

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
NJ FISH AND GAME COUNCIL
Central Region Office
Robbinsville, New Jersey
April 8, 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 April 1, 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 - **Absent**
Councilman Rick Lathrop
Councilman Rob Pollock
Councilman Bob Puskas -**Absent**
Councilman Loren Robinson
Councilman Ken Whildin

Fish & Wildlife employees included: D. Golden, K. Meistrell, J. Hearon, G. Kopkash, M. Monteschio, A. Ivany, S. Crouse, and D. Bajek.

There were several members of the public in attendance.

Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to approve the March 11, 2025, F&G Council minutes.

Councilman Robinson made a motion to approve the March 11, 2025, minutes, seconded by Councilman Jones. Vote taken. Motion approved.

Chairman Virgilio welcomed everyone to the meeting on behalf of the NJ F&G Council. This council is the essence of selflessness and dedication. I am honored to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with individuals who give so much of their time for wildlife management and conservation. Your unwavering commitment—whether from the viewpoint of the public, sportsmen, farmers, or advocates for nongame and endangered species—forms the backbone of New Jersey's wildlife conservation efforts.

It is with a heavy heart that I share the news of the recent passing of John J. Kertz Jr., the beloved father of our esteemed councilman, Edward Kertz.

John Kertz Jr. raised his family on the farm with a deep respect for the land he tilled and the wildlife that the land supported.

So much so that his son, councilman Edward Kertz, is now serving his fourth four-year term on this Fish and Game Council.

John J. Kertz Jr.'s legacy lives on through his family and his contributions to the farming community that will not be forgotten.

On behalf of our Fish and Game Council, I extend our deepest condolences to Edward and his family during this difficult time.

May they find comfort in the memories and lasting impact of a remarkable life.

Assistant Commissioner Golden thanked staff from Land Management, Freshwater Fisheries, Law Enforcement and Information & Education on the Opening Day of Trout. We had our Veteran's event at the Pequest hatchery where we had close to 40 veterans attend and fish at the pond. We had a very successful day and a great job by our staff.

Council Reports:

Agriculture:

Councilman Jones reported he is seeing a lot of bear and turkey, and they are out moving around. Spring is here and field work is being done.

Dr. Reist reported we are still dealing with Avian Influenza, no major changes. In England and Great Britain, they found AI in sheep. The USDA is working on a biosecurity plan with big

farms, there is money in research on efforts on how to deal with AI. New world screw worm fly larva lay on cattle and emerge through the skin, which feeds off the living tissue.

Farmers/Sportsman Relations:

Councilman Jones reported he attended committee meeting last week, 2 Farmer Reps and Division employees where we met with NJ Farm Bureau, State Board of Agriculture members. We had a lengthy discussion on Canada Goose control and including how to increase resident goose harvest in the Federal framework for a goose season. One option was encouraging Hunters Helping the Hungry (HHH) to include Geese to the list. We also talked about the use of bird lasers and how to look for funding. Modifications on deer depredation permits which will hopefully include online reporting and modify the agent lists. Also, we discussed the possibility of amending regulations to allow the use of both shotgun and bow on depredation permits.

NJ State Federation of Sportsman's Clubs:

Councilman DeStephano reported he met with the rehabbers, and we are trying to figure out the regulations to get them to work. He attended the Warren County Federation meeting, NJ Trappers Fur Sale and the NJ Fur Harvest pickup.

Councilman Robinson reported he attended the Migratory Bird Season Setting meeting, Waterfowl Stamp Committee meeting, Farmer Sportsman Relations, Game Committee, Finance, Somerset, Hunterdon County, Ocean, and the Monmouth, the State Federation and the Fur Harvester's, meeting. Most of the county's discussions were that geese seem to be a problem everywhere throughout the state.

Councilman Whildin reported he attended the Migratory Bird Season Setting meeting, the Waterfowl Stamp Committee, Cumberland County Federation meeting, where they discussed the Trash Hunt with 11.9 tons of trash was removed and a record of 498 volunteers county wide. He also attended the National Deer Association Deer Banquet.

