

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE  
NJ FISH AND GAME COUNCIL  
Central Region Office  
Robbinsville, New Jersey  
March 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: , K. Meistrell, J. Hearon, G. Kopkash, P. Winkler, M. Monteschio, S. Crouse, , 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 meeting. With the spirit of Women's History Month in mind, on behalf of the Entire Fish and Game Council, I would like to take a moment to recognize the outstanding contributions of the women working behind the scenes here at NJ Fish and Wildlife.

Behind every successful assistant commissioner, assistant director, bureau chief, project leader, and biologist are the dedicated and hardworking individuals who ensure that Fish and Wildlife keeps its wheels turning and its engine runs smoothly. Among these essential team members are the women working behind the scenes.

Women such as Barbara Stoff, Danielle Bajek, Kathy Porutski, Lisa Carben, Cathy Hemingway, Joyce Bullock, Wendy Barbuck, and Sabrina Visco- among others- make contributions that often go unnoticed but are crucial to our agency's success.

They are the backbone of our operations, managing administrative tasks, coordinating schedules, maintaining records, and providing essential support to all departments. Their attention to detail and organizational skills ensure everything runs seamlessly behind the scenes.

Let us take a moment to recognize and celebrate these unsung heroes who work tirelessly to support our mission. Their dedication and hard work enable us to effectively achieve our goals and serve our stakeholders and wildlife community. We are deeply grateful for their contributions and invaluable role in our agency's success.

Thank you to all the women in NJ Fish and Wildlife—your efforts do not go unnoticed, and we appreciate everything

## **Council Reports:**

### **Agriculture:**

Councilman Jones reported Spring is here and we are drying out. Deer are moving about and no bear complaints from the north. We are seeing geese damage in the fields. There were reports of vultures in Belvedere with Avian Influenza. I attended the Warren County Board of Agriculture in February.

Councilman Kertz reported it is wet in the south and the water table starting to come up. We have a lot of coyotes at night. I attended the Atlantic County Sportsman Dinner.

Councilman Puskas reported gees throughout the central region are destroying the crops and we lost about 50% so far. We are seeing more geese than ever.

#### **Farmer/Sportsman Relations:**

Councilman Jones reported he attended the North Caucus meeting, and the State Board of Agriculture meeting is next week.

#### **NJ State Federation of Sportsman's Clubs:**

Councilman DeStephano reported he attended the Sussex County beaver check station, the Bergen County Venison Dinner and the Morris County meeting as well as their Dinner.

Councilman Robinson reported he attended the Hunterdon and Monmouth County meetings in person. Somerset and Ocean were canceled and was unable to attend Middlesex. Those 3 Counties, he sent his Council notes. Union County had a virtual meeting and reported that 220 deer harvested with 120 deer (3249lbs.) donated to HHH during their County deer hunt. All Counties had a discussion about the closure of the Fall Turkey season. He also attended the virtual Law Enforcement meeting and in person Game Committee meeting and the NJ NWTF Women in the Outdoors dinner.

Councilman Whildin reported he attended the Cumberland County meeting where they discussed deer and fear of road closures expanding out. The Annual Trash Hunt is March 15<sup>th</sup>.

Chairman Virgilio reported he attended 3 Game dinners, the NJODA's key speaker Ed Markowski lead free meeting and supporting lead free hunting. He attended the Governors Surf Tournament meeting where there will be over \$2025 in prizes. We have a new screen design of a striped bass; this is not finalized yet. I also met with farmers using lasers to prevent crop damage.

**Finance Committee:** No report

#### **Game Code Committee:**

Chairman Virgilio will discuss later in this meeting.

#### **Endangered and Nongame Species Advisory Committee:**

Councilman Lathrop reported they have a meeting tomorrow.

**Waterfowl Committee:**

Councilman Whildin reported they have a meeting following today's Fish and Game Council meeting.

**Wildlife Rehabilitators Advisory Committee:**

Councilman DeStephano reported they have a meeting tomorrow.

**Law Enforcement Committee:**

Councilman Whildin reported they will discuss later under License Restorations.

**Legislative Update:**

Mary Monteschio reported that Congress has introduced HR1494 - To amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to treat certain marketplace providers as importers for purposes of the excise tax on sporting goods. On 02/21/25 the bill was introduced in the House and referred to the Committee on Ways and Means (15 co-sponsors, 0 from NJ).

**Fish and Wildlife Reports:****Office of Business Administration:**

Barb Stoff handed out a packet on license sales comparisons. The Buddy License almost doubled as many sold as last year.

Dr. Reist reported that Avian Influenza is still going, and we have another detection here in NJ on the agricultural side. The detections that we are finding come from imports of state, maybe even out of country. Livestock side, we are still clear, and we have not found any. The Health Department just started testing milk from milk silos in NJ, we don't have any results yet. We are still getting detections in wastewater.

