Helene. The crops at Beaverdam are doing well and the geo-stone spillway that had previously been destroyed and rebuilt survived the storm with no damage. He also gave a brief overview of the Wateree River HP waterfowl hunts. Overall, Regions 1 and 3 had a successful waterfowl season.

Preliminary Review of the 2024-25 Waterfowl Hunting Season

Statewide Waterfowl Biologist Molly Kneece gave a review of her activities since the last committee meeting in November. She visited Bear Island, Samworth, Santee Coastal, Sandy Beach and Santee-Delta. She attended several lottery hunts to observe conditions. She met with staff to discuss upcoming growing season plans. She has utilized social media to promote the wood duck box program. Preparations for the 2025-2026 AFC season will begin in April. She has also been busy trapping mallards for the last official year of the Atlantic Flyway Research Project. She provided the Committee with the 2024-2025 waterfowl season summary and reviewed the data. Chairman Perry made a request to carry forward the recommendation that the Committee encourages a strong social media program to promote the activities that are occurring on Category I waterfowl management areas and to help to inform our constituents.

Waterfowl Surveys and Other DNR Collected Data

Biologist Kneece distributed information regarding weekly surveys of waterfowl using WMAs. The spot survey results indicate very few days when staff observed no waterfowl. Considering the type of survey technique, impressive numbers of ducks were observed at Broad River, Samworth, Sandy Beach, Santee-Delta East, Donnelley and Bonneau Ferry WMAs. Ms. Kneece also provided a narrative report of aerial survey data conducted in late January.

Draft Annual Waterfowl Status Report

Chairman Perry stated he has distributed a digital copy of the Draft Annual Waterfowl status report to the Committee and asked them to review it. If any Committee member needs another digital copy, they need to let him know. The Chairman wants every member of the Committee to give him comments or just say they don't have any comments, and he will provide those responses to Chief Dukes and Biologist Kneece.

Duck Stamp Expenditures

A handout was provided on Duck Stamps FY- 2025 expenditures. Chairman Perry initiated a discussion on duck stamp expenditures and the wood duck box program. The Wood Duck Box Program accounts for approximately 20% of funds generated annually. He expressed concerns over the lack of data regarding deployment, utilization, and productivity of boxes. Mr. Cochran agreed and stated it's a very worthwhile program, but too labor intensive to try to collect data. Vice Chairman Hilton stated that the wood duck box program gives DNR good interaction with the public. Chief Dukes noted that a QR code

for reporting data through a simple app is now attached to all boxes, with the intent to increase public awareness and utilize the code for reporting. Dr. Wiggers stated that Nemours Wildlife Foundation and multiple partners recently completed a five-year, multi-state study on the value of wood duck boxes from the perspective of the population and the numbers were not encouraging. Chairman Perry asked the Committee what their thoughts were on the program, and is this the best way for 20% of duck stamp funds generated annually to be spent? Is there something else that the Committee would recommend benefitting the resource and sportsmen? Vice Chairman Hilton asked if it would be beneficial to bank the money and use it for additional habitat purchase. Chief Dukes responded that the agency has an active and aggressive habitat protection committee, and potential waterfowl areas are identified as a priority. While Duck Stamp funds can be used as match, they would likely never accrue to the level required for an outright purchase. Chairman Perry asked Chief Dukes what his thoughts were, and he agreed that it may be possible to collect more data on how many boxes are erected and get some data on productivity, but staff cannot contact 400 cooperators to see if the boxes have been erected. Chairman Perry asked Biologist Kneece for her thoughts. She stated she understands and appreciates the public relations benefits of the program, but results of the recently completed study cast doubt on biological benefits relative to recruitment. Chairman Perry indicated that staff should use the discussion for information, and that the Committee did not want to tell the agency what to put in or leave out of the next Duck Stamp budget; Committee members agreed.

Santee Cooper WMA Discussion

There was a discussion on whether Santee Cooper WMA or part of it was going to be sold. Mr. Cochran was concerned about this possibility and has had discussions with his neighbors and other concerned individuals. Chief Dukes stated there is a rezoning request and there is a tax map number associated with that, but it so happens that the tax map number for the 3,622-acre Santee Cooper WMA is the same as the 200-acre parcel near Vance. There is a potentially planned development for the 200 acres and that is what the rezoning request is related to. He spoke to Santee Cooper and there are no plans for the 3,622-acre Santee Cooper WMA in Eutaw Springs. The classification in their FERC license would not allow development of that parcel.

South Carolina Aquatic Plant Management Plan

Chairman Perry indicated he had a productive call with Casey Moorner and Chad Holbrook of Santee Cooper regarding the Aquatic Plant Management Council's (APMC) recommendations. Ms. Moorner cannot attend the Committee meeting. He distributed a chart to the Committee showing a rundown of hydrilla mapped by use of satellite imagery on Lakes Marion and Moultrie for a 4-year running period (2021-2024) and the hydrilla coverage is gone from 52-acres in 2021 to 5,617-acres. He discussed the changes in the lakes and what Santee Cooper is doing to stabilize the population of sterile grass carp. He communicated to Santee Cooper that he appreciated them sharing their data and that he would pass it on to the Committee and ask that the Committee to not object to Santee Cooper stocking 22,796 sterile grass carp in 2025. He noted for the record that 22,796 fish is a conservative stocking given the uptick in hydrilla growth, and that the Committee should support what APMC is doing to protect the native aquatic vegetation in the lakes.

Date, Time and Location of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Waterfowl Advisory Committee is tentatively scheduled to be at 9:30 AM, Thursday, May 1, 2025, at the South Carolina Forestry Commission office located at 39 General Henderson Road, Newberry, South Carolina

Adjournment

Vice Chairman Hilton moved to adjourn the meeting; Bill Mace seconded, and the meeting was adjourned at 12:35 PM.

Field Tour:

Afternoon field tours of Santee Coastal Reserve WMA and Santee-Delta West WMA were conducted immediately after the meeting adjournment.

Observations: Chairman Perry toured Santee-Delta West with Wildlife Technician Ovi Carandinta; the infrastructure work over the past several years has been exceptional and should pay off. Approximately 200 ducks were observed in scattered locations west of the Hopseewee Canal.

Observations: The remainder of the Committee toured The Cape with Achi Treptow; abundant waterfowl numbers were observed, and the Committee members were impressed with the habitat conditions and infrastructure improvements.