

THE MINUTES OF
NJ FISH AND GAME COUNCIL AND
ENDANGERED AND NONGAME SPECIES ADVISORY COMMITTEE
JOINT MEETING
OCTOBER 10, 2023

A joint meeting of the Endangered and Nongame Species Advisory Committee and the Fish and Game Council was held on the above date.

The meeting was called to order at 10:00 a.m. by Chairman Virgilio.

Chairman Virgilio read aloud the following notice: In accordance with P.L.1975, c. 231 notice of this meeting was filed with the Office of the Secretary of State on September 25, 2024, and delivered to the designated newspapers for the division, The Atlantic City Press and The Newark Star Ledger.

Roll call was taken in accordance:

F&G:

Chairman Frank Virgilio
Councilman Jim DeStephano

Councilman Mitchell Jones
Councilman Ed Kertz
Councilman Dr. Rick Lathrop
Councilman Rob Pollock
Councilman Bob Puskas- **Absent**
Councilman Loren Robinson
Councilman Ken Whildin

ENSAC:

Chairman Rick Lathrop
Committee member Catherine Tredick

Committee member Howard Reinert – **Absent**
Committee member Elliot Nagele -**Absent**
Committee member Russ Furnari
Committee member Martha Maxwell Doyle
Committee member Howard Geduldig- **online**
Committee member Erica Miller
Committee member David Mizrahi- **Absent**
Committee member Marion McClary – **Online**
Committee member - Ty Gould-**Absent**

Division employees included: D. Golden, J. Hearon, G. Kopkash, K. Clark, M. Monteschio, A. Ivany, S. Crouse, S. Crans, P. Woerner, K. Meistrell, B. Zarate, J. Leskie, C. Smith, and D. Bajek.

There were numerous members of the public in attendance online.

Chairman Virgilio asked if there were any changes or corrections to the September 10 minutes.

A motion was made by Councilman Robinson to approve the September 10, 2024, minutes, seconded by Councilman Jones. Vote taken; motion carried.

Chairman Virgilio welcomed everyone to this very important joint meeting of two of our states' leading and respected **conservation authorities**, the New Jersey Fish and Game Council and the New Jersey Endangered and Nongame Species Advisory Committee. We join together annually, united by our shared commitment to address critical issues facing New Jersey's fish and wildlife and their natural habitats. A year ago, I thanked the members of both conservation bodies, using the words of former governor Howard Hoffman, that is still very relevant today "Your work will receive little recognition while things are being done or remembered after your work is finished. Your work for wildlife in NJ will have no monetary reward, applause, or glory. You will see the task after your own hearts, and you will force your interests in your work to take the place of money."

Chairman Lathrop welcomed everyone to the joint meeting. We bring together the two committees because we share the same issues of concern. He has talked to his students about habitat degradation and fragmentation and loss of major issues affecting wildlife conservation and management and that is a concern of both groups. Also, emerging threats that we've discussed at both council/committees over the past years such as highly pathogenic avian influenza that affect game and nongame species alike. We also share concerns for species that are especially sensitive to exploitation, whether through poaching or regulated hunting or fishing and some of those species may be on the cusp, such as snapping turtle which will be discussed today.

Assistant Commissioner Golden welcomed everyone. This is one of his favorite meetings of the year when we bring the Council and the Committee together. It is always exciting to put together the agenda because there is always so many options and projects that our staff is working on. We try to pick items that are interesting to both groups and I think we have a good selection today. The Council and the Committee are both involved in certain rules that affect wildlife within NJ, and it just so happens that at this time all of your rules are working their way through the system. The E&T rules, which have the revisions for listings, has already been through public comment. It was proposed and we are hoping to have that adopted in December. The NJ Game Code, is under the statutory authority of the F&G Council, and has the major revisions proposed by the Council. We are working to have that rule proposed in the NJ Register by December. Finally, the NJ Fish Code, which will be a topic of conversation today, we are working with the Fish Committee and the F&G Council to consider changes to the Fish Code. At this meeting in the afternoon there will be a detailed discussion about the Fish Code recommendations. One of the kick-off conversations that we will have under New Business is to talk about Snapping Turtle regulations, which are part of the Fish Code. We'll present this topic within the Joint Meeting because we recognize the interest of both the F&G Council and ENSAC. When this topic gets presented today, it will be the first time that the full F&G Council has seen these recommendations and ENSAC will be seeing it at the same time. These recommendations will be voted on in the afternoon when the council votes on the full Fish Code. This is very exciting stuff.

