

South Carolina Department of Natural Resources
Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Committee
Meeting Minutes, February 9, 2017
Styx Classroom, West Columbia, SC

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Chair Mike Hutchins, Vice Chair Cleve Smith, Bobby Garmany, Stan Halliday, Stephen Thomas, Martha Herbert, Jonathan Rabon, Titus Duren

MEMBER ABSENT:

Sam Hiott

STAFF PRESENT:

Emily Cope, Ken Prosser, Billy Dukes, Derrell Shipes, Sam Chappelle, Ross Self, Lynn Quattro, Charles Ruth, Jay Butfiloski, Mark Hall, Jay Cantrell, Susan Johnson

No constituents were present.

Chair Hutchins opened the meeting and welcomed Vice Chair Cleve Smith who has been absent due to illness and Committee Member Martha Herbert whose health continues to improve after her tractor accident in 2015.

The minutes of the August 9, 2016 minutes were approved.

PINNACLE MOUNTAIN WILDFIRE OVERVIEW:

Mark Hall, DNR Wildlife Biologist and Jocassee Gorges Project Manager, delivered a power point presentation and noted the Pinnacle fire will have long-lasting impacts on forest composition and wildlife habitat, but will also result in many positive ecological improvements. Mr. Hall reported historically, fire played a critical role in the development and maintenance of the forest and plant communities across the Blue Ridge Escarpment. The fire threatened homes, personal property and also put the lives of fire management staff at risk in extremely treacherous terrain. The cost of the operation was approximately \$5 million. The fire lasted 3 weeks and required hundreds of personnel from natural resource agencies and emergency authorities in North and South Carolina. It burned approximately 1,600 acres on Jocassee Gorges, 2,500 acres on Table Rock State Park and approximately 6,000 acres within the Greenville Watershed property. The fire was the largest, longest and costliest mountain fire in South Carolina's history. Fortunately, no lives or structures were lost and no injuries were reported.

Emily Cope, WFF Deputy Director, and Billy Dukes, Chief of Wildlife, commended Mr. Hall and other DNR staff for their hard work and assistance throughout the process of suppressing the fire.

MUSSEL PROPAGATION:

Ross Self, Chief of Freshwater Fisheries, distributed a handout (copy attached to the original minutes) regarding recovery efforts for the endangered Carolina Heelsplitter. He stated there would be a field trip to Cohen Campbell Hatchery after the meeting for members to see the infrastructure and facilities being installed for utilization in mussel management.

Mr. Self reported the Carolina Heelsplitter was listed as endangered in 1993. Critical habitat was defined in 2002. Historically, the Heelsplitter was found in streams in the Catawba, Pee Dee, Saluda, and Savannah River systems.

In conjunction with the Fish and Wildlife Service, staff has a proposed an events timeline for 2017 to include: In the spring/summer 2017, stock adult Heelsplitters out of the Orangeburg Hatchery in Catawba Basin (Gills Creek); in the

Savannah Basin in December 2016 there was a collection of host fish and in February 2017 ripe female Heelsplitters will be collected had host fish will be infested with glochidia (the mussel's early, parasitic life stage). During the months of March and April 2017, juvenile transformation, from glochidia to sand grain sized juvenile mussels should occur. The transformed juvenile mussels will be collected and grow-out should begin in May 2017. Mr. Self stated the FWS is having discussions with the Forest Service regarding the introduction of Heelsplitters into some of the critical habitat on Forest Service property where they currently do not exist.

Mrs. Cope stated being able to utilize a DNR hatchery to help with this management restoration effort is very exciting.

Mr. Self reminded the Committee funding for this effort is a result of the mitigation for Haile Gold Mine. Staff will also be interviewing/hiring a mussel biologist. Staff is days away from bringing in a surrogate mussel species to put into the production facility at Cohen Campbell for systems testing prior to bringing in an endangered Carolina Heelsplitter. Mr. Self stated having a good, stable funding source and a mussel biologist will help lay a strong foundation for a freshwater mussel program.

TURKEY SURVEY UPDATE:

Charles Ruth, Big Game Project Leader, announced this study started in 2013 as a small scale adult gobbler versus quail feed. Quail enthusiasts' utilized supplemental feedings to increase quail populations, which led to a conflict in turkey hunting. Mr. Ruth reported a 2 year legislative process resulted in a change in the turkey season. At that time, the General Assembly instructed DNR to conduct turkey research. Mr. Ruth stated the study is time-consuming and expensive and is made possible by an increase in gun sales resulting in additional Federal Aid (Pittman Robertson) funds.

