

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
NJ FISH AND GAME COUNCIL
Central Region Office
Robbinsville, New Jersey
February 11, 2025**

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

The meeting was called to order at 10:00 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 February 3, 2025, 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
Councilman Ed Kertz
Councilman Rick Lathrop
Councilman Rob Pollock - Absent
Councilman Bob Puskas
Councilman Loren Robinson
Councilman Ken Whildin

Fish & Wildlife employees included: D. Golden, K. Meistrell, G. Kopkash, P. Winkler, M. Monteschio, S. Crouse, J. Oxley, K. Clark, and D. Bajek.

There were several members of the public in attendance.

Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to approve the January 14,2025, F&G Council minutes.

Councilman Robinson made a motion to approve the January 14,2025 minutes, seconded by Councilman Whildin. Vote taken. 7 approve, 1 abstention. Motion approved.

Chairman Virgilio welcomed everyone to this February meeting. February is Black History Month, a time to honor the achievements and contributions of Black Americans. It coincides with the birthdays of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, key figures in the fight against slavery. Over time, the celebration has grown to recognize African Americans' impact on conservation, including pioneers like George Washington Carver, Colonel Charles Young, Hattie Carthan, and Rue Mapp. Their work, along with that of many unsung heroes, has shaped our landscapes and inspired future generations. This month, we recognize their legacy and the ongoing contributions of Black Americans in wildlife and conservation.

On a more somber note, I would like to mention the passing of my friend Ed Cuneo Junior, who played a pivotal role in the creation of the New Jersey waterfowl stamp, a key achievement in the preservation of the state's wetland habitats and waterfowl population.

Assistant Commissioner Golden mentioned we will have the swearing in of two new officers, Michael Rea and Dylan Bates. I had the pleasure of attending their graduation from the academy. I was proud for them and our agency in that these two young recruits received high honors during the academy. In the academy they offer acknowledgement for individuals that achieve high in physical education, academics, firearms, and then they give one Directors award. Usually, they recognize the person who got first and second in those categories. Out of the academy of around 60 individuals graduating, our recruits received four of those seven honors. Both of these officers placed at the top of their class. we have two additional recruits in the academy now, and just yesterday we did the pre physical evaluation for around 20 new applicants that are applying for Conservation Police Officer recruit positions.

Deputy Attorney General Matt Knoblauch swore in two new Conservation Officers, Michael Rea and Dylan Bates. Congratulations to you both.

Council Reports:

Agriculture:

Councilman Jones reported he attended the Board of Agriculture meeting, the North Caucus meeting for delegates for the State Ag Convention to choose a northern rep, Jeff Bowlby who will replace Councilman Puskas. As for agriculture, everybody in the north end of the state is still talking about Avian Influenza in Snow geese and birds up there. It hasn't affected Warren Counties' poultry operation but they are locked down like Fort Knox. Merrel Creek recreation area

is closed. The State Agriculture Convention was last week where we had three resolutions that dealt with wildlife, deer, bear and an issue with depredation permits.

Councilman Kertz reported he attended the Atlantic Board of Agriculture meeting; we took on 6 more members in the executive committee. The Atlantic Federation Sportsmen meeting are getting ready for our venison dinner.

Councilman Puskas reported geese devastated crops in Somerset County. He has a government issue with a letter of possibly denying permits.

Dr. Reist reported that in the last week, the USDA has found a new strain of HPAI in dairy cows. Monitoring programs at milk processors continue. In NJ there have been multiple detections and lots of testing in wastewater plants.

Farmer/Sportsman Relations:

Councilman DeStephano reported he attended the Sussex County meeting, Virtual fish Code meeting and the Trappers meeting.

Councilman Robinson reported he attended the virtual Fish Code meeting, Spruce Run Wild Turkey Federation Dinner which had over 200 people in attendance. He also sent his council notes to Ocean County, Monmouth and Middlesex as he was sick and unable to attend.

Councilman Whildin reported the Cumberland County Annual Trash Hunt is March 15th.

Chairman Virgilio reported he attended the Federation Upland Game Committee, which had 3 recommendations and will move them through the state body, so this is a long process before those recommendations become anything. It would be proposed as: 1. they requested that all changes be communicated through the website, email notification and the hunting and trapping digest as it relates to the change in the pheasant stocking program. 2. To offset the cost of stacking pheasants in NJ WMA's, the Upland Game Committee recommends that the current law 23:3-61.1 a special pheasant and quail stamp should also be amended to include chukars. Along with giving the Fish and Game Council consent in that legislation the ability to increase the cost of the pheasant and quail stamp in \$5 increments annually and that would be reviewed by the Finance Committee of the NJF&G Council. They thought that by adding chukars to pheasant stocking and a modest increase that we might be able to accomplish the goals of the Division financially and not lose stamp buyers. 3. To allow night predator hunting on WMA's which would have several advantages, especially when it comes to game bird survival and balancing populations.