Chairman Virgilio reported he attended the Farmers Bureau meeting, Finance meeting, the Governor's Surf Tournament meeting where they picked the T-shirt design, Game Code, Federation meetings and the Board of Directors meeting.

Finance:

Councilman Robinson reported they met today and discussed future revenue/spending on stocking game birds in NJ.

Game Committee:

Chairman Virgilio reported they went over the pheasant stocking for this upcoming year and will be presented later today.

Endangered and Nongame Species Advisory Committee:

Councilman Lathrop reported that this will be his last meeting, and that Russ Furnari will be taking his place here as well as on the ENSAC. He would like to thank everyone, and the time on council has been a learning experience.

Councilman Furnari reported he is retired from PSE&G and has been serving on the ENSAC for 5 years. He has a background in wetlands management and is happy to be here.

Waterfowl Stamp Advisory Committee:

Councilman Whildin reported they has a meeting and discussed the Manahawkin impoundment project which it is held up in Treasury. We also spoke about the possibility of the purchase of 2-properties.

Public Member:

Councilman Pollock reported that everyone did a great job with trout stocking. He drove around and saw a lot of people fishing.

Legislative Report:

Mary Monteschio reported that in Congress, the House went home due to the rules of the House, so no activity was reported. In the meantime, the NJ Legislature has been working on the budget. Ms. Monteschio also reported that Bill A4976 – S3895, which establishes the crime of reckless discharge of a firearm, passed the Assembly.

Fish & Wildlife Repots:**Business Administration:**

Barb Stoff handed out a packet to council of the license sales comparison. Fishing licenses sales are up 6.8%, trout stamps are up 3.6%, Fishing and all-around sales are up 5.18%. The Apprentice and Buddy license numbers have risen significantly, and the Saltwater/multi license participation is 70% Saltwater only.

Freshwater Fisheries:

Chief Crouse reported the Opening Day of Trout Season was April 5th.

182,080 Production fish + 3,600 Broodstock = 185,680 Total Pre-Season

All waters were stocked as anticipated, with the exception of Lake Shenandoah (Ocean), 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.

Cool and cloudy weather was prevalent throughout the state, with moderate winds reported by survey clerks in some areas. Rain was reported intermittently, primarily in the northern counties and more prevalent closer to noon. Temperatures across the state on Saturday morning ranged from the upper 40's and low 50's, and generally cooled off throughout the day as clouds and rain moved in. While New Jersey remains in a Drought Warning status following last year's abnormally dry fall and winter, much of the state experienced rain during the week prior to Opening Day.

- Draft – Still waiting for 11 volunteers to submit their data. Given this is the last year prior to reg changes, this data is valuable, and the report would benefit from their inclusion prior to it being “finalized”.
- 36 waterbodies are covered at present, 31 lakes/ponds and 5 rivers. The average volunteer turnout currently, if missing data is submitted, will be the largest Opening Day survey we've done.
- As a reminder, this opening day angler survey is not used to assess the program's overall success, it is used to determine popularity and angling success on specific waterbodies.
- 950 anglers caught 604 trout, averaging 0.63 fish/angler and 26.4 anglers/waterbody.
- Angler success was high (0.7 trout/angler on ponds), 4th highest trout/angler average since 2011 on lakes/ponds.
- Blair Lake (6.3 trout/angler) but only 7 anglers, Mountain Farm Pond(3.7), Gloucester City Pond (2.0) but only 10 anglers, and the Raritan River South Branch (1.2) had highest angler success rates.
- Shaw's Mill Pond (95 anglers), Raritan River North Branch (56) and Dahnert's Lake (55) had the highest reported angler turnout.
- Overall reported cormorant activity was high. 22/31 lakes/ponds reported cormorant presence, 7/31 reported ten or more actively feeding.

On Friday near 4pm, we received an email with HAB results, indicating that Mountain Lake (Warren) tested at an “Advisory” level, indicating not to consume fish. We scrambled to get information on the web, email list serves, and social media. I even asked Al to drive over and staple up a sign himself.

