

SC DNR Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Committee
Minutes April 13, 2010 Meeting
Rembert Dennis Building, Columbia, South Carolina

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Chair Stephen Davis, Vice Chair Ed Muckenfuss, Milton Brazell, Billy Hoole, Charles Howard, John Gramling, Cleve Smith, Bryson Thomason

MEMBERS ABSENT:

Paul Bennett, John Troutman

STAFF PRESENT:

Breck Carmichael, Ken Prosser, Tim Ivey; Derrell Shipes, Ross Self, Lynn Quattro, Dean Harrigal, Charles Ruth, Jay Butfiloski, Felicia Sanders, Laurel Barnhill, Don Winslow, Capt. Harvin Brock, Lt. Col. Glen Ward, Susan Johnson

Patrick Jodice and Lisa Ferguson Eggert of Clemson University were in attendance.

Douglas Ford, Senate Fish, Game and Forestry also attended.

Chair Davis welcomed members to the meeting and the minutes of the January 12, 2010 meeting were approved as submitted.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE COMMENTS:

Several members commented on turkey hunting and Chair Davis stated he remains encouraged by the next generation of hunters and stressed to Committee Members to do what they can to keep youth in the woods.

No constituents were present.

2009-10 SC WATERFOWL SEASON RECAP:

DNR Waterfowl Program Supervisor Dean Harrigal stated not all the data from the state-wide harvest has been received yet; however several handouts were provided which included a summary of the 2009-10 Wildlife Management Area (WMA) regular season harvest summary (copies attached to the original minutes). The WMA waterfowl season finished with a total harvest of 3,643 birds, with an average of 2.0 birds per hunter. Harrigal further stated these results are identical to the per hunter average reported last year. A total of 1,841 hunters participated on 16 WMAs where individual hunt data is recorded.

Wood ducks accounted for 19 percent of the harvest, followed by Blue-winged teal, American green-winged teal, Northern shoveler, Gadwall, and Ring-necked ducks. Harrigal stated it was an average season, especially considering the weather, on waterfowl management areas.

Results on Category I WMAs (computer drawing areas) showed that 894 hunters on 7 areas harvested 2,643 birds for an average of 3.0 birds per hunter. Harrigal reported Santee Coastal Reserve led in total harvest for WMAs with 1,498 birds harvested by 338 hunters for an average of 3.5 birds per hunter.

DNR sponsored youth hunts resulted in 98 hunters harvesting 278 birds.

SC SEABIRD NESTING – FINAL REPORT:

Ph.D. Graduate Research Assistant, Lisa Eggert, delivered a Power Point presentation on intertidal bird use at Deveaux Bank. Eggert stated seabirds nesting in South Carolina include the Brown Pelican, Black Skimmer, Royal Tern, Sandwich Tern, Gull-billed Tern, and Laughing Gull. In South Carolina, seabirds nest on the ground in colonies on coastal islands that are free of development and mammalian predators, and provide appropriate breeding habitat and proximity to foraging grounds.

Eggert explained there are several coastal islands in SC but only a handful currently supports seabird breeding colonies. Declining nest numbers in the state, in particular Brown Pelicans and Royal Terns, have increased concern over disturbance at the colonies. In 2006, protection of seabirds at three state owned nesting islands was enhanced: Crab Bank and Bird Key were closed to visitors during the breeding season (March 15 – October 15). Visitor access at Deveaux Bank was prohibited above the high-tide line (the intertidal area and a designated recreational area remain open to visitors year-round), and dogs are prohibited on all three islands. The intertidal area is an essential component of seabird breeding habitat and is used for loafing, feeding, courtship, and chick rearing. Eggert studied intertidal area use by seabirds and shorebirds at Deveaux Bank, which supported the greatest diversity of nesting birds and has historically supported the largest colonies in the state. She conducted 17 surveys at Deveaux Bank to examine bird use of the intertidal area throughout the breeding season. The objectives of her study were to identify areas of high bird abundance and examine habitat relationships using physical features that could be readily identifiable by biologists during limited visits to the colonies during the breeding season.