New Business: Presentations and discussions on select wildlife species and NJ Fish & Wildlife initiatives:

Snapping Turtle Regulation Changes:

Brian Zarate gave a presentation on the Recommendations Regarding Snapping Turtle.

The NJ Commercial Harvest Permit Guidance suggested language:

- **Snapping Turtle-** Effective January 1, 2026, commercial harvest permits for snapping turtles will only be issued to permittees who have received at least one permit from January 1, 2020 to December 31, 2025 and have submitted a harvest report of at least one turtle during that time period.
- There are 50 permittees who have not applied in the past 5 years who are otherwise eligible to apply in 2025.
- There would remain 9 permittees eligible for permits in 2026, based on current 2020-2023 numbers.

Harvest Recommendation Options and Actions:

- Clarifications in Public Materials:
 - No Harvest from land
 - No Harvest of eggs from nest
 - No take for personal possession
- Outreach:
 - Initiate survey to better understand recreational harvest.
- Changes to Fish Code:
 - Limit new commercial entry
 - Institute daily and annual harvest limits, by applicant
 - Drop early harvest window of April 1- May 15 and retain July 15 – October 31
 - Better protection of breeding period and early nesting season
 - 156 to 108 days
 - 13-inch carapace measurement is curved carapace (vs straight-line)
 - Easier to measure in field
 - Harvest is intended only for personal consumption, not to keep for personal possession, i.e., pet turtle.

2024 Mosquito Season & West Nile Virus:

Chief Crans and Pat Connelly gave a presentation on West Nile Virus and the Impact on Wildlife. West Nile is spread via the bite of an infected mosquito. It was first identified in the Western Hemisphere in the summer of 1999 in New York City.

- Previously found primarily in the Middle East, Africa, Southern Europe and Asia
- Cases of Encephalitis in NYC metro-area residents coincided with discovery of the link between the human and bird disease.
 - Bronx Zoo veterinary pathologist Dr. Dee McAloose helped spearhead the discovery of the link between the human and bird disease
- Within 3-years the virus had spread to the Western U.S. and became established in 44 U.S states and 5 Canadian provinces.

Susceptible Wildlife:

- Infection is possible in many bird and mammal species
 - Birds serve as natural hosts and reservoirs for the virus.
 - Conservatively, the virus has likely killed at least tens of thousands of birds
- Can infect over 300 bird species, but corvids (crows, ravens, jays) are most severely impacted
 - Raptors, Grouse and some Passerines also experience significant infection rates and mortality
- Infection has been observed in many mammals:
 - Rodents, skunks, canids, white-tailed deer, racoons, bear, opossums, bats, and non-human primates
 - Mammals are usually asymptomatic or experience mild illness

West Nile in Birds:

- Direct bird-to-bird transmission is possible via contamination of food and water sources by infected bodily fluids and feeding on infected-prey
- Infected birds often show neurological signs
 - Loss of coordination, head tilt, tremors, weakness, apparent blindness, and lethargy
 - On necropsy, hemorrhages on or in the brain, an enlarged spleen, and areas of necrosis of the heart muscle

2024 Outbreak:

- Increased reports of dead grackles in northern NJ beginning in June and dead raptors in July
 - 3 Cooper's hawks presented to the NJFW wildlife pathology lab this summer, with mortality signs
- USDA-WS recently alerted us to increased calls regarding found-dead blue jays

West Nile Virus Activity in NJ 2024:

- 21 county programs
 - 20 pools per week (WESJ, LAC, ZCD)
 - Test/report Mid-May through mid-November
 - State Commission pays for testing (~420, pools per week)
- Additional Testing
 - EEE surveillance (resting boxes)

