

**South Carolina Department of Natural Resources  
Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Committee  
February 5, 2026, Minutes  
State Shooting Complex at the Love Farm WMA  
1832 Vanboklen Rd., Eastover, SC 29044**

**Members Present:**

Chairman Mike Hutching, Vice Chairman Cleve Smith, John Butler, Martha Herbert, Jonathan Rabon, Titus Duren, Mac Baughman, Trey Watford

**Members Attending Virtually:**

Stan Halliday, Will Shirley

**Staff Present:**

Will Dillman, Billy Dukes, Jay Butfiloski, Jay Cantrell, Ross Self, Lynn Quattro, Ken Prosser, Willie Simmons, Barry Kesler, Kelsey Huffstetler, Conner Owens, Mikayla Thistle, Sam Chappelle, Katherine Coynor

There were no constituents in attendance.

Chairman Hutchins called the meeting to order.

The minutes of the November 20, 2025 meeting were approved as submitted.

**Major Billy Downer, SCDNR Law Enforcement Staff Operations**, provided an overview of Love Farm Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and the Palmetto Shooting Complex, including property acquisition, facility development, and public use opportunities with an emphasis on youth engagement and cooperative partnerships. The 781-acre property was acquired in 2019 for \$2.8 million using Wildlife Restoration Funds with match support from The Conservation Fund and NWTF-SC. A total of 400 acres has been designated as the Nat Love Youth Special Hunting Area, where 2025 activities included five youth deer hunts, two youth turkey hunts, one youth waterfowl hunt, and three adult deer clinics. Additional recreational opportunities highlighted included a 60-acre dove field, the only public field in Richland County, which ranked as the top field statewide on opening day in 2023, three waterfowl impoundments, and a five-acre pond used for youth fishing rodeos. Major Downer also reviewed development of the Palmetto Shooting Complex, with construction initiated in 2022 and completed in May 2025 at a total cost of \$5.8 million, including \$750,000 in State Legislature funding and \$205,000 in equipment donations from the Boyd Foundation. Facility features include eight skeet and trap overlay fields, with four additional fields at Wateree available for overflow during large events, making it the largest skeet and trap facility in South Carolina. Supporting infrastructure includes a 400-square-foot office and scoring room, public restrooms, a 6,000-square-foot pavilion, and a 2,000-square-foot classroom. The complex was dedicated on September 19, 2025, with Lieutenant

Governor Pamela Evette participating in the ceremonial first shot, and was presented as a model of coordinated investment in public access, shooting sports infrastructure, and youth outdoor programming.

**Connor Owens, Region 3 Fisheries Biologist**, presented an overview of ongoing efforts to enhance fish habitat at Lake Murray, focusing on littoral habitat restoration and improving angler access to fish attractors. The presentation outlined long-term degradation of shallow-water habitat due to sedimentation, shoreline development, and vegetation management, and emphasized goals to enhance spawning and juvenile recruitment through the addition of complex habitat structures and aquatic vegetation. Current efforts include both artificial and natural habitat enhancements, with structures such as reef balls, wooden cribs, brush blocks (crappie condos), and other concrete materials, as well as felled trees and American water-willow propagation. Methodological considerations included the need for durable, environmentally friendly structures capable of withstanding seasonal reservoir drawdowns of approximately four feet and providing year-round habitat across depths of 0–25 feet. Preliminary results included installation of 91 structural enhancements and propagation of 486 water-willow nodes, consisting of 42 reef balls, 7 wooden cribs, 18 brush blocks, 13 additional concrete structures, one large stump, and 10 felled trees. Observational evidence indicated spawning activity associated with reef balls and cribs, suggesting positive early response to habitat enhancements. Future plans include expanding the current enhancement area with additional reef balls, cribs, and brush blocks, followed by implementation in other coves, as well as potential coordination with shoreline property owners. The presentation also addressed efforts to improve access to fish attractors, noting previous reliance on recycled Christmas trees and limited accessibility for bank anglers. Objectives include identifying 24 legally accessible sites distributed evenly across upper, middle, and lower sections of the reservoir, while monitoring decomposition of attractor materials using BioSonics sonar technology. Preliminary implementation includes establishment of eight sites per reservoir zone, with select locations designated for long-term monitoring.

