

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE  
NJ FISH AND GAME COUNCIL  
Central Region Office  
Robbinsville, New Jersey  
January 9, 2024**

The regular meeting of the Fish and Game Council was held on the above date.

The meeting was called to order at 10:05 a.m. by Chairman Frank Virgilio.

Chairman Virgilio read aloud the following notice: In accordance with P.L. 1975, c. 231 notice of this meeting was filed with and posted at the Office of the Secretary of State on January 3,2024 and delivered to the designated newspapers for Fish and Wildlife, the Newark Star Ledger and the Atlantic City Press on January 3,2024.

Roll call was taken in attendance:

Chairman Frank Virgilio

Councilman James DeStephano

Councilman Mitchell Jones – Late 10:10

Councilman Ed Kertz

Councilman Rick Lathrop

Councilman Rob Pollock- **Absent**

Councilman Bob Puskas- **Absent**

Councilman Loren Robinson

Councilman Ken Whildin

Fish & Wildlife employees included: D. Golden, L. Barno, G. Kopkash, J. Hearon, A. Ivany, K. Springer, k. Clark, S. Crouse, and J. Bullock.

There were several members of the public in attendance.

**Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to approve the December 12 F&G Council minutes.**

**Councilman Robinson made a motion to approve the December 12<sup>th</sup> minutes, seconded by Councilman DeStephano. Vote taken. All approve. Motion approved.**

Chairman Virgilio would like to mention the passing of a dear friend and former Director of NJ Fish and Wildlife, Robert McDowell, and express condolence to his wife, Jan, his family, along with friends and colleagues during this difficult time.

Bob was a charismatic man with a fiery and dynamic personality, making him stand out prominently among individuals known for Wildlife Conservation. Despite his physical height, Bob was perceived as a giant in terms of his impact, presence, or influence in the field of Conservation and Wildlife Management. In 2001-2002, Bob was elected president of the Northeast Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies. In the 121 years of its existence, there have only been three presidents from the state of NJ. In 2015, Bob McDowell received the Robert McDowell Award for Conservation Management Excellence from the Northeast Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies. It's their highest award, which, by the way, was created in Bob's namesake. He was the first recipient of this award which is presented annually.

Director McDowell believed that hunters played a vital role in the management of White-tailed deer in New Jersey and attributed the success of our dear management policies to The cooperative management concept of the Council, NJ Fish and Wildlife, and the sporting public. Bob said it's much like a 3-legged stool, each supporting the future of fish and wildlife in the Garden State on an equal basis. The weakening of one leg affects the stability of the entire structure. As you can see, Bob McDowell was a man; yes, a big man! With an eye like an eagle And as tall as a mountain dedicated to serving the community and the environment, his work has left a lasting impact on our state's wildlife management. By the way," was a man; yes, a big man!" With an eye like an eagle and as tall as a Mountain" was taken from the lyrics of Daniel Boone."

Assistant commissioner Golden thanked Chairman Virgilio for his words on Bob McDowell, who was the first Director that I worked under in the department and will be missed.

As we move into 2024, I hope everyone had a nice holiday. There are some changes he would like to point out in the format for these meetings. We had to change when COVID hit and then we came back with a hybrid format where we were allowing public comments virtually, and now we are switching once again to a slightly modified format where we will still attempt to broadcast these meetings, but all comments must be made in person. The reason behind this change is this office is highly unstable with the internet connection. So, we decided to continue to broadcast to the best of our ability and make public comment in person only. There is one new change with our license system, the Saltwater Registry is now run through our licensing system.

Assisant Commissioner Golden would like to introduce Patrick Connely, our new Wildlife Pathologist who replaced Nicole Lewis.

## **Council Reports:**

### **Agriculture:**

Councilman Jones reported we have Canadian and Snow geese now in the fields. The Hunters Helping the Hungry had a good program last weekend on deer butchering. There are still a few guys out deer hunting and trapping.

Councilman Kertz reported he attended the Atlantic County Board of Agriculture meeting and Atlantic County Federation meeting last month. We still have guys complaining about not seeing any deer and clubs that they know that usually harvest deer only had two for the week of shotgun.

Dr. Reist reported HPAI is our big thing. It is lower than the Spring of 2022, which was a disaster, but it is still bad. Yesterday Wisconsin was positive and within the last month, New York and Pennsylvania were positive. New Jersey is not positive yet. We had a triple E positive horse in Ocean County which is a mosquito born disease. That adds to our positive in Gloucester County and Salem County in September and October.