- State & Cape May surveillance efforts
- Huma, equine, etc., case follow-up (case by case)
- Statewide report, weekly snapshot, control

USFW National Survey of Hunting, Fishing & Wildlife Associated Recreation- NJ Results:

Kristen Meistrell gave a presentation on the Summary of 2022 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation in New Jersey. Support comes from Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Funds. It is jointly managed by U.S. Fish & Wildlife Services and Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. The National Survey has been conducted since 1955. The survey was administered in two phases by NORC at the University of Chicago, phase 1: initial screener- 2,291 people from NJ and phase 2: interviews with 4,258 people from NJ.

NJ gets \$9.4 Billion in Expenditures

- \$3.2 Billion in Fishing Related Expenditures
- \$947 Million in Hunting Related Expenditures
- \$5.3 Billion in Wildlife-Watching Related Expenditures

Kristen put together a report that summarizes the graphs and will share that with the council.

Wallkill NWR Non-Lead Alternative Pilot:

Joe Leskie gave a presentation on Wallkill NWR Non-Lead Alternative Pilot Program.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is implementing a pilot lead-free ammunition incentive program. 7 national wildlife refuges across the U.S. for the 2024-2025 hunting season are included.

Lead-free incentive program hunting locations:

- William L. Finley National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon
- Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge in Indiana
- Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin
- Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in North Carolina

Lead-free incentive program with additional education workshops and an opportunity to test ammunition:

- Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge in New Jersey
- Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge in Maryland
- Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge in West Virginia

Why use Lead-free hunting ammunition?

- Help keep lead out of wildlife food chains. Lead ammunition loses weight in small fragments as it passes through an animal, while leadfree leaves little or no remains behind.
- Lead-free fragments left in gut piles from harvested wildlife are consumed by scavenging birds and cause severe harm or death.

Through the incentive program, hunters at participating sites can try lead-free ammunition for free by submitting receipts to receive a gift card for up to \$50 per box of lead-free hunting ammunition (\$25 box for shotgun or muzzleloader.) first comes, first serve and limited to 2 boxes of ammunition per eligible hunter.

We are doing two workshops: Friday October 11 for agency staff and Saturday October 12th will be open to the public and policy makers. As of right now we have 16 people signed up.

Lunch: 12:12 – 12:50

NJF&W Online Application Demo:

Pat Woerner gave a presentation on NJFW GIS Applications. The purpose is to develop, implement and maintain accurate geospatial datasets, analyses, applications and GIS technical guidance in order to effectively guide conservation and management of Fish and Wildlife populations and habitats.

We have been working very closely with ENSP, Bureau of Freshwater Fisheries, and Bureau of Marine Fisheries on getting our NJ Landscape Project update complete. Our target public release date is December 2, 2024.

Landscape Project Data: a set of GIS layers that...

- Depicts land-use/land-cover derived habitat for endangered, threatened and special concern wildlife species based on documented occurrences
- Includes habitat features vital for connectivity (Riparian Corridor) and habitat-specific metrics of suitability

New Version (v3.4) – 12/2/24

- Updated habitat base data
 - NJDEP 2020 Land-use/Land-cover
 - Road Centerlines
 - Riparian Corridor (flood data. SSURGO, etc.)
- Updated species occurrence data (SOA)
- Species specific method changes based on new research

This will also include our Conservation Focal Areas for the Wildlife Areas Action Plan. The state was broken up into 50 areas that were similar in terms of the threats to wildlife and the actions to address those threats.

The Saltwater Fishing Explorer has 8 separate app locations within the Saltwater Fishing Explorer some examples are:

- artificial reef deployments sites
- Saltwater Fishing Opportunities map application
- Marine Protected Species sighting report form
- Artificial Reef feedback forms
- Saltwater Fishing Angler Volunteer Survey
- Seafood Finder

Freshwater Fishing Explorer includes two web-map applications:

- Trout Stocked Waters of NJ
- Great Fishing Close to Home in NJ

Hunting and Trapping Explorer has around 13 applications focused on specific Game Species or Game Species Groups. Some examples are:

- Deer Management Zone and Unit Explorer
- Bear Management Zone Explorer
- Upland Bird Stocking Areas

Wildlife Management Area explorer, which is the most used application.