He also attended two meetings on the restructuring of the New Jersey Outdoor Alliance of Wildlife Conservation Foundation. He attended the NJ Conservation Association meeting, Bergen County Federation Annual Venison Dinner, and the Gloucester County Federation meeting.

Finance Committee: No report

Game Committee: No report

Endangered & Nongame Species Advisory Committee:

Councilman Lathrop reported they had a meeting January 22 and one of the issues that came before the Committee was the Shore Tidal Area Protection rule proposal, which is designed to improve enforceability of restrictions on public access to specific tidal waters and beaches for endangered species conservation purposes. The Committee has endorsed the rule proposal; the public comment period closes Feb 13.

Wildlife Rehabilitators Advisory Committee:

Councilman DeStephano reported we have a meeting next month after the March Council meeting.

Law Enforcement Committee: No meeting

Legislative Update:

Mary Monteschio reported that Congress is still trying to figure out the budget.

Mary was asked to provide an update to ACR119. ACR 119 proposes a constitutional amendment to make the State the trustee of public natural resources and guarantee to the people other environmental rights. There is nothing new with this bill and it hasn't moved since last year.

Fish & Wildlife Reports:

Business Administration:

Barbara Stoff handed out a packet with all the updates sales for 2024-2025. The Buddy License sales this year compared to last year have more than doubled and that is due to the promotions we have been having regarding the new rules. As far as everything else goes, you will notice the saltwater was higher and will hopefully go down this year. Last year we saw a pretty big increase and turns out that even though our system is working properly, there seems to be a bunch of people on the Saltwater registry side that do not get any other licenses from us. Because you can register for more than one vessel, when you put that in your cart, and if you are not paying attention, you can keep adding it in the same transaction. We have to have Aspira remind customers to double-check their carts.

Freshwater Fisheries:

Chief Crouse reported On January 16, we held our first of three virtual fisheries meetings. We presented the proposed 2026 Fish Code changes. There were 95 attendees, which is more than when we previously held these meetings in person. There were opportunities for questions and comments throughout the meeting. Only one individual opposed one of the changes (moving the Winter stocking up a few weeks to combine it with the Fall stocking program, while there were many who commented that they supported the proposed changes.

The second virtual public meeting will be held on Thursday, February 20 from 7-8:30pm and will cover warmwater and coolwater species stocking program, management, and sampling results.

The third virtual public meeting will be our annual Trout Meeting and will be held on Tuesday, March 11 from 7-8:30pm. Come hear about the Pequest Trout Hatchery, 2025 stocking projections, and all things trout. Once again, anglers must register ahead of time. Please come and learn about our programs and have your voice heard.

Ice Fishing in New Jersey – This winter has been an exceptional year for ice fishing, with extended favorable ice conditions. For any of you that follow our GoFishFriday postings that have been going on for 191 consecutive weeks now, Craig Lemon (Superintendent of the Hackettstown Hatchery) does an excellent job working with I&E staff to compile angler photographs to share the hottest fisheries of the week with the public. Many of the recent posts have been of ice fishing, and most of them have been of children ice fishing, indicating it's a great family activity.

Biologist Justin Rozema put together this packet of information, which may be turned into an article, to be distributed to the Council, so that you could bring it back to your Federation of Sportsmen meetings to promote ice fishing. I will highlight a few important points. For many, ice fishing might seem intimidating, but I would like to encourage you to give it a try. Unlike many other forms of fishing, that can be considered a solitary activity, ice fishing is a communal activity. You will often see dozens of people huddled up around a bunch of holes ice fishing. They will often share tips with you. They are typically crowded around a grill, with the feeling of a tailgating party. Fish caught through the ice are often kept to eat and generally taste better coming from the cold water and kept fresh on ice. Ice fishing safety is important and there are some standards such as having at least 4 inches of ice to be considered safe. If you are a first timer, you might want to consider trying an area that was being used by other ice fisherman, as its an indication of safe ice and possibly a concentration of fish. Safety equipment should include a spud bar, some rope in case there is need of a rescue, wearable ice picks, and a life jacket. Just like the new Buddy License, you should always ice fish with a buddy, in case there are any accidents. The document also includes other tips such as places to go and species to fish

for. We think at this point there might be 2 to 3 weeks left this season in the northern portion of the state. Go ahead and give ice fishing a try.

Information & Education:

Chief Ivany reported Planning continues for the Association for Conservation Information conference being hosted by NJDEP Fish & Wildlife in Atlantic City in July.

Hunter Education Registration for Spring classes will begin next week, **February 18th** with Live-Fire Range sessions starting in Mid-March.

