

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

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

The meeting was called to order at 11:00 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 June 26, 2024, and delivered to the designated newspapers for Fish and Wildlife, the Newark Star Ledger and the Atlantic City Press.

Roll call was taken in attendance:

Chairman Frank Virgilio  
Councilman James DeStephano  
Councilman Mitchell Jones - **Absent**  
Councilman Ed Kertz  
Councilman Rick Lathrop  
Councilman Rob Pollock  
Councilman Bob Puskas- **Absent**  
Councilman Loren Robinson  
Councilman Ken Whildin

Fish & Wildlife employees included: D. Golden, G. Kopkash, A. Ivany, M. Monteschio, L. Quirk, S. Crouse, T. McBride, B. Stoff, and D. Bajek.

There were several members of the public in attendance.

**Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to approve the June 11th F&G Council minutes.**

**Councilman Robinson made a motion to approve the June 11, 2024, minutes, seconded by Councilman Lathrop. Vote taken. all approved. Motion approved.**

Chairman Virgilio welcomed everyone to the meeting. On behalf of our Fish and Game Council, I want to thank NJ Fish and Wildlife for your recent purchase and installation of an AED in our remote Conservation Center location. This significant addition demonstrates NJ Fish and Wildlife's commitment to the safety and well-being of both staff and stakeholders, ensuring that critical lifesaving equipment is readily available in emergencies and enhancing the overall safety of our off-site remote meeting location. A special thanks to Finance Chief Kim Springer and Capt. Linda Quirk, for their speed and skill in negotiating the purchasing process, which made it possible for this vital lifesaving equipment to be available. Thanks once again for prioritizing everyone's health and public safety.

Assistant Commissioner Golden wanted to emphasize the significance of this meeting with game code changes and simplifying the regulations has been around a 2-year process. Today is significant and important to the public and will help us advance our R3 efforts by removing the barriers to people getting involved in hunting and trapping in New Jersey.

### **Council Reports:**

#### **Agriculture Committee:**

Councilman Kertz reported it's been a busy this month, he has had several inquiries about the closure of zone 45 & 46, but once he informed them of the reclining harvest and it will only be temporary for one year then reassessed, they were much happier. He also had a chance to talk with Law Enforcement Interns and spend some time with them talking about wildlife damage, the farmer depredation permits, and went to farm that had groundhog damage to see first-hand the damage they can do. We were looking for deer damage, but there is hardly any deer in our area anymore. They drove around the fields and explained to them that without the deer, he still has corn standing from last year and if we had the number of deer we had 3-years ago, there would be nothing left.

**Wildlife Animal Health:**

Dr. Reist reported HPAI in the last 7-days we had 11 cases in cattle. We also had the fourth human infection from cattle in Colorado. HPAI in domestic poultry has decreased and HPAI in the wild birds is the same as its been since last year.

**Farmer/Sportsman Relations:** no report

**NJ State Federation of Sportsman's Club:**

Councilman DeStephano reported he attended the Trappers picnic and was getting hammered about the Game Code changes.

Councilman Robinson reported he attended meetings at Somerset, Hunterdon County, Ocean County, the State Federation meeting and the Predator Hunters had a virtual meeting. He got all good feedback with the Game Code changes. A Round Valley Trout Association member is interested in being a team leader for HOFNAD. Ocean County would like to know when the Free Fishing Days for 2025 would be. Ocean County also mentioned that they would like fish for their fishing derby's.

Councilman Whildin reported he attended the Cumberland County meeting where he got good feedback on the changes for zones 45 & 46, but they still have concerns in zones 34 & 47.

Chairman Virgilio reported he attended Cumberland Counties meeting where they still would like to see certain pages in the digest on Deer Harvest by County and Zone. He attended the Southern Region meeting where they finalized the NJ State Federations of Sportsman's Clubs 2025 Convention and Sportsman's Jamboree. He attended the State Federation meeting and they approved the Southern regions PowerPoint presentation on the 2025 State Federation Conventions Sportsman's Jamboree for April 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of 2025 with the Jamboree to be held on April 26<sup>th</sup>. He attended the Camden County meeting where they discussed habitat projects for the Winslow WMA and currently in the process of coordinating a meeting with the Southern region habitat planner Tyler Kinley. At the Gloucester County meeting they discussed habitat management and people had voiced concerns about mid-June planting from Land Management and Wildlife Management Areas. He attended the Burlington County meeting, where they discussed Game Code considerations, and they were very supportive of what we do. He also attended the NJ Wild Turkey meeting Federation meeting where Jimmy Sloan gave a Turkey Population presentation.