### **Farmers Sportsman's Relations:**

Councilman Jones reported the State Agriculture Convention is coming up in February along with the Vegetable Growers meeting in Atlantic City.

### **NJ State Federation Sportsmen Clubs:**

Councilman DeStephano reported he attended the Warren, Bergen, and Morris County meetings. The trappers will be assisting the Division with another fur harvester seminar on February 10<sup>th</sup>.

Councilman Robinson reported he attended Hunterdon and Middlesex County in person meetings and a combined meeting this Thursday with Somerset and invited Assistant Director Barno and others from F&W to come speak as well as The Hunters helping the Hungry and the NJ Predator Hunters. He attended a virtual meeting for Union County last night and their deer harvest is down with all the rain, the properties are in flood zones but still took 111 deer for this year, with 60% being donated.

Councilman Whildin reported he attended Cumberland County Federation meeting, where they discussed making it required to wear hunter orange during 6-day firearm. He also received a few phone calls about coyotes in peoples yards.

Chairman Virgilio reported most of the southern counties did not have meetings during the month of December, however he attended the State Federation meeting with one concern of a need for Automatic Electronic Defibrillators (AED) to be placed at the Conservation Center. Since there are many meetings there and this is an aging group, they feel this is something that should be looked into. He attended the Cumberland County meeting Assembly bill A5854 which Ken discussed, and the increase of mountain bike traffic an Wildcat ridge along with dog-off-leach at our WMA's. Although Salem County did not meet, they are concerned about the overly restricted regulations concerning public access at Oakwood Beach along with limited parking. He attended two meetings on 2024 Federation Annual Convention along with the Garden State Deer Classic. Our current plans include 27 seminars, an outdoor women's program of NJ R3 sampler workshop. Items yet to be developed are Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts merit badge classes and certified boating operation classes. The NJ State Federation of Sportsman Clubs is working in conjunction with the Sportsmen's Wildlife Foundation are excited about the Wildlife Conservation Education Convention and making monumental changes to better our program.

**Financial Committee:** No report

**Game Committee:**

Chairman Virgilio reported they are scheduling meetings as we speak.

**Endangered and Nongame Species Committee:**

Councilman Lathrop reported they have their meeting scheduled for next Wednesday.

**Waterfowl Stamp Advisory Committee:** No report

**Wildlife Rehabilitator Committee:** No report

**Law Enforcement Committee:** No report

## **Legislative Report:**

Mary Monteschio reported the legislature was very busy yesterday, we heard they passed over 100 bills. she went over the following passed bills:

A1100- requires entities to remove abandoned lines and mark information on certain lines

A3092- requires State Agencies to make demographic data collection graphics on Native, Asian, Hawaiian

A3837- requires state government entities to provide vital documents and translation services in at least 7 of the most common non-English languages.

A5227- expands eligibility for Buddy Fishing

A5391- imposes conditions on drivers disabled vehicles.

A5495- clarifies types of firearms allowed to be carried.

A5610- revises penalties for procession or consumption of alcoholic beverages by underaged persons

S2459- requires state government entities to provide vital documents in 15 of the most common non-English languages.

## **Division reports:**

### **Business of Administration:**

Chief Springer reported that included in your packet provided a graphic comparison of license sales from the end of December 2019 through 2023. license sales through the end of December 2023 were up less than 1% as compared to end December 2022. As compared to 2019 license sales were up by ½%. With respect to the Wildlife Habitat Supporter Program, the total amount of donations through December is \$3,135 with a total of the program since it began in November 2019 at \$71,325.

### **Freshwater Fisheries:**

Chief Crouse reported that December is a slow period within the hatcheries. At Hackettstown, the Intensive building currently has Landlocked Salmon, Muskie, Largemouth Bass, Hybrid Striped Bass, and Mosquitofish. Buildings and equipment have been winterized.

At Pequest all lots of 2025 production Rainbow Trout now averaging 1.8 inches and are on feed. The 2024 trout are averaging 8.9 inches.