Trapper Education held its first Winter Session course last weekend for 30 students that was very well attended. The thought is to offer a class while allowing the opportunity to get out and trap during the season. The next day, the 3rd annual fur handling workshop was conducted for 30 new trappers. We had students attend from Sussex County down to Cape May County and everybody had an enjoyable learning experience. A special thank you goes out to the Jamesburg Field and Stream Club for their assistance with the program.

The R3 Hunting & Shooting Program: has over 120 people who have signed up for the two Turkey Hunting Seminars scheduled. One is up at Pequest on March 1st (1-3 pm) and the second one is March 15th, (1-3 pm) at Batsto. Bob Ericksen and Scott Hill will do the Pequest Program and Joe Leskie and Lou Gambale will do the Batsto Program.

R3 also continues to work on finalizing logistics for the 2025 Women's Mentored Turkey Hunt in Vineland at the end of April (B-Week)

The Tuckahoe Managed Waterfowl Hunt concluded last weekend for the Youth and Veteran Waterfowl Day hunt. 3 teals were harvested by 2 veterans on that day. (Snow/ice conditions made the January days quite difficult to hunt this year.)

Land Management:

Tony McBride reported Central region is preparing for their prescribed burns and all our regions are getting ready for mowing in a few weeks. Staff are preparing equipment now and cutting back vegetation to get ready for Spring planting. The northern region is getting equipment and purchasing more seed to continue making strides towards planting and managing habitats on the WMA's. Crews statewide are getting ready for Spring Trout Stocking.

Update on Warren Mills dam, we got our RCPP Grant for 9.2 million to go towards decommission. The total cost will be 20 million and an opportunity came up to apply for NOAH grant for a maximum of 8 million, which brings us to 17 million. In addition, we had to get support from a private landowner to decommission the dam and he provided a letter of support. Southern Region updates, Habitat Enhancement project is beginning this week, including parking for access, road

improvements and planting for pollinators. Winslow, the roads are going to be regraded in the next few weeks. Parking lot rehabilitation at Malibu Beach WMA is scheduled for the middle of March.

Law Enforcement:

Chief Panico reported we just sworn in our two graduates Michael Rea and Dylan Bates and have two more recruits in the academy. We are in the process of hiring three more, which they took the PT assessment yesterday. Field staff are out in the fields, ice fishing is still real big right now.

Wildlife Management:

Chief Oxley reported the deer numbers as of last week at 4,001 deer ahead of last year 11.7%. if you look at the 6-day firearm season, we had nasty weather. Hopefully you all got your pheasant survey last week. We already exceeded more than 5% response and had some follow-up comments and emails. Staff is out trapping waterfowl and turkey, we had a very successful southern trapping session, we still need 5 more hens in the north. Ducks, we already banded over 100. We will have the final numbers for the March meeting. We are finishing up beaver and staff is getting ready for the mandatory check-in Feb 22 we had 117 harvested as of now.

Endangered and Nongame Species Program:

Chief Clark reported staff conducted a mid-winter survey for bats in a former military bunker in Monmouth County. They discovered two species, one of them being Tri-colored Bat, which is proposed for Federal listing. HPAI is widespread this winter in eagles and raptors, which usually die rapidly when they contract it; eagles in particular are vulnerable because they feed on sick and dead waterfowl including snow geese. Since January 1, we picked up 10 eagles that were positive or suspected positive for Avian Influenza. In the 2024 breeding season, Avian Influenza caused a loss of about half the breeding population of Peregrine Falcons, so we are going to be monitoring them closely this upcoming season, including testing any birds we encounter. We are working with the BI&E on a "Wild About NJ" campaign that is going to highlight different endangered and nongame species or species-groups each month. We are exploring the use of environmental-DNA sampling for hard to detect species.

New Business:

Bobcat Project Update:

Gretchen Fowles gave a presentation on the ENSP's Bobcat Project.

Lunch: 12:15 – 1:01

Offshore Wind:

Assistant Director Meistrell reported she had reached out to the Board of Public Utilities to get a sense of how the executive order on pausing Offshore wind permits is going to affect NJ. At this time there is not any major update, except a statement from the Governor's Office saying we're committed to advancing environmental energy priorities and will continue to explore different options available to meet those goals. At this point it appears that the offshore wind projects have been paused.

Community Based Deer Management- Bernards

Brian Schumm reviewed Bernards application for community Based Deer Management. While deer management efforts should continue to maintain the population at this level, interest from Township staff and agents in continuing this CBDMP has dissipated resulting in low participation (only 4-8 deer harvested annually in the last several years vs. over 50 agents on the permit annually). At this time, the division recommends denying this application.

