

Waterfowl Advisory Committee
May 1, 2025
Meeting Minutes
SC Forestry Commission Newberry Office
39 General Henderson Rd, Newberry, SC 29108

Members Present:

Chairman Bob Perry, Vice Chairman John Hilton, Stuart Cochran, Bill Mace, Ernie Wiggers. Dr. Mark Hartley was absent (excused).

DNR Staff Present:

Deputy Director Emily Cope, Assistant Deputy Director Ken Prosser, Chief of Wildlife Billy Dukes, Assistant Chief of Wildlife (Statewide Projects) Will Dillman, Assistant Chief of Wildlife (Regions 1 & 3) Willie Simmons, Assistant Chief of Wildlife (Regions 2 & 4) Sam Chapplelear, Statewide Waterfowl Biologist Molly Kneeece, Region 2 Coordinator Sam Stokes, Region 2 Biologist Jake Oates, Region 3 Coordinator Barry Kesler, Wildlife Section Administrative Coordinator Patty Castine.

Constituents Present:

There were no constituents present.

Call to Order

Chairman Perry called the meeting to order at 9:25AM, 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. Chairman Perry made an announcement that the new DNR Board Chairman Dr. Mark Hartley was unable to attend the meeting due to a scheduling conflict. Dr. Hartley will serve as the new ex-officio member of the Waterfowl Advisory Committee and Jerry Lee will be stepping out of the role.

Introductions and Constituent Comments

Chairman Perry opened the meeting. Committee members and staff introduced themselves and provided their backgrounds and interests. Chairman Perry requested a slight agenda change to include a discussion on Santee Cooper Lake levels and handouts were provided to Committee members and senior staff.

Approval of Minutes

Chairman Perry requested a motion to approve the minutes of the February 6, 2025, Waterfowl Advisory Committee meeting. Vice Chairman Hilton made a motion to approve the minutes. The motion was seconded by Stuart Cochran and passed with unanimous approval by the Committee.

Comments from the Chair

Chairman Perry referenced Item 13 on the agenda stating that he will be stepping down as Chairman of the Waterfowl Advisory Committee and that current Vice Chairman John Hilton had offered to be considered for the Chairman's role if Ernie Wiggers would become Vice Chairman. Chairman Perry requested to remain as Chair until the end of May to make sure there is a smooth transition.

Comments from DNR Leadership

Deputy Director Emily Cope announced that she will be retiring from SCDNR effective May 23, 2025. Chairman Perry applauded Emily and thanked her for all her hard work. Chief Dukes paid tribute to Emily's accomplishments during her tenure as Deputy Director.

Mallard Genetics Update

Chairman Perry indicated that in lieu of meeting with David Wielicki of the South Carolina Waterfowl Association, he had been involved in conversations with Mr. Wielicki about what was formerly called the Mallard Restoration Project. SCWA has ended that program. They have recognized that evidence indicates that

there is a degradation of the gene pool in the eastern mallard associated with releases of hand-reared mallards throughout the Atlantic Flyway. Dr. Phil Lavretsky is refining another major proposal and will be asking for funds to carry out the proposal. Chairman Perry stated that Mr. Wielicki has invited the Committee to have the next meeting on August 7, 2025, at the Waterfowl Association headquarters in Rimini, SC. Chief Dukes stated there may be a scheduling conflict due to a US Forest Service cooperative meeting. It was discussed changing the next WAC meeting date to August 5, 2025.

Infrastructure and Status of Cat I WMA's

Assistant Chief Willie Simmons gave an update on Cat I Waterfowl Areas in Regions 1 and 3. Planting will begin at Clemson Waterfowl Area and things look good there. Beaverdam waterfowl area upper impoundment is slowly being drained on the lower section for moist-soil management. USDA Wildlife Services will provide beaver trapping and dam removal services to improve water management capability. At Wateree River HP staff have continued to make improvements around impoundments to prevent flooding. There are a few issues with a dike leaking making things difficult to control and hold water on the site, but they are working to get it fixed. At Brickyard Pond hog panels have been installed around the impoundment to protect the food sources that have been planted, and a deer buster fence is planned. The Goodwill impoundment has been prepared and is ready for planting and there are plans for a deer buster fence on that pond as well. At Love Farm, Little Pond has been completely fenced, and a deer buster fence will be installed. At Old Pond, the deer buster fence has been installed, and hog panels are in place. Overall, conditions are dry but otherwise all properties in regions 1 and 3 are in good shape.

Assistant Chief Sam Chappelle gave an update on Cat I waterfowl areas in regions 2 and 4. He stated that conditions have been droughty on the coast. At Sandy Beach they continue to dry out Stoney Bay, but the lake has been very high. At Broad River the dike between Greentree Reservoir and the DU pond is working to keep Terrible Creek out of the Greentree Reservoir and the old impoundment, which has been a historic problem. Staff gathered at Samworth WMA to inspect impoundment to decide priorities for the upcoming season. At Santee-Delta East and West the renovations there have made a big difference. At Cedar Island staff are in the process of proofing specifications for the NAWCA project. Amphibious vehicles are doing work on problem areas at Murphy Island to refurbish the dike. The Cape and all other properties are in good shape and maintenance work continues. He announced the hiring of Preston Snow at Bear Island WMA and Tanner Adair at Donnelley WMA who have replaced Daniel Barrineau. Coosawhatchie WMA will be added to the Cat I waterfowl lottery hunts this coming season. Cat II waterfowl hunts were offered on portions of the property last year and staff will continue to do that as well. On Donnelley WMA, portions will be Cat II open one day a week and Cat I lottery hunts will be conducted on the impoundment portion of the property.