### **Research and Management**

**Multi-Stressor Study** – NJDEP’s Division of Science and Research is studying the role of anthropogenic stressors (contaminants, degraded water quality) have on sensitive fish populations in Northern New Jersey was accepted with partnership with NJFW and the Bureau of Freshwater and Biological Monitoring (BFBM). With the recent discovery of the role of tire anti-degradant 6 p-Phenylenediamine (6PPD; and degradant byproducts) in urban runoff mortality syndrome in coho salmon, there is an increased interest how this chemical interacts with other salmonids across the country. While trout species in New Jersey are not as acutely sensitive to these anti-degradants as coho salmon, additional stress from degraded water quality and acutely toxic compounds in run-off may contribute to a multi-stressor scenario. NJFW has committed to stream temperature monitoring on the study sites along with conducting electrofishing surveys on the current fish assemblage. Work completed includes:

- Between May 23<sup>rd</sup> and June 9<sup>th</sup> a total of 22 sites were selected to install continuous stream temperature monitors. Streams included in the study, Rinehart Brook, Sun Valley Brook, Raritan River South Branch (trib.)(N of Drakestown), and Raritan River South Branch (trib.)(Drakestown)
- Standardized backpack electrofishing surveys were completed in August to supply fish population data for the analysis.
- Assistance was given to DSR for collection of water quality samples in the field. Preliminary analysis detected 6PPD in all but two sites.
- Continuous stream temperature loggers were collected in the field for download and data was shared with the project leader, Dan Milleman. (Collenburg, F-48-R)

**Round Valley Reservoir Fish Habitat Enhancement Project** – Due to Round Valley Reservoir being in a lowered condition for several years for the dam improvement project, trees have grown around the perimeter of the reservoir below the typical watermark within the Round Valley Recreation Area. Some of these trees will interfere with the camping areas and will be cleared for boat access to the campsites. Rather than disposing them, they will be constructed into modified porcupine crib structures and deployed with cinderblocks while the water level is still down. This project will be a collaboration with Round Valley Trout Association, NJ State Parks, and the New Jersey Water Supply Authority. The Lands Management Review application will be submitted for an expedited review and expected work will take place during a 1-2 day period sometime between late January and March of 2024.

### **Information & Education:**

Chief Ivany gave an update on Hunter Education and R3. Hunter Education numbers through the year stand at 4,814 students versus 5351 in 2022, which are down a little bit. The second Fur Handling Workshop has been scheduled for February 10,2024 at Jamesburg Field and Stream Club. The R3 program in partnership with hunters helping the hungry to grow more fertilizer company and game butcher’s deer processors conducted a “How to” workshop in Bloomsbury for 17 hunters. Over 100 people applied for 30 spots, this was during the snowstorm so that did result in quite a few cancellations, however we are working to get another workshop hopefully on the schedule for later in the season. The photos are snow covered but it looked like they were

having a great time. Update on our black bear marketing campaign, we have received a couple of bids from vendors from the request for proposals we put out. As far as the media buy this year, we're going to be using the existing creatives that we've already developed and spending the money we have which is about \$190,000 completely purchasing media. We received a couple of bids back from vendors and one was awarded. Staff is now working with procurement to get that contract signed so we can move forward throughout the year. We'll pulse these ads throughout the year during peak activity periods for bears and they'll run the entire season for 2024. A couple quick updates on the digest as you're aware the Freshwater Digest is out, and the Marine Digest is in the works. The last thing I just wanted to mention is that I&E staff continues to work with the State Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs on Deer Classic, we had another meeting last night and things are going really well there so we're very excited for this year's Deer Classic and as well as all of the seminars that will be going on at the Federation Convention.

### **Land Management:**

Assistant Director Hearon reported that we just finished stocking season for Pheasants and Quail. We are in the process of cleaning up and storing boxes, trying to recoup from the season. We jumped right into the planning phase for 2024, with Habitat planning meetings, meeting with Forest Fire and timing is essential with the Land Management Review Process. We're out in front making sure we get out Spring Habitat stuff lines up, funding, and budget meetings. The farm leases are coming out, all the in-kind agreements have been sent out to the farmers in the south, central and north will go out soon. There were a few leases approved during the last auction, and going out for initiating steps, so they will also be starting. On the demo front, Rockport pens are in the process of coming down. For those who are in the south and know about the Phillips house at Nacotee Creek, that house is now down. Things are in progress to remove the Lenape house as well.