**Freshwater Fisheries:**

Chief Crouse reported **2025 Spring Trout Stocking** – Preparation for spring trout stocking continues. The Spring 2025 Trout Stocking Allocations, Bonus Broodstock, and plan for the

season was presented to Council last month. There were no deviations from the 2024 season. A vote was taken, and it passed. Other ongoing duties include coordination of opening day angler counts (volunteer heavy), communication with staff across Land Management, Pequest Trout Hatchery, and Research & Management staff, and a review of public information. Stocking trucks roll out on Monday, March 17<sup>th</sup>. This is the start of the three-week preseason closure that is still in effect on trout stocked waters for 2026. To be clear, the proposed regulation changes will not go into effect until 2026. Lake Shenandoah (Ocean Co.) will not be stocked due to low water levels due to an ongoing rebuild of the dam, replacement of the bridge, and improvements to the fish ladder. The water level might be back up by fall, therefore winter stocking might be possible.

We are still in a drought and water levels are still low across the state. The same goes for our wells at Pequest and our spring at Hackettstown.

**Oak Ridge Reservoir** water levels are very low. This Newark water supply reservoir was observed to be down to approximately 10% of its surface acreage. An on-site visit by a Conservation Police Officer and one of our Biologists was conducted recently to put eyes on the situation. There is an ongoing dam repair project that was permitted by NJDEP Dam Safety. Fish & Wildlife was not contacted by the engineers on this project. Water levels appear to be rising and facts are being gathered to better understand why this happened. It is not clear at this time as to the relative contributing factors as to why the water levels are so low. Regulations require a minimum passing flow to be released into the Pequannock River at all times to protect the downstream aquatic resource.

Our annual **Virtual Warmwater and Coolwater Fisheries Meeting** was held on Thursday, February 20<sup>th</sup> from 7-8:30pm. There were 180 participants. The agenda included AC Meistrell delivered a Fish & Wildlife Update, Craig Lemon and Tyler Tresslar from the Hackettstown Hatchery presented on update on the Channel Catfish Stocking Program, Justin Rozema gave a presentation on the results of his recent Coolwater Species monitoring program, Chris Smith (Supervising Biologist) gave a update on recent Black Bass sampling and the new Aquatic Invasive Species program. The meeting (just like the virtual Fish Code meeting) was recorded and will be made available on our website.

Please join us tonight for the **Virtual Trout Meeting** from 7pm until 8pm tonight. You must register on our website and will receive a meeting link to join. We will be discussing production of Rainbow Trout at the Pequest Trout Hatchery, the 2023 stocking program and trout allocations, along with potential changes for 2026. Finally, an overview of wild Brook Trout work that has taken place in recent years will be given. This is intended to be an interactive meeting, so please bring your questions and comments and we will be happy to address them.

**Information and Education:**

Chief Ivany reported a black bear Spring activity news release is with the DEP Press Office. Target release is no later than the end of this month. The digital media campaign will kick off on March 15 and continue into November. We are also promoting the availability of educational programs. A news release regarding the Opening Day of Trout Season is also circulating internally and will be sent to the DEP Press Office this week.

An Opening Day of Trout Season celebration for our Veterans will once again be held at Pequest on April 5. More than 80 Veterans have confirmed their attendance, and the program filled immediately.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition Wildlife Habitat Supporter Program stamp (Bobcat) is now available.

Hunter Education classes are filling up very quickly with the Spring kick off starting this weekend in both Regions. Firearm classes are filled up throughout March with limited space available in April right now. An introduction to Trapping program for 18 Rutgers students who are mostly interested in the scientific research side of trapping was held. All seemed to go into it with prior misconceptions and left with a deeper understanding of the necessity for trapping in modern society. Participants enjoyed seeing the furs and many stayed a half hour afterwards asking questions.

The R3 Hunting and Shooting Program conducted a Turkey Hunting Seminar in partnership with the National Wild Turkey Federation at Pequest for more than 30 people. The R3 Team will be conducting another seminar at Batsto this Saturday and registration has been filled for that seminar for some time now.

I&E Staff will be working at DEP's Take Your Kid to Work Day on April 24; the Sportsmen's Jamboree and Deer Classic *and* a DEP Earth Day event in Jersey City on April 26. Planning also continues for the Governor's Surf Fishing Tournament to be held on May 18 at Island Beach State Park.

