

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
NJ FISH AND GAME COUNCIL
Central Region Office
Robbinsville, New Jersey
March 12, 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 March 5, 2024 and delivered to the designated newspapers for Fish and Wildlife, the Newark Star Ledger and the Atlantic City Press on March 5, 2024.

Roll call was taken in attendance:

Chairman Frank Virgilio

Councilman James DeStephano - **Absent**

Councilman Mitchell Jones

Councilman Ed Kertz - **Absent**

Councilman Rick Lathrop - **Absent**

Councilman Rob Pollock- **Absent**

Councilman Bob Puskas

Councilman Loren Robinson

Councilman Ken Whildin

Fish & Wildlife employees included: L. Barno, G. Kopkash, A. Ivany, M. Monteschio, F. Panico, S. Crouse, P. Winkler, and D. Bajek.

There were several members of the public in attendance.

Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to approve the January 9, 2024, F&G Council minutes.

Councilman Robinson made a motion to approve the January 9, 2024 minutes, seconded by Councilman Whildin. Vote taken. all approved. Motion approved.

Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to accept the revised 2024 F&G meeting schedule date change from April 9 to April 16, 2024

Councilman Robinson made a motion to accept the revised 2024 F&G meeting schedule, seconded by Councilman Jones. Vote taken; all approved.

Chairman Virgilio welcomed everyone to today's meeting. Last month, unfortunately, he wasn't able to comment on Black History Month due to snow cancellations, however, he wanted to take this opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate Black History Month. Although Black History Month is observed in February in the United States and Canada, it coincides with the birthdays of two significant figures in African American history: Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. Frederick Douglass was born into slavery but escaped to freedom and became a leading voice for abolitionism through his powerful speeches and writings. Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which paved the way for formally abolishing slavery.

Over time, Black History Month has grown to celebrate the achievements and contributions of notable African American figures who have been involved in hunting and wildlife conservation efforts like George Washington Carver, One of the most impactful conservationists in the United States, Colonel Charles Young, Born to enslaved parents in 1864, Charles Young was the first Black colonel in the U.S. Army and the first Black superintendent of a national park, among many other accomplishments, Hattie Carthan, who was interested in trees all her life, and at the age of 71, founded the Neighborhood Tree Corps to inspire young people to care for and plant trees. Her passion helped build a grassroots movement to create green space in our cities, and as a child exploring her family's ranch, Rue Mapp realized that we're not separate from nature and that nature is best shared with others. In 2009, Mapp started a blog called Outdoor Afro to reconnect more Black people to the outdoors. Since then, it's turned into a non-profit organization with more than 100 leaders in more than 60 cities across the U.S. The number of Black Americans who have broken barriers to contribute to conservation is far greater than this list. There are unsung heroes and lesser-known leaders in communities nationwide who want a future where people and nature thrive. Isn't it time for us to join the list?

Swearing in of New Officers:

Chief Panico introduced Candice McLaughlin and Matthew Knoblauch, Deputy Attorneys General here to swear in our 6 new officers: Jordan Parham, Brandon Raguz, Allyson Rooke, Mason Kuri, Nash Hughes and Shawn Coiro.

Matthew McLaughlin stated that it is truly his honor to participate in this ceremony and to swear in the newest Conservation Police Officers. NJ Conservation police officers are the original stewards of our state's natural resources. On Earth Day in 1970, the legislature created the Department of Environmental Protection to protect our air, water and other natural resources but for nearly a century before that the Game Worden superseded our modern CPO's, carried the heavy burden of enforcing the laws in many of the wildest places of the Garden State has to offer. CPO's protect our wildlife from over exploitation and serve as guardians for our fish, our wildlife and hundreds of thousands of acres of public land. Conservation Officers are integral part of the North American model of Wildlife Conservation, and it is his absolute pleasure to swear in new officers to this unique and elite force.

At this time Matthew and Candice swore in 6 new Conservation Police Officers.

Chief Panico wanted to thank the Council and Assistant Commissioner Golden for this opportunity. It really means a lot to the Bureau of Law Enforcement the support we receive, and we appreciate it.

Princeton Partners Black Bear Awareness Campaign and Behavioral Analysis 2023:

Jeff Chesebro and Cameron Tague of Princeton Partners gave a brief presentation on the 2023 Black Bear outreach campaign behavioral analysis study and how the campaign impacted the people of NJ, as well as an overview of the media used in the campaign.

