

SC DNR Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Committee
Minutes, June 15, 2011
Rembert Dennis Building, Columbia, South Carolina

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Chair Johnny Evans, Vice Chair Mike Hutchins, Paul Bennett, John Troutman, Billy Hoole, Jr., Stan Halliday, III, Charles Howard (via teleconference)

MEMBERS ABSENT:

Milton Brazell, Bryson Thomason, John Gramling, Cleve Smith

STAFF PRESENT:

Breck Carmichael, Ken Prosser, Ross Self, Lynn Quattro, Derrell Shipes, Tim Ivey, Charles Ruth, Jay Butfiloski, Dean Harrigal, Susan Johnson, Don Winslow

OTHERS PRESENT:

Douglas Ford, Senate Fish, Game and Forestry Committee Research Director, Larry Bachman, Brook Moore, Doug Sheorn

Chair Evans opened the meeting by leading the group in the Pledge of Allegiance. He introduced himself to the Committee as the new Chair. Chair Evans also introduced DNR Board Member Mike Hutchins as the new Vice Chair of the Committee. The minutes of the October 12, 2010 meeting were approved as submitted.

UPDATE ON PROPOSED COMPREHENSIVE STATEWIDE DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN:

Deer/Turkey Project Leader Charles Ruth stated DNR and the public have been discussing the issue of changing the deer management strategy for the state for the past 4 to 5 years. Exhaustive public meetings have been held, and four surveys have been completed to gauge deer hunter opinions. The information gathered has consistently indicated that hunters would like to see a reasonable bag limit imposed on the taking of antlered deer, and a mandatory tagging system to enforce the limit. Deer hunters are willing to pay an additional fee to support a tagging program, provided funds derived from the program will be used for deer management and research.

Ruth noted that this was discussed during a number of DNR Board meetings in 2010, and in December the Board endorsed recommendations for a deer management program based on input from public meetings, surveys and DNR staff. The recommendations included a statewide limit of 4 antlered deer. Also, in year one, hunters would be allowed four doe tags; however, DNR would reserve the right to manipulate the number of doe tags hunters can receive based on annual management needs. Individual buck and doe tags would be sold for \$5 each for residents and \$25 each for nonresidents. Doe days would be eliminated, and Ruth added that the Board recommended the antlerless doe quota program (ADQP) for larger properties remain as is with the exception of a fee increase.

The Board recommendations for the program were included in DNR's 2011 legislative proposal, however there has been no action in the General Assembly in the form of legislation. Ruth stated that most of the negative feedback he has received concerning the recommendations was related to the cost of the deer tags, not necessarily the tagging requirement or buck limit. During most of the public dialogue on this issue, the tags were to be offered in a package for one fee, not via a fee on a per tag basis.

Ruth also addressed South Carolina's deer population trend, which has shown about a 30% decline since 2002. The decline is attributed to changing habitat conditions, the fact that the state has had a very liberal deer harvest strategy, and the potential impacts of a new predator in the system- the coyote. All of these factors point to the need for change in the state's deer harvest strategy. Vice-chair Hutchins stressed the need to educate the public concerning the impacts coyotes are having on the deer population, as well as other species of wildlife.

CONSTITUENT COMMENTS:

Mr. Larry Bachman, a West Columbia business owner, stated he is an extremely passionate hunter and is involved in many Columbia area conservation organizations. Bachman stated outdoorsmen in SC are very fortunate to have the liberal limits we enjoy. He feels there is a very vocal minority of individuals opposed to the harvest limits and fee increases. His opinion is the majority of hunters would support DNR's proposed deer management plan. Mr. Bachman further stated he would not be opposed to a three-buck limit rather than four. Mr. Bachman attended the meeting to express his support for the proposed harvest limit and fees associated with the tagging program.

Mr. Brook Moore stated he is the market president of a local bank. Moore stated for the past 20 years his hobby has been intensive deer management on several tracts of land. Mr. Moore stated his strong support for the proposed management plan.

Mr. Doug Sheorn stated he owns 500 acres in Lancaster County and offered his support for the proposed management plan with the exception of the 4 buck limit. He feels 4 is too high. Sheorn challenged Committee Members to contact members of the General Assembly in an effort to find a legislator to sponsor a bill reflecting DNR's comprehensive statewide deer management plan.

UPDATE ON FRESHWATER FISHERIES CHAPTER 13 REVISION:

Freshwater Fisheries Chief Ross Self stated for the past few years, efforts have been underway to revise the chapter of the South Carolina Code of Laws dealing with freshwater fisheries. Self stated the bill was introduced in January and passed the House but became held up in the Senate due to several other pieces of controversial legislation. Self stated a third vote was needed to get the bill out of the Senate but the bill is not eligible to be discussed in the upcoming "special" legislative session. Self further stated 2011 is the first year of a two-year session and the bill will be reviewed in the 2012 General Assembly. Self believes there will be good support for the bill and believes it will move ahead pretty early in the next legislative session. According to Self, there were a few minor changes in the language of the bill. Effective dates of the bills are projected to be July 2012. However, Self stated not all changes will be official by the time Law Enforcement In-Service training begins and those changes will have to be addressed at a later date.

Self addressed Committee Member Howard (joining the meeting via teleconference) due to Mr. Howard's interest in the herring fishery. Self stated there is also a bill changing the commercial blueback (river) herring season in the State to keep South Carolina in compliance with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission management plan for herring. The bill made it through the House and was also held up in the Senate due to other controversial issues. Self stated the bill needs only a 3rd reading vote in the Senate in the next legislative session.