**Finance Committee:**

Councilman Robinson reported they had a meeting this morning and will have a full presentation at the September meeting.

**Fish Committee: No Report****Game Code Committee:**

Chairman Virgilio reported he would like to start off by thanking Assistant Commissioner Dave Golden for his skillful juggling of diverse personalities and perspectives, harmonizing them to create a symphony of NJ Fish and Wildlife Excellence. Additionally, a special thanks to Assistant Director Lisa Barno, who, as the orchestra conductor, guided the multiple bureaus within NJ Fish and Wildlife in perfect harmony toward their goals. Her copious efforts in leadership and work were instrumental in bringing this Game Code and reorganization process forward for a council vote on the PowerPoint presentations of changes that the Game Code committee recommends being incorporated into an adoption document for a final vote at a later time. I would also like to thank Chief Wildlife Biologist James Oxley and Principal Biologist Jodi Powers, whose leadership was pivotal in uniting all other staff members and whose collective efforts were instrumental in bringing the Game Code portion of the process forward for a council vote.

**Endangered and Non-Game Species Advisory Committee:**

Councilman Lathrop reported they have a meeting coming up on July 24<sup>th</sup>.

**Waterfowl Stamp Advisory Committee: No Report****Wildlife Rehabilitators Advisory Committee: No Report****Law Enforcement Committee: No Report**

### **Public Member Committee:**

Councilman Pollock reported that members of the public had questions on the bear proof garbage bins that were going to be distributed.

### **Legislative Update:**

Mary Monteschio reported congress is out this week and America's Conservation and Enhancement Authorization Act of 2024 was introduced into the Senate and the House. It has passed the Senate Committee. It is reauthorizing a bunch of programs, such as the North American Wetlands Conservation Act and the National Fish Habitat Partnership.

### **Fish & Wildlife Reports:**

#### **Business Administration:**

Barbara Stoff reported license sales to the end of June, Hunting licenses are down 1% Fishing sales are up 3%, overall sales are up 3.3%, which is mostly due to the large increase in WMA use permits which are up 45%. Fishing including the Trout Stamp is up 2.9%, Fishing Licenses are up 3.9% and Saltwater registry is at 66% and customers are only getting their registry and not any other hunting/fishing license with it, so Saltwater registry is down around 10% from last year.

### **Freshwater Fisheries:**

Chief Crause reported on the **PERCH Program** – Working closely with Kristen Meistrell, we have applied for a large grant (up to \$25M over 5 years) to the USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) for a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant program to initiate a program that we are calling Pond Enhancement & Revitalization for Communities & Habitat (PERCH). If awarded, this money will allow us to invest and pond ecosystems in overburdened communities across the state, while providing safe and welcoming access to nature and outdoor recreation. As you know, New Jersey's population density and land use changes pose significant threats to our aquatic habitats and many ponds have degraded over time. Across the state, there is roughly 1.6 million acres of development with 3,575 overburdened communities representing approximately 5,100,000 people. Overburdened Communities are neighborhoods that are low-income, have limited English proficiency, identify as a member of a minority community, and have been disproportionately affected by environmental and public health stressors. Through the PERCH Program, NJ DEP Fish & Wildlife will work to improve ecological condition and recreational opportunities in small ponds

in populated areas through locally led partnerships. The program will work with municipalities, schools, scout groups, sponsors, and volunteers to provide an enhanced recreational opportunity that is esthetically pleasing, family-friendly, and most of all a good place to fish. Grands will be awarded this fall, and we are eagerly awaiting to find out if the PERCH program will be a recipient.

**Paulins Kill – 5-year Post Columbia Dam Removal (Warren)** - A stream electrofishing survey was conducted at the base of the notched Paulina Dam (2023) on the Paulins Kill. This survey was done to evaluate the fishery below the Paulina dam prior to its removal later this year. This survey is both part of the post dam removal assessment following the removal of the Columbia Lake Dam and can be used as a pre-dam removal survey for the Paulina Dam. This electrofishing survey was conducted on 6/4/24 by Fish & Wildlife staff. We conducted the pre-dam removal surveys at this same location on 6/8/2015.