- Wildlife Management (WMA) System
 - 122 WMAs
 - 360,000 acres (>44% of NJ state-owned open space)
 - Acquisitions continually being added
 - Managed for diversity of fish & wildlife species
 - 1000 miles of roads, maintenance of buildings and grounds
 - Parking areas, boat ramps, shooting ranges, dams, dog training areas, wildlife observation areas
 - Hunting & Fishing access, trail access
 - Stocking upland game birds & fish
 - Habitat Management & Restoration

NJ Aquatic Invasive Species Plan:

Chris Smith gave a presentation on the development of the Invasive Species Management Plan. We started in 2022 with the development of the plan. We then developed a core team which included himself (Chris Smith), Joe Balinski with NJDEP Division of science and Research, Heather Desko with NJWSA NJ Water Supply Authority, and Nicole White with Little Bear Environmental Consulting. We then utilized styles of various state plans (what meets NJ needs). Nj specific AIS list using data from NJDEP, neighboring states, federal resources, and other partners. We settled on 5 objectives that we formulated our plan around.

New Jersey AISMP Timeline:

- July 2022- MAPAIS (Jan 2022 Award rec'd (\$20k)
- September 2022- Statement of Work Developed
- October 2022- Contractor solicitation, Core Team formed
- Winter 2022-23 Work group formed, worked started
- Fall 2023- Draft Plan
- Winter 2023-24- 60-day Public Comment period, Final Plan for agency review/approvals
- April 2024- Plan signed by Governor, Sent to ANSTF (Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force)
- May 2024- ANSTF review and approval
- 2024 and Beyond- What's Next??

The overall goal for this plan is to:

- Identify technical, enforcement, and financial assistance required to reduce the environmental, public health, and safety risks associated with AIS
- Identify new and emerging threats and focus limited resources on appropriate projects and areas.
- Provides a framework to be used by the NJDEP as the lead agency in cooperation with a series of working groups and collaborative organizations.

Plan Objectives:

1. Oversight & Coordination
2. Prevention
3. Surveillance & Early Detection
4. Response & Restoration
5. Long-term Control & Evaluation

Here are critical Action Items identified Year-One Implementation:

- Create AIS Coordinator Position within DEP
- Establish a Statewide AIS database manager position within NJDEP
- Establish funding pathway for long-term implementation
- Partner with neighboring states and other entities to coordinate cross-jurisdictional goals
- Establish specialized working groups (e.g., Prioritization WG, ED & Outreach WG, etc.)
- Create and provide a reporting platform statewide for the public

We have now become eligible with an approved plan for a portion of the money, so our state would get \$90k annually to use towards either staff or dedicated projects towards AIS management. We have just recently been given approval for FTE, AIS Coordinator position within NJDEP Fish and Wildlife. We have also been working internally to prioritize goals and action items in anticipation that this position will be held in the near future. There have been recent talks about using IMapInvasives as a resource for invasives.

NJF&W Regional Office Construction Updates:

Assistant Commissioner Golden reported on two of the bigger facilities we've been working on. The Northern Region Office and the Holly Farm Office are both getting pretty close, within the next year we will be breaking ground on both projects. The Northern building will be The Wildlife Resource Center at the Highlands. We initiated design in 2020 we brought in a designer, focused on public access & wildlife

interpretation. It is a consolidation of 5 existing field offices, so there will be office space for our field staff Endangered Nongame Species Program, Bureau Freshwater fisheries, Bureau of Information and Education, Bureau of Law Enforcement and Bureau of Wildlife Management. Because it ties into our federal grant work, some of the funding will come from our whisper fund and the majority will come from corporate business tax.