**Jay Butfiloski, Furbearer and Alligator Program Coordinator**, presented a summary of the 2025 public alligator hunting season, including applicant data, harvest results, and management actions aimed at increasing opportunity while maintaining population sustainability. A total of 12,243 applicants from 49 states and Puerto Rico applied for the lottery, with 1,400 individuals selected, including 1,000 regular tags and 400 newly introduced slot tags. The slot tag system was implemented to increase harvest opportunity while protecting larger, slower-replacing individuals by targeting alligators in the 4–8 foot size class, which reach reproductive maturity more quickly relative to older age classes. Participation in the slot tag program was optional, and

hunters were restricted to specific gear types, with provisions allowing release of oversized animals. A total of 1,185 tags were purchased, including 881 regular tags and 304 slot tags, with 243 nonresident hunting fees collected. Harvest results indicated a total of 467 alligators taken statewide, with distribution across hunt units including Southern Coastal (106), Middle Coastal (128), Midlands (114), and Pee Dee (119). Of these, 109 alligators were taken by slot tag hunters and 358 by regular tag holders. Analysis of size class data indicated that 250 harvested alligators (approximately 54%) met slot tag criteria, including roughly 40% of those taken by regular tag holders. The overall average harvested alligator length was 8 feet 3 inches, with the largest reported individuals including a 13-foot 8-inch, 781-pound male from the Moultrie system and a 10-foot 10-inch, 323-pound female from the Cooper River. The presentation emphasized balancing increased hunter opportunity with conservation of representative size classes and long-term sustainability of a slow-growing resource.

**Mikayla Thistle, Marsh and Wading Bird Programs**, presented a ten-year review of research, monitoring, and management efforts for the Eastern Black Rail in South Carolina, including species status, habitat requirements, and conservation strategies. The species is a small, highly secretive marsh bird associated with high marsh habitats characterized by shallow water levels, dense overhead vegetation, and complex microtopography, with detection rates generally at or below 30 percent during surveys. Monitoring efforts initiated in 2014 have identified two primary population centers on SCDNR properties, with survey data suggesting fewer than 50 breeding pairs remain statewide. The species was listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 2020, with significant regional declines and projections indicating potential extirpation without active management. Ongoing efforts include call-response surveys, camera trapping, acoustic monitoring, and water level monitoring to inform habitat management, with long-term data indicating low and variable detection rates. Primary threats include habitat loss, increased flooding, woody encroachment, and incompatible management, while management strategies focus on impoundment management and supplemental irrigation to maintain suitable hydrology and vegetation structure. Project accomplishments include development of monitoring and management frameworks, contributions to federal listing and recovery efforts, participation in multi-state initiatives, publication of research on breeding ecology and molt, and establishment of a statewide working group focused on increasing habitat quantity and quality through coordinated management.

**Will Dillman, WFF Deputy Director**, gave a brief overview of legislative updates. All South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) regulations, including annual Wildlife Management Area regulations, have cleared House and Senate committees and now await final

approval via Joint Resolution or the end-of-session toll period. S. 337 (Blue Catfish) is expected to be heard by the House Wildlife Subcommittee next week, with full House consideration likely later in March. The bill would establish a 150-fish daily limit statewide, except in Lake Marion, Lake Moultrie, and the upper Santee River (25 per day), and maintain a two-fish limit over 32 inches in select waterways. SCDNR is also recommending legislation to expand the use of turkey tag revenue to include technical assistance for private landowners managing wild turkey habitat, aligning with the department's existing small game program and broadening current restrictions limited to public lands.

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

The next meeting of the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Committee will be on Thursday, April 30, 2026, at 10:00AM in the Board Room of the Headquarters location in West Columbia, SC.

Chairman Hutchins adjourned the meeting at 12:19PM.