The most notable change in the fish assemblage was to the anadromous fish species (as expected). Gizzard Shad which were not found in the 2015. Over 100+ Gizzard Shad were estimated at the base of the dam in a deeper pool too deep for standard sampling techniques. Gizzard Shad were first documented at this site in 2019 the year following the Columbia Dam removal. American Eel also showed a major shift in abundance from the pre-dam removal work in 2015 to the post-dam removal work this year. The 2015 survey found 11 American Eel (4 greater than 200mm & 7 less than 200mm). This showed that the Columbia dam was not a complete barrier to American Eel, but was certainly having a major impact by only passing a few American Eel. The 2024 survey collected 110 American Eel (11 greater than 200mm & 99 less than 200mm). This large increase in smaller American Eel found at this location demonstrates how the overall Eel biomass has significantly increased since the removal of the Columbia Dam. It is important to note that the Paulina Dam is still acting as a partial to full barrier at this time and that fish and American Eel abundance numbers are likely inflated due to the impediment to upstream movement at this survey location.

Unfortunately, Fish and Wildlife staff did not document any American Shad at this location. Granted, we may have missed the run if it were earlier in May. It could also be the relatively recent removal of the Columbia dam barrier. American Shad have been confirmed in Blainstown below the USGS gauging station about ½ mile downstream of the Paulina Dam. It is still presumed that American Shad can traverse the USGS gauging station dam in Blainstown, but actual evidence of American Shad upstream of the gauging station has not been confirmed using electrofishing methods.

In Summary, this work showed that the removal of the Columbia Dam in 2018 had the desired effect of passing anadromous fish species further upstream into the Paulins Kill adding biomass to the river and enhancing the overall ecology and health of the river.

## **INVASIVE SPECIES MANAGEMENT**

Completed a site inspection at the Huey Ponds on the NJ Conservation Foundation property in Hunterdon County on 6/10/24 to observe the application of the molluscicide to treat the invasive Chinese Pond Mussel (Silty Pond Mussel). Princeton Hydro was contracted to perform the application. The manufacturer of the molluscicide was present on site as well as NJ Water Supply, NJDEP, and Conservation Foundation. I will follow up to see if/when efficacy of treatment is determined.

A Northern Snakehead (Invasive species regulate as a potentially dangerous species) was reported by an angler on June 29 in the Maurice River Watershed at Menantico Sand Ponds and was confirmed by Biologist Chris Smith via electrofishing on July 2. One individual was found guarding a school of 1 inch fry. This Snakehead was removed and fry were also removed, however the school broke up and dissipated, preventing full removal. Immediate action was taken to close the Union Lake Fish ladder to prevent further upstream migration of Snakeheads. Additional actions are being considered.

**NAACC Assessments** – The North Atlantic Aquatic Connectivity Collaborative (NAACC) is a network of individuals from universities, conservation organizations, and state and federal natural resource and transportation departments focused on improving aquatic connectivity across a thirteen-state region, from Maine to West Virginia. This month, Freshwater Fisheries hourlies conducted NAACC assessments on over 100 culverts to assess crossings related to native Brook Trout and other wild trout populations, and fish species proposed for listing as Endangered (Bridle Shiner and Ironcolor Shiner) and Threatened (Slimy Sculpin). This will put the Bureau of Freshwater Fisheries in a position to guide and prioritize management of road/stream crossings that may be barriers to aquatic organism movement. This is an ongoing collaboration.

#### Pequest Trout Hatchery

Maintenance at the hatcheries continues to be time-consuming and costly. Several localized thunderstorms passed through Warren County over the last few weeks, one of which caused a power outage lasting about 5 hours. Backup generators worked well, however when power was restored, a contact burned up in Well#1 and caused Wells #2 and #6 breakers to trip that needed to be restarted manually. Well#1 was taken offline until an electrical vendor could make repairs. Staff responded, checked on fish, checked diesel backups, and maintained flows during the outage.

The complex air conditioning system that was installed late last summer at Pequest was finally brought on-line, as there have been a series of technical issues, requiring many service calls and modifications along the way. One instance was the need for ground penetrating radar to look for an isolation valve, that was not located. As a result, production wells feeding the line had to be shut off briefly to reduce the pressure and the valve was installed with the water flowing. This was a stressful time for staff, as flow through the entire hatchery had to be temporarily reduced. In the end all worked out and no fish were lost.