On boating access, we will be installing new docks this Spring at Maple Lake in Stevens Lake. We also have a meeting scheduled in Belvedere to try to move that boat ramp forward, I not we will move the funding elsewhere. Round Valley is being refilled; we are looking into the process of getting prices for new docks. The docks there have been damaged over the years. Assunpink lake dredging study is wrapping up and we are getting some alarming figures, 67 million, we want to dredge that lake in total. First step is feasibility which could be done in multiple stages or apply for funding, but we at least have phase one wrapping up. On the Coastal side, we were finally able to complete the Morris River dredging project. We did a beneficial reuse along the dyke at Hyslerville WMA, there has been a weak spot in that dyke for years that we were trying to get things done. Phase one has been completed and are happy to say it was just under 100,000 cubic yards of material and wrapped up right before Christmas. It looks successful so far, but time will tell. That was phase one of a 3-phase project. We are looking to partner with DOT which is in works, and we also have a FEMA proposal for the same area. Abbots Meadow wrapped up around the same time frame and was in the area of 600,000 cubic yards and so far so good there. The Higley beach pond creek project has been rebid a couple times, then tied up in

litigation and we just found out that it is a go. We have kick off meetings scheduled for tomorrow. Staff have also attended a few events such as the Forked River Powwow.

### **Law Enforcement:**

Captain Quirk reported that the officers will be graduating from the Cape May Police Academy on Friday. There will be 3 recruits going to the North, 2 recruits going to Central, and 1 recruit to Marine. Following their graduation, they are going to be in agency training in about 2-weeks and after that they will be in field training program starting in April, just about the opening of trout season. The field training program, each recruit is paired with a seasoned experienced officer and they begin in just an observation phase and through several week they will start taking on more responsibility to the end of the training when they are doing all the inspections with the public and the experienced officer is there just for safety and making sure they are implementing all things that they learned in the year of training they had up to that point. We had a NOV (notice of vacancy) close last week and got to hire an additional 2 Conservation Officer recruits and both of those recruits will be coming to the central region. The next phase for those folks, they are having their resumes and transcripts vetted that they meet the educational requirements and from there they will report to the Cape May Police Academy for a physical fitness assessment to go further into the hiring process.

### **Wildlife Management:**

Assistant Director Barno reported that the end of December brought an end to F&W pheasant stocking, with a huge shout out to Lands Management for everything that they do. We had 60,080 pheasants that were stocked, 11,000 quail, and 880 chukars that went out. A total cost of the bird purchases was 1.1 million. The Waterfowl biologist conducted the Mid-Winter Waterfowl Survey, Ted Nichols, Lisa Clark and Austin Dammingier were out on January 3-5 and they are working with US Fish and Wildlife Service, they supply the plane, the pilot and our staff are the observers. The Waterfowl survey estimates are used to guide the management of Brant and Tundra Swans. They conduct the flights from NJ and the area of Long Island, which makes up 80% of Brant in the Atlantic Flyaway. The counts were nearly identical between NY and NJ with 98,710 Brant, which is down 9% from 2023. We do not have the total estimate yet from the entire Atlantic Flyaway, we have to have a minimum of 100,000 to keep the season open. We are definitely anticipating the extra 10 or 15,000 birds will be made up between Virginia and the other states. It looks like we should reach the threshold of 100,000. This has been 20 years in the making continuing project used to access a variety of Waterfowl species, but the Brant and Tundra Swans are proven to be the ones that the counts are beneficial in accessing the population and since 2016, that has been the focus of the surveys.

Assistant Director Barno provided the council members with a printout for the deer harvest. We are currently at 29,416 deer total for the seasons, which is down 8.7% from 2022 at the same period. Currently this season the weather is turning swampy there but hoping to make up some



lost ground with the slow start all the way from the early bow season between permit muzzleloader, shotgun and winter bow.

As for bear, for the month of December we only had 1 Cat1 incident and that was from protective hive. We set a trap, but we did not capture any bear in the trap. There was a dramatic amount of increase in the number of vehicles strikes. With the one rainfall we had gotten 3 inches of rain, 2-days later we had 6 bear vehicle strikes in one day. We are assuming that the swamp levels came up really high and forced the bear out of those areas and onto the roadways. But provided the copy of the full year end report for bear activity and incidents we had a total of 1,084 damage and nuisance complaints, which is a drop of 38% overall for the entire year. Cat1 in 2023 was 121 compared to 234 in 2022 that is a drop of 48% and Cat 2 was 593 compared to 1,021 in 2022 which is a drop of 41.9%.