Public Comment:

Barbara Sachau commented she opposes the CBDM for Bernards.

Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion.

Councilman Robinson made a motion to deny the Bernards CBDM application, seconded by Councilman Whildin. Vote taken; 6- denied, 1- approve, and 1-abstention. Motion is carried and the permit is denied.

2025 Trout Stocking Program:

Chief Crouse reported on the 2025 Trout Stocking Program. Some trout seasons bring changes and some bring challenges... the 2025 trout season brings neither. There are no changes to the program from 2024, however I will outline important points for clarification. Opening day will be on April 5, with a preseason closure on March 17th. For clarification, the proposed Fish Code changes will not go into effect until 2026, so all trout stocked lakes and ponds will be closed during the preseason in 2025. There are no changes to the trout stocking formula. 570,000

Rainbow Trout will be allocated in the same manner as in 2024. Please see handout. This will include nearly identical numbers, loaded on nearly identical trucks. Mill Pond in Bergen County will remain suspended since 2021 due to large amounts of accumulated sediment. The township is looking to dredge, and once complete Mill Pond will be reintroduced to the trout stocking program. Please see the handout indicating proposed waters for the Bonus Broodstock program.

We did an assessment to see how much of our trout stocking program falls within NJDEP's Overburdened Community (OC) layer. Our program consists of stocking trout in 179 waters. Of the 86 lakes and ponds, 42 (49%) are within OCs. Of the 93 trout stocked rivers and streams, 59 (63%) are within OCs. In total, 56% of our trout stocked waters are within OCs.

Public Comment:

Barbara Sachau commented she does not agree with trout stocking.

A motion was made by Councilman Puskas to approve the 2025 Trout Stocking Program as presented, seconded by Councilman Jones. Vote taken; all approved.

Lake Takanassee Trout Stocking:

Chief Crouse reported on Lake Takanassee Trout Stocking Program.

In 2012 Hurricane Sandy wiped out the dam on Lake Takanassee, Long Branch, Monmouth County. A small stream was left in its place. Takanassee was trout stocked water and since it was no longer suitable, we added Franklin Lake in neighboring West Long Branch, which is only 3 miles away. It has been in the program since. Our proposal is to add Lake Takanassee back into the program, as the dam has been rebuilt, the fishery has been reestablished, there is excellent shoreline fishing access, and Long Branch and the Police Department are very supportive of fishing. In fact, the local PBA obtained a stocking permit to stock trout for an opening day fishing derby in 2024 and in 2025. Lake Takanassee is also in an Overburdened Community. We propose adding this water, along with the 22 small ponds, for the 2026 season, to be stocked during the preseason only. These waters will be evaluated and if deemed popular and successful, may be added for additional in-season stockings in future years.

Public Comment:

Barbara Sachau commented that she does not approve, especially with the algae bloom that poisons the waters.

Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion.

A motion was made by Councilman Jones to approve Lake Takanassee Trout Stocking Program as presented, seconded by Councilman Kertz. Vote taken; all approved

Old Business:

Fish Code Update:

Assistant Director Meistrell reported at this time the proposal is with Legal Affairs and the Attorney General's Office and then it will go to the Governors office. If all goes well the adoption could be sometime in November/December this year.

Artificial Reef In Delaware Bay:

Assistant Commissioner Golden reported it's underway and we are in phase 1, which is sand mitigation at the reef site. We should be placing material, which is concrete from the wind port, by the end of the month. From there it is around 30 more days until it is finally complete.

Greenwood Lake Access:

Assistant Commissioner Golden reported not much movement. The package is at Treasury waiting for their approval before we do the architect/engineer selection. The last estimate was it will probably be another 4-6 weeks until we are there.

Public Comment:

Shane Coile commented on a fox named Ziggy he saved that was sick with mange. He would like a review / amendment for a comprehensive program with steps to train and certify people of the public to help treat other animals with mange.

Jim Gleesen commented on pheasant hunting and believes the pheasant allocation plan is a failure. He wanted to see if possible, to put out a survey at the WMA's with a QR code so input on stocking and how it works would be available and the public knows when and how it was stocked. He also heard there would be a reduction of birds next year but asked to increase the fees to help with the cost.

Barbara Sachau commented that DEP took water quality in freshwater a few years ago and standards were lowered. Also, it is public trust, and everyone should have a say about wildlife.

Nina J. commented that the public should get information on bird flu as well as the rehabbers. She also asked if there is anywhere in the state providing testing.

Tamara commented she also would like to be able to treat animals with mange and hopes the public can help these animals as well.

A motion was made by Councilman Kertz to adjourn the meeting at 1:56, seconded by Councilman Lathrop.

Next meeting: March 11,2025 at 10:00 am in-person at the Robbinsville Office.