Chief Dukes stated that he, Waterfowl Biologist Kneece, Assistant Chief Willie Simmons, Regional Coordinator Barry Kesler and Technician Jonathan Mackey conducted a thorough inspection of Santee Cooper WMA Cat II waterfowl area. They concluded that to continue to have good duck utilization of the property, the best thing to do is to limit disturbances in the area, and they are considering implementing a restriction on gas motors from November 1 to February 8.

Project Habitat Updates

State Waterfowl Biologist Molly Kneece gave an update on habitat conditions for spring of 2025. She stated conditions are dry, however work is continuing as planned, everyone is on schedule and good things are happening. Currently, conditions are good on all areas, but hopefully we will get some rain where needed.

Proposed 2025-2026 Duck Stamp Budget

Biologist Kneece gave a narrative on the duck stamp budget. Projects contained in the budget include:

1. Continuing the wood duck box program which will allow for approximately 1200 boxes including predator shields - \$100,000,
2. Continuing to conduct the waterfowl survey in cooperation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service - \$14,000,

3. Atlantic Flyway Council banding assessment dues that cover the routine dues to the Council and contributes funds for banding pre-season birds in the NE and eastern Canada - \$11,500,
4. A cooperative project to control undesirable vegetation at Hickory Top and Santee Cooper WMA - \$45,000,
5. Materials and infrastructure maintenance in the Piedmont Region - \$151,000,
6. Plantings and general maintenance on Wateree River HP and Love WMA and a geotechnical survey of the impoundment at Cooks Mountain - \$53,000, and
7. Habitat Management, equipment, materials and Infrastructure supplies on coastal WMAs - \$440,700,

Total funding requested in the proposed FY26 Migratory Waterfowl Permit is \$822,200.

The total fund balance as of April 4, 2025, was approximately \$1.4 million. Funds not expended during any FY are carried over into the fund balance. A more detailed proposed budget is appended to these minutes.

Chairman Perry asked for clarification on whether DNR feels it is appropriate to continue with the wood duck box program in the absence of data collection and analysis to which Chief Dukes replied, yes. There was discussion regarding DNR charging a fee for individuals applying for wood duck boxes beginning in 2027. The anticipated fee will be \$50.00 per box which includes a predator guard but no post. There would be more probability that individuals will pick up their boxes if a fee is required. Chairman Perry expressed concern that without providing the post there is concern that wood duck box recipients may attach boxes to trees. Staff will continue to provide recipients with ample instructive literature. The Committee and staff are hopeful that these individuals will purchase a pole for each box and report the status of erecting and maintaining their boxes allowing the Waterfowl Project to collect useful data.

Chairman Perry requested a motion to approve the 2025-2026 duck stamp budget and present it to the DNR Board for their approval. Vice Chairman Hilton made a motion to approve the budget as presented by staff; Bill Mace seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Waterfowl Status Report

Biologist Kneece presented hard copies of the 2023-2024 Waterfowl Status Report to the Committee. The report has also been posted on the DNR Migratory Bird web page for the public to view. The 2024-2025 report is targeted to be available in November. Chairman Perry suggested that a particular page in the waterfowl status report be dedicated to recognizing staff. Chief Dukes proposed that a particular project be recognized since these projects are completed as a team. The Committee agreed. Vice Chairman Hilton stated that he is pleased with the report and appreciated having a document that shows the work that is being done and being able to present it to people who question what is being done and that the work has been successful. Hard copies will be provided to the Chairs of the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee and the Senate Fish, Game and Forestry Committee. Chairman Perry asked Deputy Director Cope to please relay to the Board that the Committee is very pleased with the report.

Winter Water Levels on Lakes Marion and Moultrie

Chairman Perry presented a report and graph regarding historic winter water levels on Lakes Marion and Moultrie. He asked the Committee to consider that Santee Cooper maintain a shallower level within the operational curve in the winter of 2025 between mid-November through January. Starting such in mid-November should give DNR an opportunity to flood impoundments at Hickory Top GTR and Sandy Beach. The same would be true for the Santee National Wildlife Refuge where they have intakes at various elevations. The question is to see if Santee Cooper will maintain a wintering level varying between 72.0 to 72.5 ft. Chairman Perry would like for DNR's FERC team to make the preliminary request. He also suggested inviting Casey Moorer from Santee Cooper for her thoughts so that this issue might be formally considered at the August Committee meeting. Stuart Cochran agreed that duck hunting has always been better on the lake when the water level is down, and it does allow more refuge areas for ducks. Deputy Director Cope or Chief Dukes will follow up with the Freshwater Fisheries Division for their input. It was determined there is a consensus to move forward for further discussion. A handout on historic winter water levels is attached.

Selection of Waterfowl Advisory Committee Chair

Stuart Cochran made a motion to appoint Vice Chairman John Hilton as the new Chairman of the Waterfowl Advisory Committee and Ernie Wiggers as the Vice Chairman beginning June 1, 2025. Bill Mace seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

Meeting Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 12:05 PM.

Date, Time, and Location of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Waterfowl Advisory Committee is tentatively scheduled for Tuesday, August 5th at the South Carolina Waterfowl Association, 9833 Old River Road, Pinewood, SC 29125.

Field Tour:

A field tour of Broad River Waterfowl Management Area was conducted immediately after the meeting adjournment.

Observations: Committee members were impressed with the staff's knowledge of the complexities of managing Broad River WMA. Considerable infrastructure work has been completed on the area to optimize habitat management. Precipitation and flooding are variables that cannot be controlled; however, staff have demonstrated resilience and adaptability. The area is well prepared for planting as soon as soil moisture improves. Overall, Committee members were impressed with the site as well as staff knowledge and commitment.