### **Endangered and Nongame Species:**

Chief Clark reported she provided the council with a handed out on Horseshoe Island that is a report from the Tidelands Resource Council because this was the first full year F&W had management authority over the island. 2023 was the second year of the 5-year management agreement with Tidelands council. Horseshoe Island is a small island that has formed offshore outside of Little Egg Inlet. It wasn't until 2021 that there was some sand area above water. Nesting was first seen in 2021 and in 2022 we were monitoring but we didn't have the full force of the management agreement and enforcement, but we were monitoring populations. 2023 was a very successful season in that over 35 species were documented using the island, 5 species were documented as nesting, and they include Black Skimmer which this turned out to be the largest skimmer colony in the state. American Oyster catchers, Royal Tern and nesting Common terns. Although all of those are important for supporting our nesting populations and in terms of migratory birds that use this site, there is notably Red Knott they are seen at over 500 at a peak count. We put a lot of effort into signage because this was the first season where we have the full management authority to enforce the closure. Our management agreement is for 5 years and the closure each year is March 1<sup>st</sup> to September 30<sup>th</sup>. most people did respect the closure, but this had become an area for boaters to go hang out, so our Law Enforcement really jumped on it and responded to all of these incidents. This was a complete game changer for the island and our staff who take a lot of abuse in the field. We ended up having a lot better compliance with the closures. Chief Clark reviewed a graph of documented human disturbances and it dropped by 90% and just that alone allows these birds to nest undisturbed and increases the chances they are going to be successful. A huge thanks to Law Enforcement and all the staff, this is an effort that is not only Endangered Species Program but also Conserve Wildlife Foundation and Forsyth Refuge. We are still working quit heavily on our State Wildlife Action Plan revision and know that is still going on. We have regular meetings with our technical advisory group, their the smaller group that are weighing in on all the decisions and the process of selecting Species of Greatest Conservation need and starting prioritizing threats and actions. The larger group that will also be getting surveys in terms of prioritizing threats and actions is the technical stakeholders.

Chief Clark gave a huge thanks to BI&E they worked all year to highlight the species and the projects that get done and as a result, the New Jersey Endangered and Nongame Species Act celebrated its 15<sup>th</sup> year. We got recognition from the Governor, and he proclaimed December 14, 2023 as New Jersey Endangered and Nongame Species Act Recognition Day. BI&E produced a great video to show the work we do on endangered species.

## **Old Business:**

### **Greenwood Lake**

Assistant Director Barno reported that we met with Parks and the architect firm on the overall design concept. We provided our comments and so did Parks. They are going to do some minor adjustments, then Parks will be posting the conceptual design on their website for input from the general public. We do not have a timeframe for when that will occur as far as the actual posting. We are warning everybody it will be for 10 trailer spots and 5 car spots. Everyone wished it could be more and we worked hard over the past year for squeezing out every inch we could, but there are island restrictions on what we can build at this location. We know once it gets posted, there are going to be some upset individuals, but we have to abide by the regulations that are in place.

## **New Business:**

### **DEP Sustainable Black Bear Trash Pilot Program:**

Jill Aspenwall gave a brief presentation on Black Bear Trash Can Program. The NJ Department of Environmental Protection has received \$500,000 to develop a pilot program encouraging the use of certified bear-resistant trash cans in municipalities with high rate of bear/human interaction. They have six municipalities that are interested in participating in the pilot program. The funding must be encumbered by June 2024 and distribution of BRC's is expected to be in March-April of 2024.

## **Lunch: 11:56 – 12:31**

### **NJ Aquatic Invasive Specie Management Plan:**

Joe Balinski with the Division of Science and Research gave a presentation on the NJ Aquatic Invasive Species Management Plan. An introduction and overview of efforts to develop a management plan for NJ.

**Public Comment:**

Tom, Gloucester County NJ asked a few questions. Has the council ever considered or would they consider a Sunday archery turkey period. Would they consider a statewide three points minimum on one side with the exception of juvenile license.

Assistant Commissioner Golden mentioned there is a process in which you submit that request to Assistant Director Lisa Barno and it will go before the Game Committee who takes on those suggestions for regulation change.

**Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting.**

**Councilman Kertz made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 1:35 pm, seconded by Councilman DeStephano. Vote taken; all approve.**

**Next meeting February 13,2024 at the Robbinsville office – in-person.**