**Land Management:**

Chief Winkler reported staff are out trout stocking, and seed order completed. Crews are working with Forest Fire doing prescribed burns. The Conservation Renovation Kick Off meeting is scheduled for March 25<sup>th</sup>. We are working on our equipment needs list for the WHISPER grants for the coming year. Round Valley Docks are on order and a scheduled insulation date around Memorial Day. We will be working with Wildlife Management to review the results of the Pheasant/Quail Stamp Survey.

**Law Enforcement:**

Chief Panico reported we are doing more WMA work, trout seasons here and putting signs in the WMA's so everyone knows where to fish. We will be attending the Veteran event on Opening Day. We are training two recruits in-house and we have two recruits at Cape May Academy, and we are conducting background investigations on 11 potential candidates. If any are successful then we will get interviews in May. We are looking to hire three guys, if we get three then we will have a full boat.

**Wildlife Management:**

Assistant Director Meistrell reported the preliminary deer numbers, with final numbers hopefully by next month. Overall, we have an increase in the harvest rates from 2023-2024 except for 6-day firearm where we had significant weather. The overall total harvest number for 2024 is 39,256, which is an increase of 10% from 2023. Zone 34, 43 & 47 above buck goal and staff will review zone 45 & 46 which is below buck goal.

The Pheasant and Quail Survey wrapped up March 7<sup>th</sup> and we are compiling the results. We had a 10% response rate, which is pretty good.

Turkey 2025 research trapping has been completed, we had 106 wild turkeys caught, 49 up North and 57 in South, it's an ongoing research project in multiple states. There is 1 more year left for that study.

Furbearers research trapped 1 adult fisher on February 8<sup>th</sup> and put a collar on it as well as monitoring 2 adult males that were trapped last year. Beavers- 596, Otters- 44, Coyotes- 439, Grey Fox- 71 harvested to date.

Waterfowl staff have been trapping over the last few months. American Black duck, we have been partnering with several partners to work on a study funded by the Black Duck Joint Venture. This is to take a look at the behavior movement through the annual cycle of black ducks and understand productivity using tracking devices, backpack transmitters. Winter 2025 is the 4<sup>th</sup> year NJ had 8 redeployments on female black ducks and program staff operated several additional different banding stations.

**Endangered and Nongame Specie Program:**

Chief Clark reported that biologist Sharon Petzinger finished the end of year report for Sparta Mountain WMA. The program is able to do silvicultural management on 10 acres a year. As a result of management to create younger-aged forest, she has documented 55 bird species, half of which are at-risk species. The silviculture treatment is to open forest canopy which allows shade intolerant shrubs and trees to grow. Within 2-3 years there is a 200% increase in the bird conservation value of the habitat. There is an average of 150% increase in the number of bird species. The next 10 acres is being managed in March. In other news, Bald Eagles are in height

of nesting season, and so far, volunteers have documented 150 pairs incubating and 26 pairs already hatched. Avian Influenza is still affecting Bald Eagles: so far, we picked up about 20 eagles, most of them already dead, some were sick and then died. Dr. Connelly (Office of Wildlife Health & Forensics) is testing for Avian Influenza and found 15 eagles positive. We are planning to continue picking up sick/dead raptors for testing.

#### **New Business:**

#### **Fall Turkey Season:**

Jimmy Sloan gave a presentation on the Fall Turkey Season. Here are our options.

1. Leave season open for Fall 2025
2. Close half of the state
3. Close Hen harvest statewide
4. Close statewide either-sex season.

Fish and Wildlife recommends closing the Fall either-sex immediately.

#### **Public Comment:**

Tony P. worked with the upland game and the turkey project, disagrees with the Divisions decision to close the Fall season.

Bob E, a wildlife biologist of 50-years in turkey research is opposed to closing the turkey season, and feels it is unwise to initiate regulation changes in a course of a study.

Ed commented he agrees with the division to close the Fall season until numbers get to a sustainable population.

Bill M. past Councilman opposes the closing of the Fall Season but suggested to make some changes such as: 1 turkey per season, not allow turkey hunting in elevated stand, 3-day season and 7-day where turkey are thriving.

Lou G. National Wild Turkey Federation commented he agrees with the Division and that we have a decline of birds.

Barbara Sachau is against killing turkeys in any season.



Jay S. agrees with the Division and that we have a declining number, and it is trending South.

Tom W. commented he agrees with the Division and birds in the north are in trouble.

**Councilman Jones made a motion to open discussion, seconded by Councilman Kertz.**

Chairman Virgilio mentioned that last week The Game Code Committee met and recommended supporting option number 4, to close the 2025 fall turkey hunting season.

After careful review, we base this recommendation on our biological data, hunter-harvest reports, and long-term population monitoring trends. Our turkey populations are in decline in all 3 regions of the state. The signs of decline are attributable to a few factors, like reduced recruitment, habitat loss, predation, and weather impacts during the critical brood-rearing period.