Council Reports:

Agriculture:

Councilman Jones reported the Farm Bureau was at the Sportsmen's Federation show, which they had a good interaction with the sportsmen. Spring is coming, and turkey season is right around the corner, the deer are back, and the bears are out. The resolutions from the agriculture convention are out and are being put together.

Councilman Puskas reported he has never seen so much mud. The biggest problem right now is Canadian geese, he has a 20-acre field, and they wiped it out in one day. Spring is on its way, and it is going to be a tough year to farm due to commodity prices.

Dr Reist reported High Path Avian Influenza is still around but has been lower this past month. NJ liberalized our import policy for domestic birds coming in from effected areas and discussion is in the air on vaccinations for turkeys and other fowl.

Farmer Sportsman's Relations:

Councilman Jones reported that we are working on the resolutions and there were some wildlife issues, not been as much on the deer front, but in land use and allowing parcels to be farmed.

NJ State Federation Sportsmen Clubs:

Councilman Robinson reported he attended meetings at Union County, Middlesex, Hunterdon, and Somerset County. He also attended a of convention meetings and the State Federation meeting. He attended Union Counties deer harvest wrap up, where they had 61 hunters this year, nine were new. They took 168 deer with 83 deer being donated and only cost Union County \$63 per deer. They have taken 1258 deer since they started in 2018 and their antlerless to antlered is 2-1 or 3-1 every year. He went to a couple of seminars at the State Convention, which Information and Education did a great job with them. He went to the Operation Game Thief quality Deer Management seminar; the main issues are antler point restrictions and dove season.

Councilman Whildin reported he attended the Cumberland County meeting in February, the Game Proposal meeting, and the Federation Deer Classic. The Deer Convention and Classic were very well put together, and the seminars were great as they always are.

Chairman Virgilio reported he attended the Federation Trapper meeting, where there was a review of game code recommendation changes, a discussion on public safety captures of nuisance beavers, a discussion on Youth Trapping days on WMA and potential decline in grey fox and the Trappers Hall of Fame. He also attended the Deer Convention, which was a success. The Cumberland County meeting had some questions; members would like to return the digest page showing total deer harvest by zones. They had concerns about trapping at Carsons Inlet, on who was doing the trapping. He attended NJ Waterfowl south Jersey and they had concerns on illegal dumping on WMAs. They held Wood duck nesting box workshop where they made 204 wood duck boxes, there were concerns over swan increase populations.

Finance Committee: No report.

Game Code Committee: No report

Waterfowl Stamp Advisory Committee:

Councilman Robinson reported they have a meeting today.

Legislative Report:

Mary Monteschio reported bill **HR7408** Americas Wildlife Habitat Conservation Act is In Congress. They had a hearing on it last week, and it does not look like it is going anywhere.

Fish & Wildlife Reports:

Business of Administration

Assistant Director Kopkash reported that included in your packet provided is a graphic of license sales from the end of December 2019 through 2024. Between 2022 and 2024 there is not much difference between the two years. For 2024 we total we sold 94,569 licenses as for 2023 in the same time period we sold 96,099 licenses with a difference of 1.9% total. Apprentice archery is down. With respect to the Habitat Supporter Program, the total amount of donations through February is \$4,949.55, with the round-up option when purchasing a license, it really is making a difference to the revenue coming in. the total donations since it began in November 2022 is \$82,425.37.

Freshwater Fisheries:

Chief Crause reported that preparation for spring trout stocking continues. The Spring 2024 Trout Stocking Allocations, Bonus Broodstock waterbodies, and plan for the season has been devised and will be presented in the new business session of this meeting. Other ongoing duties that are quite time consuming include coordination of opening day angler counts (volunteer heavy), evaluation of runs to increase efficiency, review of public information. Our annual **Virtual Trout Meeting** was held on Thursday, March 7th from 7-8:30pm. There were 135 participants. The agenda included AC Barno delivered a Fish & Wildlife Update, Ed Conley (Pequest Superintendent) gave a production update, Ross Shramko (Principal Biologist) gave a Trout Stocking Plan and Allocation update, Shawn Crouse (Fisheries Chief) gave a presentation on the upcoming Fish Code and preliminary trout angler survey results. There were technical difficulties (29% responded to a live poll indicating audio and/or video was not working for them. The meeting was recorded and will be made available on our website.

Northern Pike at Pompton Lake – Biologist Rozema sampled Pompton Lake with trapnets and captured 26 and had a better catch rate than when last sampled. The largest Northern Pike was 40 inches and 19.6 lbs.

Northern Pike Broodstock Collection took place on Budd Lake. The crew did well and met their goal of taking 300,000 eggs.