We have continued to have issues on the new UV domestic system with programming and operation that the vendor is still trying to figure out. They have been out several times since the installation making changes. Water Resource Management also looked at the system and thinks there may be an error in the programming as well. We sent an email to DEP Water Supply requesting a 3-month extension to rectify the issues before going on-line.

#### Hackettstown Fish Hatchery

As you know, the Hackettstown State Fish Hatchery is responsible for rearing 15 species of cool and warm water fish and distributing them to over 200 water bodies around the state. A large part of the fish production occurs in the Intensive Culture Building which was constructed in 1999. The building was designed to flow three water temperatures 52, 68, and 80°F to accommodate multiple species at one time. The 68- and 80°F system water is recirculated at a rate of 80% to reduce the cost of heating. Both systems were designed with two pumps – one variable drive and one fixed speed drive. Having two pumps means multiple flow rate options and having a backup.

On Friday 7/5, staff heard an odd sound coming from the pump room and upon entry found the 80-degree variable drive motor filling the room with smoke and whining. The motor was immediately shut off and the fixed drive was started. Staff allowed the motor to cool and added grease and restarted it only to hear the same noise. Dom Mercurio, Crew Supervisor Buildings Maintenance Programs was called, and he confirmed our thoughts that the bearings had gone.

Tanks in the 80°F system are currently full of 60,000 three-inch Channel Catfish and will soon be full of fingerling Hybrid Striped Bass. Hatchery Supervisors are not comfortable running the system without a backup motor at this time of year and the system will not be shut down until November 1<sup>st</sup>. William Stothoff Company was contacted by Dom, and they provided a quote for \$9,006.00 to remove/install a new variable drive motor. This requires a two-man crew and 27-ton crane to lift the motor through the hatchery roof. The work is scheduled for today. Staff are working to make sure their business registration paperwork is complete and up to date. Funding source will be from the Federal Aid Grant NJ F-50-D-32 Fish Culture and Stocking Program.

Warm and coolwater species stocking season is in full swing, with Northern Pike, Tiger Musky, Walleye, and Largemouth Bass being stocked in many waters.

Councilman Robinson mentioned the request to stock a few derbies in Ocean County. I would like to remind everyone that we have not had a statewide derby stocking program for over 10 years. We strategically use our limited number fish to stock all 21 counties. We stock 85 streams and 87 ponds with trout and well over 100 waters with warm and coolwater fish. We prefer to use the fish in places with a demonstrated need, for example waters that have recent fisheries data suggesting a need. Many waters in which derbies are held support viable fisheries and have self-sustaining populations. If awarded, the PERCH program may be an avenue to rehabilitate small, degraded ponds to bring them to a point of sustainability, thus not requiring annual stocking.



**Information & Education:**

Chief Ivany reported on July 22-26 staff will be attending the Association for Conservation Information conference in Virginia. We are going to be meeting with folks who planned this conference because we are hosting the ACI conference next year in Atlantic City July 21-23 of 2025. We are putting together a planning committee as well. Work continues on the hunting digest, and we are on track for a release in August. Chief Ivany is pleased to announce that back in June we held interviews for the Black Bear Outreach position, and we have made an offer that was accepted with a start date of July 29<sup>th</sup>. We have been getting a considerable number of requests for information regarding bears. Our Outreach Campaign "Summer of CHANJ" Connecting Habitat Across NJ is in full swing. We have been doing a lot of social media posts and website updates promoting the program. We are working with the Endangered and Non-game Species program who are providing us with information for posts. There was a comprehensive news release that went out and the campaign will run throughout the summer. Lastly, our Hunter Education Coordinator and R3 Administrator Joe Leskie represented the hunter education and the R3 hunting and shooting programs on a Non-Lead Hunt initiative meeting with representatives from the US Fish and Wildlife Services, Chief Oxley of Wildlife Management, State Federation of Sportsman's Clubs president Wade Stein and NJ F&G Council Chairman Virgilio. This pilot program will focus on the National Wildlife Refuge property in Sussex County. Proposals to implement a multi-faceted approach to encourage voluntary actions that reduce unintended ingestion of lead by wildlife because of hunting. Joe Leskie is also looking into the use of non-lead alternatives for R3 hunting events, specifically the Take a Kid Youth Pheasant Hunt coming up this fall. Several staff members are going out to Sedge Island tomorrow, as we received funding and have approval to replace the bulkhead at Sedge.