On March 11 we had our annual **Virtual Trout Meeting** from 7pm until 8pm. Presentations on Rainbow Trout Production at the Pequest Trout Hatchery (Nick Healy), Trout Allocations and 2026 potential changes (Kyle Civalier), and an overview of Brook Trout Conservation and

Restoration (Ross Shramko). 229 public participants attended, making it tied with our most well attended meeting yet. The meeting (just like the other two meetings) was recorded and is available on our website. In fact, as of the morning of Friday, April 4th, we have had 1,279 views.

Fish Code Update - We received the legal review. Mary reviewed it and it is back in my possession. We are three weeks behind, but plan to finish our review by next week.

Information & Education:

Chief Ivany reported an Opening Day of Trout Season celebration was again held at the Pequest Trout Hatchery Fishing Education Pond for Veterans. More than 60 Veterans attended for a morning of fishing and comradery. Many thanks to the Hackettstown Elks Lodge 2331 and Bagelsmith in Belvidere for providing breakfast for the vets.

Much time was spent promoting the Opening Day of Trout Season. A DEP news release was drafted and distributed statewide through the Press Office and there were many stories in the press. Promotion was also accomplished through the Fish & Wildlife Website, social media and GovDelivery. A black bear news release was also drafted and distributed statewide through the DEP Press Office highlighting the Spring bear activity period and providing tips on how to avoid bear encounters. The digital marketing campaign regarding black bear safety is also underway and will run into November.

Information and Education staff assisted with the dissemination of information regarding Avian Influenza. Updated and extensive information was posted on the Fish & Wildlife website in the form of an all-inclusive microsite that includes background, frequently asked questions, signs and municipal and county resources. These resources were promoted on social media and through GovDelivery, as well as the Local Government Assistance newsletter.

Final editorial sign off on the Marine Digest is expected asap with an on the shelf target date of May 10.

Information and Education staff will be working at the upcoming Deer Classic on April 26. Planning is also being finalized for the Governor's Surf Fishing Tournament on May 18, and continues for the Association for Conservation Information Conference in July.

Requests are coming in for the Mobile Education Trailer for 2025 and DEP has confirmed our display space again for the League of Municipalities in Atlantic City in November.

Law Enforcement:

Chief Panico reported staff were out full force for Opening Day Trout season. Our two newest CPOs are at their halfway point at the Cape May Police Academy and our other two are out in the field with other officers and will be on their own soon. Next meeting will look very different, as of April 22 we will launch our new CAD system with E-summons.

Land Management:

Assistant Director Hearon reported staff have been out trout stocking. We are doing our Spring planting and have road crews in full swing out working across the state. Winslow is being worked on now and they have already been to Malibu, and Hansey Creek and will be heading over to DOD along the Delaware river next.

Lands Management worked with the woodcock society in Central and South NJ. Last weekend they completed a project in Dennis Creek WMA where smooth Alders were planted. Bay Point Beach restoration in Lawrence Township just completed. The second project, we are able to restore those areas back to its natural sandy beaches, which helps the horseshoe crabs and migratory shorebirds. Pond Creek is at the halfway point; the water tower came down.

Boat ramp projects are continuing to roll in, we are waiting for the docks at Round Valley and Spencer Creek. Once delivered, they will be installed.

Endangered and Nongame Species:

Assistant Director Hearon reported that field season has begun. We have hourlies coming on to help and staff are preparing for the field season. The Bald Eagle project is in full swing with volunteers monitoring over 230 nests. There will be a full report next month.

Wildlife Management:

Chief Oxley reported last month some involvement with local government and the public, we got wind that Ocean Township had recommended an ordinance for no hunting East of route 9. Staff attended the council meeting on March 18th, they allowed us to talk, educate and clarify things and point out the issues with that ordinance. They did end up rescinding it. It was very successful and wanted to thank staff for going out after hours.

On March 20th, Jimmy Sloan and Tim Ruth met with Plainsboro Public Works manager to discuss wildlife habitat management on a preserve, deer population issues, and made them aware of the opportunities now available with the Deer Management Grant for FY25.