Mrs. Cope introduced Jay Cantrell as the Assistant Big Game Project Leader (deer, turkey and bear). Mr. Cantrell was the Project Manager at the Webb Wildlife Center prior to his move to Columbia. Mr. Cantrell provided a power point presentation as well as a handout relative to the turkey study (copy attached to the original minutes).

Mr. Cantrell reported the study began in the winter of 2014 on Webb, Palachucola and Hamilton Ridge Wildlife Management Areas and encompasses approximately 26,000 acres. The overall goals are to evaluate reproductive phenology of female wild turkeys, gobbling chronology of male wild turkeys, movement ecology of both male and female wild turkeys, and evaluation of wild turkey responses to different hunting and land management activities. Mr. Cantrell announced information obtained from the study will provide useful information to wildlife managers in South Carolina and across the southeastern United States for a better understanding of which habitats and conditions are essential for reproduction and what impacts human activities have on turkey populations.

Mr. Cantrell explained that staff utilizes GPS/VHF combination backpack-style transmitters to collect data on movements and habitat use. The tracking and collection of data allows staff to track changes in movements and habitat use, and provides information on the location and timing of nest attempts. Staff can identify where and when nesting and brood rearing is taking place. Once a nest has been located, after hatching/failure, staff conducts vegetation measurements to compare and contrast successful and failed nesting attempts and what habitat variables may influence them. Thus far, staff has collected data on 54 nest initiation attempts, 27 have been successful (50%) with approximately 40% of those nests having poults at 2 weeks.

Mr. Cantrell stated Autonomous Recording Units (ARUs) located in trees in the WMA complex are being used to assess gobbling chronology from March 1 to July 1. Information collected with these ARUs allows staff to assess changes in gobbling intensity throughout the breeding season. It will also help managers set hunting season dates that protect breeding efforts of turkeys and parallel with a peak in gobbling to satisfy hunters.

Mr. Cantrell also reported staff has collected data on prescribed fire activity, scale size and seasonality, and overlaid it with general turkey movement to assess the impact fire has on turkey movements. This information will provide

managers with suggestions on what time of the year to burn, as well as on what scale burns should be conducted to improve habitat and increase survival of turkeys. Additionally, hunter movement patterns and the potential influence they may have on turkey movement is being collected via allocation of handheld GPS units on a voluntary basis at hunter check points. This research is being conducted in conjunction with LSU and has proven to be a great collaborative effort with their staff.

COYOTE TAGGING UPDATE:

Derrell Shipes, Chief of Statewide Projects, distributed copies of coyote related activities that occurred in 2016 (copy attached to the original minutes). Mr. Shipes thanked Wildlife Biologist Jay Butfiloski for the work he has done relating to coyote permits, control and the harvest incentive program.

Mr. Shipes reported in terms of predator management, 222 permits were issued in 2016 to large landowners. These permits encompassed approximately 313,120 acres. A total of 9 coyote control seminars/presentations/workshops were held in 2016 and 493 individuals attended. A 2nd annual Webb Center Coyote Control Workshop was held over 1.5 days and 26 individuals attended. Coyote trapping demos were also given at the Webb Wildlife Center at the 75th anniversary field day and approximately 50 people attended.

Mr. Shipes stated in 2016 a budget proviso was created and DNR was directed to develop and implement a coyote tagging and reward program (Coyote Harvest Incentive Program). As a requirement of the program, 16 coyotes have been tagged and released, 4 in each game zone. The reward for the harvest of tagged coyotes is a complimentary lifetime hunting license to the hunter/trapper or their designee. DNR implemented a voluntary registration program in an effort to gauge interest in and the success of the Coyote Harvest Incentive Program.

An easy on-line pre-registration system was created to obtain a list of persons interested in the program. The listing will be used to notify individuals of upcoming coyote programs and to be able to survey those individuals about their coyote control activities. A total of 1,900 individuals have registered. So far, 5 tagged coyotes have been taken (3 by deer hunters, 1 after dogs injured it and was shot by neighbor, and 1 by a licensed trapper during the season).

Staff has conducted one radio interview, 3 on-camera interviews and 5 newspaper interviews related to the incentive program.