**Land Management:**

Tony McBride reported planting is complete on WMA's and staff are now mowing and doing maintenance on roads/parking lots and boat ramps. In addition to the PERCH RCPP Grant application there were two others that were submitted by the July 2 deadline which are the Early Successional Habitat Grant Program and the Warren Mills Dam Decommissioning in Warren County. Hopefully we will get some news on those applications by this October. A report on the findings of Round Valley safety lights, where we had an announcement for the public warning them to check the weather because of the high winds at Round Valley. The Fish & Wildlife ramp light was checked, and it is functioning properly, but it only stays on for 3-minutes, whereas it should be on for 15 minutes. Staff continue to work on encroachments around the state, we have a meeting this week to go over encroachment work. We are continuing to make progress improving relations with DEP Land Use to make sure we're in compliance with the regulations. We developed a working plan and continue to move forward on enhancing our work. Staff are looking into the Expressway expansion through Winslow WMA at the Councils request and contact has been made with DOT and more will come as the conversation with them progress. As for personnel, Land Management is waiting on 6 backfills soon to be 7. We are in hopes some positions can be filled.

**Law Enforcement:**

Captain Quirk reported we have 20 recruits taking the PT assessment at Cape May today, so by the end of the day we will know how many came. We have four openings, two in the South and two to be determined. Our Conservation Police Officers are getting ready to attend County Fairs, next week Tuesday-Saturday we have Burlington County Fair where our Central region officers will be there as well as the Mobile Education Trailer. We will also be attending the Warren County Fair July 27<sup>th</sup>-Aug 2 and National Night Out August 6<sup>th</sup>. We have a new event being Co-hosted by State Park Police at Allaire State Park WMA. And finally, we are at that time of the year where we focus a lot of time/efforts throughout the State on WMA enforcement both during the day and in the evening and our officers are teaming up to work together to make sure our WMA regulations are being enforced. Last month we wrapped up our Spark internship program, we had three college students going into their senior year and got the tour of our agency. Captain Quirk would like to thank all the bureaus who helped. their final project was how our agency can better communicate with young adults and teenagers and at the end of the internship they gave a presentation which they had some really insightful advice for us as to how we can message our social media.

**Wildlife Management:**

Chief Oxley reported that this time of year the natural resources of berries and food sources are out so there is a slight down tick in bear activity. We received 319 bear calls in the last month, 12- Cat 1 with 8 traps set, four target bears captured and one euthanasia.

A Turkey presentation will be given by Jimmy Sloan later in the meeting.

Geese banding took place June 18th-27th and we had 1467 geese banded by staff and volunteers at 38 different locations.

**Endangered and Nongame:**

Bill Pitts reported staff are working on revising the Landscape Project mapping with the office of Information Systems, reviewing new species-habitat models for anticipated changes in status lists, to be completed in time for the adoption of revised endangered and nongame wildlife lists. The ten-year revision of the agency's State Wildlife Action Plan is also well underway, with the assistance of all staff and technical stakeholders, and we are soliciting public comment at each step. The Plan is due to the USFWS in fall 2025. The Delaware Bay Shorebird Project's aerial surveys were conducted on May 16, 23, and 28. The peak Red Knot count was made on May 23 with a total count of 14,225 knots, which is below the average count of the last ten years.

**Lunch: 12:38 – 1:15**

**New Business:**

**Wild Turkey Update: Harvest Summary and Current research:**

Jimmy Sloan gave a presentation on the Current Research and Harvest of Wild Turkey.

**Old Business:**

**2025 Game Code Recommendations Presentation:**

Chief Oxley gave a presentation on the 2025 Game Code Recommendations.

**Public Comment:** No Comments

Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to accept the 2025 Game Code Presentation.

**Councilman Robinson made a motion to accept the 2025 Game Code recommendations as presented by Chief Oxley, seconded by Councilman Kertz. Vote taken; all approve. Motion carries.**

**Public Comment:**

Andrew Burnett wanted to thank the Bureau of Wildlife Management and Council for simplifying the Game Code.

**Councilman Whildin made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 1:58 pm, seconded by Councilman Kertz. Vote taken; all approve.**

**Next meeting is September 10, 2024, at 10:00 am at the Central Region Office**