Resource Center:

- 2,380 sq. ft. exhibit center
 - Interactive LED Displays
- 1,774 sq. ft. Community Engagement
 - 100-person video/event room
 - Community Program/meeting Rooms
- 1.2 Mile Resource Education Trail
- Parking/bathrooms for public for the Highlands Trail/Clinton WMA (70+ spaces)
- EV Charging Stations
- Information and Licenses
- Large scale outdoor events
 - Department-wide events/programs
 - Shooting Sports
- Fishing Programs (Spruce Run Reservoir)

Holly Farm Update:

Assistant Director Hearon gave a presentation on the Holly Farm Office. Construction reviews are complete, and the design firm is developing bid documents. DPMC reviews bid documents, forwards them to Treasury for review and advertisement. Once Treasury has this, we should be looking around 70-days on average for notice to proceed. We may be under construction by February.

Habitat Restoration:

- Habitat Succession Demonstration Area
- Pollinator Habitat Demonstration Area
- Forage & Cover Plot Demonstration Area

Future Management Plans:

- Prescribed Fire Demonstration Area (NJFFS)
- Vernal pool installation/enhancement
- Forestry mowing rotation
- Northern pine snake management

Public Comment:

Andrew S. commented he thinks fall stocking on the Raritan River is a good idea.

Break: 1:45 – 2:00

Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to move into Executive Session.

Councilman Kertz made a motion to move into Executive Session, seconded by Councilman Jones. All approve.

Executive session took place.

Fish Code Recommendations from Fish Committee:

Chief Crause gave a presentation on the Fish Code Recommendations.

Fish Code timeline:

- Proposed & Approved by Fish Committee 8/15/24
- Proposed to F&G Council 10/8/24
- Fall of 2024 – Draft Proposal
- Fall 2025 – Code in Place
- December 2025 – To Publisher for 2026 Digest

Recommended Fish Code & Program Changes: Trout

- ~ Opening Day of Trout Season the 2nd Saturday in April (2026-2030)
- ~ Remove Pre-Season Closures on all trout stocked lakes & ponds
- ~ Addition of 22 small Ponds to Trout Stocking Program
- ~ Expand stocking boundaries on 3 streams
- ~ Change the “General Trout Regulations” section to “Trout -Stocked, Wild Brown Trout Managed”
- ~ Reduce the Summer/Fall/Winter creel from 4/day to 2/day

Lunker Bass Regulation Changes:

- ~ Minimum size 15”
- ~ Daily limit of 3
- ~ Ryker and Rainbow Lake
 - General Bass Regulation: Min size 12” & Daily limit of 5
 - General Panfish Regulation: No Min Size & Daily Limit of 25

Invasive Species Regulations:

- ~ Freshwater Drum to Potentially Dangerous Species
- ~ Add “all catfish species” to the species that are allowed to be taken with a bow. This allows the invasive Blue Catfish to be taken, without concern for accidentally shooting a Channel, White, or Bullhead.

American Eel Daily Limit Alignment

~ Reduce American Eel baitfish daily limit to 25

Endangered & Nongame Listing of Several Fish Species:

~ Ensure statewide prohibition of take for E/T/SC species (including boundary waters), with demarcation within indigenous species definition.

Harvest Recommendation Options and Actions:

~ Change Fish Code

- Limit new commercial entry
- Institute daily and annual harvest limits, by application
- Drop the early harvest window of April 1- May 15 and retain July 15- October 31
 - Better protection of breeding period and early nesting season
 - 156 to 108 days
- 13- inch carapace measurement is curved carapace (vs straight-line)
 - Easier to measure in field
- Harvest intended only for personal consumption, not to keep for personal possession, i.e., pet turtle

Councilman Pollock mentioned the Fish Committee did meet and agrees that we should move forward with recommendations as presented.

Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to accept the Proposed Fish Code Recommendations as presented.

Councilman Pollock made a motion to accept the Fish Code recommendations as presented, seconded by Councilman Jones. Vote taken; all approve, motion carries.

Councilman Kertz made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Councilman Jones. Vote taken; all approved.

Next meeting will be November 13, 2024, at 10:00 am. at the Assunpink Office.