A Fish Habitat project was initiated at Round Valley Reservoir. 17 cribs were constructed of cut trees that were cleared from the wilderness campsites. Tree diameters were up to 4 inches. This

project was in cooperation with NJWSA, Parks & Forestry, Fish & Wildlife, and Round Valley Trout Association. Additional structures will be constructed and deployed.

Information and Education:

Chief Ivany reported the NJ State Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs Convention and the Garden State Deer Classic was a success. He would like to thank everybody who was involved with the planning of the classic, and all the Fish & Wildlife staff who provided programs. He would also like to thank staff from the Bureaus of Land Management and Freshwater Fisheries who provided invaluable assistance with setup of the Deer Classic display. Many thanks also to Linda DiPiano who did a fantastic job with Deer Classic planning and Karen Byrne, who was instrumental in setting up the "Becoming an Outdoors Women" part of the convention, which was a wonderful success. Linda DiPiano was also presented the prestigious Frank Valgenti award from the NJ State Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs at the convention. We are working on our events calendar and are getting good feedback. Hunter Education is up and running, and classes are filling up fast. We are having the annual Opening Day of Trout Season event for veterans at Pequest on April 6, 2024 and he extended the invite to all council members.

Land Management:

Pete Winkler reported we completed the trout stocking schedule and are working with Forest Fire prepping fire lines and performing prescribed burns. Staff is getting ready for Spring planting and working on 3 Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grants, which are the Warrensville Dam removal, Hyper Humus Restoration and Early Successional Habitat projects statewide. As for boat ramps, Jakes Landing should be moving to construction this year, Belvidere ramp is working on design, we are going to be submitting Great Bay Boulevard for a feasibility study and Round Valley and Spencer's Creek are getting quotes for installing new docks. The Higbee project is up and running, we are coordinating a ribbon-cutting event with the Office of Climate and Energy and Office of Natural Resource Restoration. We are also talking about meeting with an architect on Friday to start looking at the Conservation Center for an upgrade there as well.

Law Enforcement:

Chief Panico reported that tomorrow we have 16 applicants to hand off background packages and fingerprints to fill two spots for Central. We are transitioning away from winter sports of hunting and trapping and getting into the Spring sports and helping to post trout signs.

Wildlife Management:

Assistant Director Barno reported we launched a community grant program through funding provided by the department to assist communities with deer issues. \$160,000 is available and the grant is up and running on the DEP Grants page. The application period is open until May 3rd. Staff has been working on the Deer Hunter Regulation Survey, which was discussed at the Game Committee meeting, then sent out to some staff within F&W, and we are working on inputting those changes into the survey. We will then select a trial with hunters to get their feedback before we launch the survey at the end of this month. Our turkey and fisher projects are moving along. The turkeys in the north are not as cooperative as the south. We are trying to tag 25 in both the north and south and we have met that goal for the south with only half tagged in the north. Staff continue to monitor fishers and change out the SD cards on the trail cams and have successfully trapped two adult male fishers. The preliminary deer harvest numbers this year are 35,667 compared to 38,324 for 2022, so it is down 6.9%.

New Business:**Trout Angler Survey:**

Chief Crouse gave a presentation on the trout angler survey. This survey is to get the general trout anglers' usage, opinions on the catch and release period, pre-season closures, in-season closures and on general trout regulations.

Spring Trout Stocking Schedule 2024:

Chief Crouse reported on the Spring 2024 Trout Stocking Schedule with a preseason closure on March 18 and closed until April 6th, which is Opening Day.

Public Comment on 2024 Spring Trout Stocking Schedule: There were no comments.

Councilman Robinson made a motion to accept the 2024 Spring Trout Stocking Schedule as reported, seconded by Councilman Jones. Vote taken; all approve.

Lunch: 11:55 – 12:35

Waterfowl Hunter Survey Results:

Ted Nichols gave a presentation on the results of the Waterfowl Hunter Survey.

Seasonal Wildlife Management Areas Closures:

Chief Panico reported Menantico Ponds will remain open and the other four being Cedar Lake, Parkers Pit, diving cliffs at Wildcat Ridge, and a portion of Winslow, we will request that they be closed again.

Public Comment:

Ray S. with the Morris County Federation Club asked about Lake Musconetcong, being closed during pre-season trout stocking. The group would like to have it opened for for during pre-season stocking for panfish angling.

Councilman Puskas made amotion to adjourn the meeting at 1:12, seconded by Councilman Jones. Vote taken; all approve.

Next meeting April 16,2024 at 10:00 am. In-person at the Assunpink Office.