Game Code update- as of March 25th it is back with the Office of Legal Affairs once again to go over all the edits we worked on over the last couple of months. Once wrapped up their it will go over to the Governor's Office.

Jodi Powers gave a presentation on the 2024-2025 final White-tail Deer harvest numbers. We had a total of 39,255 deer. Compared to the 5-year average we are down 4.2% from 2019.

Old Business:

Black Bear Resistant Trash Can Pilot Program:

Jill Aspinwall and Loretta Pregartner gave a presentation on the distribution of the Black Bear Resistant Trash Cans. They distributed cans in Sparta, Jefferson, West Milford, Hampton and Rockaway. There was overwhelming support for the program, but some complaints were that the cans were too small, top heavy, and difficult to lock.

Lunch: 12:23 – 1:02

Abbots Meadows Restoration Project:

Tyler Kinney gave a presentation on the Abbots Meadow Restoration Project with adaptive management and marsh restoration.

2025 Pheasant Stocking Schedule:

Jimmy Sloan gave a presentation on the Pheasant & Quail Stamp Buyer Survey 2025. He provided Pheasant stocking options to council. NJF&W recommends we remove mid-week stocking on certain WMA and added Manasquan.

Chairman Virgilio reported we had a Game Code Committee meeting this morning and agreed to what NJF&W recommends which is remove mid-week stocking on certain WMA and added Manasquan.

Public Comment on 2025 Pheasant Stocking Schedule:

Barbara Sachau commented that she is against all killing of animals.

Councilman made a motion to accept the recommendation as presented, seconded by Councilman Whildin. Vote taken; all agree. Motion carries.

Oak Ridge Reservoir:

Chief Crouse reported water was intentionally lowered as part of an ongoing dam repair project that was permitted by NJDEP Dam Safety. This Newark water supply reservoir was observed to be down to less than 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, however we do not know if a fish kill occurred within the lake.

A Dam Safety permit condition was violated, as Fish & Wildlife was not contacted to obtain a Water Lowering Permit or to determine if Fish Salvage was necessary. Dam Safety typically notifies F&W, but in this case, there was no notification. This does not relinquish the responsibility of the City of Newark to reach out to us. Dam Safety does not intend to impose any consequences to the City of Newark at this time.

Communication between F&W, Dam Safety, and the City of Newark continues. At this stage, communications are aimed at making sure all parties are aware that the City of Newark needs to communicate with F&W, so that a proper review of projects of this magnitude can take place. The repairs associated with this project were mandatory, but not an emergency. F&W would not have allowed this water lowering to take place during the winter months to protect hibernating turtles and would have required a fish salvage. Moving forward, water levels are rising, and we aim to improve communication so that an event like this does not happen in the future. It is my understanding that Law Enforcement does not intend to pursue any violations.

Delaware Bay Artificial Reef Project:

Assistant Director Hearon reported that Delaware Bay reef site was created in 2017, but to date has received very little material. We had the opportunity to partner with EDA to get material which is 3x3 square concrete pilings that are 3-8 ft long. Roughly 700,000 tons of material to be placed there. There are four artificial reefs in state waters, the other 13 are in Federal waters. As of last week, we are halfway through the 700 tons of material. Overall, 15 barge loads will go out, roughly 470 tons per load. When everything is done there will be a documentary on our website.

Greenwood Lake Update:

Assistant Commissioner Golden reported we are continuing progress. We met with Parks/forestry this past month and the conversation was about the RP is going out to bid for construction. One change that was made at that meeting was to add a floating dock at the ramp to help with the ease of launching boats. Hopefully this time next year we will be working on a ramp and completed by Summer 2026.

Public Comment:

Barbara Sachau commented she has difficulty with retrieving the monthly reports off our website. She also feels there are a lot of problems with virtual meetings and that when a speaker is presenting, they should identify themselves by their full name so listeners know who is speaking.

Councilman Whildin made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 1:57 pm. Seconded by Councilman DeStephano.

Next meeting: May 13, 2025 at 10:00 am. in person at the Assunpink Office.