2010-2011 WATERFOWL SEASON REPORT:

Wildlife Biologist Dean Harrigal distributed copies of SCDNR'S WMA Regular Season Waterfowl Harvest Summary and DNR's February 10, 2011 news release regarding same (copies attached to the original minutes). Harrigal stated the statewide waterfowl harvest information will not be available from the Fish and Wildlife Service until mid-July.

Harrigal stated duck hunters finished the season on public hunting lands with a total harvest of 6,441 birds, an average of 2.4 birds per gun on all waterfowl areas. A total of 2,711 hunters participated at the 16 WMAs that recorded individual hunt data. Wood ducks accounted for 38 percent of the harvest, followed by Green-winged teal, Northern shoveler, Blue-winged teal, Gadwall and Ring-necked ducks.

Harrigal further stated overall the season for the waterfowl areas was excellent, with many areas reporting harvests at an all-time high in terms of birds harvested per hunter. The significant cold weather in early December pushed birds into the state and they stayed for the duration of the season. Harrigal also stated birds were pretty well distributed around the state making for good hunter success on the waterfowl areas.

SC BLACK BEAR MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION STRATEGY, 2011:

Charles Ruth distributed "draft" copies of SC Black Bear management and Conservation Strategy, 2011 (copy attached to the original minutes). Ruth stated he was updating the Committee in his sister-in-laws' absence (Deanna Ruth, DNR Wildlife Biologist). The publication was compiled and written by Deanna Ruth from input and comments by DNR's Black Bear Working Group.

Ruth stated South Carolina has had two distinct populations of black bears, one in the mountains and upper piedmont, and a second in the eastern upper coastal plain. During the last decade, black bear numbers have increased and become more widely distributed across the state. Due to a number of factors it has become apparent that DNR faces great challenges in managing black bears and that what may represent a desirable density of bears in one area, may be too few or too many bears for other locations. SC currently has a two-week bear season in the mountains (3rd and 4th weeks in October) which includes one week of still hunting and one week of dog hunting. Ruth stated in 2010, DNR received regulatory authority to establish bear seasons in other parts of the State when deemed warranted. DNR is considering draw bear hunts in Horry and Georgetown counties and possibly other areas. Ruth states current population estimates are 1,200 to 1,500 bears in the mountains and approximately 500 bears in the coastal plain.

Ruth further stated the primary objective of the plan is to maintain SC's bear population at a level compatible with land use goals and acceptable human social limits. The plan includes reviews of DNR's past bear management efforts, state and regional bear population trends and current management techniques. The plan also lists black bear conservation goals, and objectives, along with offering strategies to attain the desired outcomes.

Deputy Director Breck Carmichael stated one of the reasons for the development of the plan is that DNR is receiving interest in opening some bear hunting in the coastal plain primarily due to the number of bear/human encounters occurring. Carmichael further stated pursuant to establishing a bear season, solid data and a solid plan are needed.

Carmichael stated he would like to receive the Committee's endorsement of the plan so it can be submitted to the DNR Board for consideration at their July meeting. A motion was made to endorse the SC Black Bear Management and Conservation Strategy, 2011 to be submitted to the DNR Board. A second to the motion was made and carried unanimously.

LEGISLATIVE AND BUDGET UPDATE:

Carmichael distributed copies of DNR's 2011 Legislative Proposal and the June 3, 2011 Legislative Update (copies attached to the original minutes). Carmichael stated the bad news for DNR is that of the ten bills listed in the Agency's 2011 legislative proposal, only the Chapter 13 (freshwater fisheries) bills moved forward. However, the good news is no legislation the Agency opposed, passed during the year.

Carmichael did not go over each bill and told Committee Members to feel free to contact him if they had any questions related to the bills. However, Carmichael stated legislation is introduced almost every year to allow hunting deer over bait in Game Zones 1 and 2 (where it is currently prohibited). DNR's official position does not support the hunting of deer over bait. If the Agency had the authority, DNR would prohibit the hunting of deer over bait statewide. Carmichael further stated there is usually legislation introduced to open the turkey season earlier in the upstate (March 15, as in the coastal plain). The March 15th turkey season is not a biologically-based season, and DNR's official position is the opening of turkey season in the upstate should remain as is (April 1).

Carmichael reminded Committee Members 2011 is the first year of a two-year session, so the bills listed in the proposal will become active in January 2012. Carmichael did mention a law was passed (Chandler's Law) putting much-needed regulations in place regarding youth riding ATVs. The law imposes some requirements for training and an age requirement to ride alone. All law enforcement agencies will be enforcing Chandler's Law.

Regarding DNR's budget, Carmichael stated the House-Senate conference committee is still meeting. DNR anticipates a 2% reduction in state dollars, beginning July 1st (approximately \$296,000 less to the Agency's base budget). Carmichael noted DNR does hope to receive \$2 million in non-recurring funds for Law Enforcement equipment (\$1 million from the Capital Reserve Fund and \$1 million remaining from the Attorney General's budget to litigate a lawsuit with NC concerning diversion of water from the Catawba River).

There was no old and/or new business.

DATE, TIME AND PLACE OF NEXT MEETING:

Tuesday, October 11th. Location to be announced.

Future Committee meeting dates: January 10, 2012, April 10, 2012, July 10, 2012, October 9, 2012, January 8, 2013.