Fall hunting may be supported and enjoyed by a portion of our hunting public but occurs at a time of year when turkey hens and juvenile birds—are most vulnerable to additional mortality. Unlike the spring season, which is biologically timed and largely focused on gobblers, the fall season permits the harvest of hens, which can have a greater influence on the overall population trajectory.

In light of these concerns, and to support population recovery along with long-term sustainability, the Game Code Committee recommends this closure as a **measured action**. The Committee further recommends that this decision be revisited annually, informed by ongoing data collection and input from both biologists and stakeholders.

The Game Code Committee understands the importance of keeping hunting opportunities as an important part of our state's conservation efforts, however, in this case, the scientific indicators suggest a more precautionary approach is necessary. This action aligns with the Council's broader responsibility to conserve wildlife for future generations, even when it entails difficult trade-offs.

Therefore, the Game Code Committee recommends that the Council formally close the fall turkey hunting season under the special circumstances authority of our game code 7:25-5.1(g) until population indicators support its reinstatement. We remain committed to working closely with the Division, stakeholders, and the hunting public to monitor population trends and ensure that any future changes are based on sound science and shared values.

**Councilman Kertz made a motion to close the discussion, seconded by Councilman Puskas.**

**Councilman Kertz made a motion to close the 2025 Fall Turkey season as presented, seconded by Councilman Whildin. Vote taken; 6-approve, 1-oppose (Puskas), and 1-abstention (Robinson). Motion carries.**

#### **License Restorations:**

##### **David Cappiello – Present**

Captain Soell read aloud the statement for the revocation appeal for Mr. Cappiello who was present. Mr. Cappiello was convicted on October 25, 2023, of violation N.J.S.A/N.J.A.C. 23:2B-6 possession of 1 undersized tautog. A second violation on November 28, 2024 for N.J.S.A/N.J.A.C. 23:4-47, violate antler point restriction fall bow season.

Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to open the floor for discussion.

**A motion was made by Councilman Robinson to open the floor for discussion, seconded by Councilman Kertz. Vote taken, all in favor; motion approved.**

After the council discussed Mr. Cappiello's violations, Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to close the floor for discussion.

**A motion was made by Councilman Robinson to close the floor for discussion, seconded by Councilman Whildin. vote taken, all in favor; motion approved.**

Chairman Virgilio stated that the council has three options, reinstate, continue revocation, or delay for additional information. If there is a motion to reinstate, for the record justification is needed.

**Councilman DeStephano made a motion Not to reinstate Mr. Cappiello's license, seconded by Councilman Kertz. vote taken, 7- in favor, 1-oppose (Puskas); motion carried.**

**Lunch: 12:10 – 12:52**

#### **Wildlife Management Area Closures:**

Chief Panico gave a presentation on the WMA closures. These will take place May 23, 2025 through September 2025.

**Public Comment – WMA Closures:**

Public Member commented if trash cans were put in the WMA's, the public would use them.

**Old Business:**

**Greenwood Lake Update:**

Assistant Director Hearon reported that as of right now there has been no change.

**Delaware Bay Artificial Reef Project:**

Assistant Director Hearon reported things are happening as we speak.

**Deer Depredation Permit Update:**

Assistant Director Meistrell reported that they met and had internal discussions with NJ State Parks, Forests, and Historic Site and determined that all deer depredation permits that are issued on all NJ State Parks, Forests and Historic Sites will be effective from March 1<sup>st</sup> – Aug 31<sup>st</sup> to not conflict with the regular hunting season.

Those depredation permits should have been sent to everyone who applied for one. If they haven't been issued it is because they are waiting on the lease agreement holder to send back the paperwork.

**Contact Vendor Options for Pheasant Stocking Program:**

Assistant Director Meistrell reported this was in response to what happens if our vendors get Avian Influenza. We have two contract vendors that we are using and we have to look into other options, but our options are fairly limited. If one of our vendors do contract AI, then we will have to make some really tough decisions. If one gets it we will look into the other vendor for birds to supplement. We will keep an eye on it and keep exploring options.

**Landscape Project Mapping Demo:**

Pat Woerner gave a presentation on landscape mapping version 3.4. the Wildlife habitat mapping for community land-use planning and species conservation.

**Wharton State Forest Road Access Update:**

Pat Woerner gave a presentation on Wharton State Forest and vehicle use, roads and environmentally sensitive areas.

**Public Comment:**

Barbara Sachau commented it is time for all animals in NJ to be endangered/protected.

Andrew Burnett commented in Wharton; trappers need access as well.

**A motion was made by Councilman Kertz to adjourn the meeting at 2:06 pm, seconded by Councilman Jones. Vote taken, all approve.**