

**South Carolina Department of Natural Resources
Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Committee
May 17, 2023, Minutes
Styx Classroom
2762 Wildlife Lane, West Columbia SC 29712**

Members Present:

Chairman Mike Hutchins, Vice Chairman Cleveland Smith, Stan Halliday, Martha Herbert, Jonathan Rabon, Titus Duren, Mac Baughman, Eddie Kinsey

Members Absent:

Will Shirley, Trey Watford, Sam Hiott

Staff Present:

Robert Boyles, Emily Cope, Billy Dukes, Sam Chapplelear, Will Dillman, Ken Prosser, Lynn Quattro, Ross Self, Leo Rose, Andrew Grosse, Kelsey Huffstetler

Others Present:

There were no constituents present.

Chairman Hutchins called the meeting to order.

The minutes of the February 28, 2023, meeting was approved as submitted.

Andrew Grosse, State Herpetologist, presented an overview of conservation and rehabilitation efforts for the Gopher Frog population on SCDNR public lands. Gopher frogs are an endangered species that range throughout the Southeastern United States and prefer both wetland and upland habitat. They remain endangered in South Carolina, due mostly to the loss of isolated wetland habitat. Conservation efforts have been a priority at the Webb Center, since 2014. Historically, the area was the site of a large number of gopher frogs; however, the population began to decline with the loss of suitable wetland habitat. Wetland restoration efforts began in 2019 and are ongoing. Management practices include bringing in heavy equipment to remove trees and stumps, application of herbicide to treat recruiting hardwoods, and hand treating unwanted midstory. "Headstarting" has been a highly effective and heavily utilized restoration practice. The purpose of headstarting a species is to give them a chance to develop in a safe environment, so that they can be more productive in the wild. SCDNR staff assists by collecting a portion of the egg mass after breeding season, allowing them to hatch in a lab, then releasing them back into the wild. The survival rate of tadpoles is low, so allowing them to mature in an environment where they aren't predated on is crucial to increasing the gopher frog population. Riverbanks Zoo and the SCDNR Freshwater Fisheries program assisted the herpetology program through their knowledge of captive rearing and care.

Billy Dukes, Chief of Wildlife, updated the committee on staff recommendations concerning the turkey lottery program. Currently, the turkey lottery consists of five hunt sites: Donnelly, Belfast, Wateree, Bonneau Ferry, and Santee Cooper. Historically, there have been approximately 3000 applicants each year, with only 100 of those being successfully drawn. This imbalance has resulted in excessive wait times, which have created unrealistic expectations, and ultimately has led to frequent participant disappointment. Staff has proposed eliminating the turkey lottery, in a way that will be fair and equitable to hunters that have applied in the past. Hunters will be offered a refund based on preference points. Moving forward, DNR suggests opening the season to turkey hunting on public lands Thursday through Saturday, with a bag limit of one bird. Staff will continue to monitor harvest reports and evaluate if adjustments are necessary. If the proposal is approved, regulations will be filed in 2024, and effective in 2025.

Billy Dukes, Chief of Wildlife, provided an update on the waterfowl season survey. Historically, the waterfowl season dates have been set by tradition and migratory patterns. The public has expressed interest in changing the seasons, based on updated migratory patterns. Federal guidelines require a three-segment season; however, dates are set by the individual governing state agency. There is a need for greater public input, so Billy is working with Molly Kneece, Statewide Waterfowl Biologist, to create a survey that is being modeled after a similar survey that was conducted in 1998. The survey will go out to hunters who purchase a migratory waterfowl permit and will contribute to further consideration by the Migratory Gamebird Committee, the Waterfowl Advisory Committee, the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Committee, and the DNR Board, for changing the season dates in the future.

Lynn Quattro, Assistant Chief of Freshwater Fisheries, presented an overview of freshwater fishery management activities, including surveys, research, and special programs. There are regional operations in all four regions, as well as statewide programs. Statewide programs include research, aquatic education, hatcheries and state lakes, mussel conservation, and diadromous. The conservation responsibilities are resource management, habitat improvement, and provide angler opportunity. Fisheries resource management is divided into three major areas which include survey and inventory, technical guidance, and habitat improvement. Survey and inventory practices are done through population studies, life history studies, and natural history studies. Technical guidance involves fish kill investigations, private pond consultations, water quality monitoring, and reviewing/commenting on technical permits. Habitat improvement is achieved through fish attractors, in-stream and in-lake restoration, stream bank restoration, and shoreline stabilization.

Emily Cope, Deputy Director of WFF, reported on legislative updates. S399, the DHEC Restructuring Bill has passed, and will take the Hydrology and Aquatic Nuisance Species programs out of the SCNDR Land and Water Division and put them into the Environmental agency. S96, which requires mandatory boater education for anyone born after July 1, 2007, is still in the house. The bill

allowing a disability license for the legally blind was passed. The bill requiring electronic harvest reporting for deer passed and will be effective during the 2024 season. Sunday hunting on WMAs passed and will be effective in the 2023 hunting season.

Date, Time, and Location of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Committee will be held at 10:00 am on Thursday, August 3, 2023, at the Styx Classroom in West Columbia.

Chairman Hutchins adjourned the meeting.