The harvest includes the taking of 2,428 coyotes taken by licensed trappers during the 2015-2016 season; 448 taken under the Predator Management Permit Program (222 permits issued); 29,027 taken by deer hunters (2015 season, in the 2016 deer survey) for an estimated total of 31,903.

Mr. Shipes announced a position has been advertised for an alligator project biologist which the agency has not had for approximately 12 years. Mr. Shipes commended Mrs. Cope for her support in his recommendation for an alligator biologist. The individual hired will be physically located at Samworth Wildlife Management Area in Georgetown.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE:

Mrs. Cope reported Rep. Moss will be re-introducing the striped bass bill from last year and staff will be monitoring it. She reported there has been a lot of talk about deer/dog hunting and feels that any proposed legislation will likely follow Georgia's law. There is also a bill making changes to the bear season. Staff had a recommendation to put forth for bear legislation and the bill Rep. Clemmons filed is not what DNR has proposed. Staff is working with some delegation members to amend the bill to reflect DNR's recommendations. Mrs. Cope stated there had been discussions about a proposed bill to create a bird sanctuary in the Murrells Inlet area. Sen. Goldfinch was asked to re-introduce the bill.

Prior to doing so, a public meeting was held and individuals that did not want the bird sanctuary outnumbered those who did.

Chair Hutchins thanked Stephen Thomas for his in-put on the potential legislation regarding the Murrells Inlet bird sanctuary.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS:

Mr. Halliday asked for a copy of the deer management changes that goes into effect in July, 2017.

Mr. Garmany asked if there was a fee for turkey tags could the funds being earmarked for turkey research.

Ms. Herbert asked if a fee for turkey tags is a possibility. Mrs. Cope replied that it would be viewed as a "tax." Chair Hutchins stated that while it is not a good time to ask the General Assembly for a user fee for turkey tags, it is on the back burner.

Mr. Thomas stated he misspoke at the August meeting regarding the number of hunters per season day at the Category 1 WMAs by stating the number as 6 when he meant 20. He asked for a correction. Mr. Thomas also distributed a handout (as he does each year following the end of the draw duck hunts of raw data provided by Derrell Shipes) and reported there is still a trend that the number of hunters drawn per season day is on a downward trend. He stated one of his concerns is when duck hunter interest is being lost, political support for duck hunting will also be lost and management for waterfowl will become more difficult. Mr. Smith replied that with today's culture with young kids, duck hunters appear to be dying breed. Mr. Shipes said staff had plans this year to slightly increase the number of people selected for Category 1 WMAs. Unfortunately, South Carolina experienced a hurricane resulting in the reduction of the number of people that hunted on Santee Coastal Reserve/Murphy, and Bear Island/Springfield the Cut due to breaks in dykes that are still there. Mr. Shipes would like to discuss with Mr. Thomas changing the information reflected in his handout due to the hurricane. He stated if the dyke work can be completed next year, the number of hunters for those areas will increase. Chair Hutchins requested an update on the Samworth WMA. Mrs. Cope reported Molly Kneece has been hired as a second biologist on the Upper Coastal Waterfowl Project and is primarily stationed at Samworth. She stated Ms. Kneece, along with Achi Treptow, Sam Chappelle, Dean Harrigal, and Billy Dukes are doing a remarkable job and progress continues on the project. Staff met with bidders on repairing the Samworth setback dyke and has asked for an emergency procurement to handle hurricane issues at Bear Island WMA.

Mr. Dukes reported he visited Samworth and Santee Delta on February 8th and there is a lot of work going on there. Staff still has a lot to overcome, but progress is making progress.

Mr. Thomas stated there is an upcoming Aquatic Plant Management Council meeting. At the meeting, a plan will be developed on aquatic plant management control and public comments will be received for a one month period. Mr. Thomas reported success in keeping a balance in the stocking approach, especially on Lakes Marion and Moultrie is being seen.

Mrs. Cope announced the Committee will not have a meeting between the time the draft Aquatic Plant Management Plan goes out for public comments and that deadline so she would like for several members to review the Plan and prepare a draft letter from the Advisory Committee with their comments. DNR staff will circulate the letter among staff and Advisory Committee members. Mr. Thomas and Mr. Rabon agreed to review the draft plan and prepare comments for the Committee. Mrs. Cope stated staff will be happy to provide the Committee information and recommendations on the Plan as well.

There was no old or new business.

DATE, TIME AND PLACE OF NEXT MEETING:

May 18, 2017, 10:00 AM, Styx Classroom, West Columbia.