Habitat characteristics at 2 scales were considered. At the plot scale, plot models considered the effects of beach slope and human use on bird abundance. Human use was included as the proportion of surveys that people, dogs, or signs of use were observed during surveys. At a larger, landscape scale, models included minimum distance to colony and standing water, presence of dunes and offshore sandbars. Over 9000 birds representing 33 species were counted. All survey plots around the island were used by seabirds and shorebirds; no plots were unused during the two years. However, there was substantial variability in plot use between years which reflected the dynamic nature of both the habitat itself (e.g. location of colonies, dunes, and human use indices shifted between years) and the bird responses to those changes. However, the study revealed that no single habitat characteristic accurately and/or precisely predicted bird abundance. For example, areas of high abundance were not simply limited to intertidal areas near colonies or sandbars. Within the intertidal area, the majority of seabirds

and shorebirds (60%) used the lower beach, i.e., that area of the beach immediately above the water's edge. The mid-beach area also was important, supporting 26% of birds. But all areas were utilized as the water's edge supported 9.3% and the upper beach supported 4.0% of the birds. Adult and young consistently use all sections of Deveaux Bank (uplands, dunes, intertidal) throughout the entire breeding season. Intertidal areas away from nests are critical habitat to chicks of terns, pelicans, and skimmers, which often roam widely prior to fledging. The closed intertidal zone at Crab Bank also was heavily used by seabirds and shorebirds. Between 2005 (before closure) and 2008 (after closure, last year of study), colonies increased by 132 nests for Black Skimmers, 256 nests for Royal Terns, and 322 nests for Brown Pelicans. Few undeveloped islands with habitat characteristics appropriate for seabird nesting remain in SC or throughout the southeastern U.S. Eggert stated limited conservation opportunities remain for seabirds in this region.

SHAD AND RIVER HERRING UPDATE: Freshwater Fisheries Chief, Ross Self, distributed copies of SC's freshwater river system as a reference item. Self stated shad and herring stocks are declining across the Atlantic Coast creating a need to implement restrictions in an attempt to preserve and recover those populations. Self further stated the Management Plan of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) is calling for the closure of shad and herring fisheries in the coastal rivers unless states can demonstrate sustainability in the individual river systems. Self further stated Amendment 2 under the Plan addresses river herring (blueback herring) and calls for the closure of blueback herring fisheries in the coastal rivers by January 2012. South Carolina's Management Plan for Blueback Herring has been completed and submitted to the ASMFC. Self stated the SC Plan would result in closure of the commercial and recreational harvest of the blueback herring fishery in the Ace Basin (the Ashepoo, Combahee, Edisto and Savannah Rivers) by January 2012. Self also stated the blueback herring fishery will most likely be closed in the Winyah Bay system as well.

Self reported there is good information regarding bluebacks in the Santee River System and hopefully, the fishery will remain open in the Santee and Cooper Rivers. Blueback herring may be harvested below Russell Dam by cast net to use as bait. Populations land-locked in the upstate reservoirs will remain accessible.

Self stated staff is currently in the process of developing SC's response to Amendment 3 of the Plan which refers to the American shad. Self stated this management plan will be somewhat similar to the Blueback Herring Plan. However, the fishery may remain open recreationally and commercially in the Savannah River system. Self reported there is a possibility the National Marine Fishery Service (NMFS) will eliminate set nets on the Savannah River, and the shad fishery may be closed in the Waccamaw River System. The Santee Cooper System has a robust shad population and there are some shad enhancement projects in the system that Self feels may be helpful in keeping that fishery open.

UPDATE ON DEER HARVEST MANAGEMENT PROGRAM PROPOSAL:

Deer/Turkey Project Leader Charles Ruth stated that at the March meeting of the DNR Board, information was provided concerning various types of surveys that could be implemented to further measure public sentiment related to deer limits, tagging and charging a fee for a tagging system. The Board requested staff provide additional information concerning surveys, including sample sizes, cost estimates, and timelines.

Ruth reported DNR has a contract with Responsive Management (a nationally known natural resource survey firm). Prices for mail and telephone surveys have been set and the firm also conducts internet surveys. Ruth discussed the pros and cons of the various types of surveys. Staff will present further developments relevant to the surveys (i.e. random telephone or mail survey, sample size, statistical reliability, cost and timeline) to the Board at the April 16th meeting.

A motion was made and a second received in support of moving ahead with the Responsive Management survey.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE:

Breck Carmichael distributed copies of DNR's Legislative Update as of 4/2/10 (copy attached to the original minutes). Carmichael stated the House passed their version of the budget several weeks ago and it is now being discussed in the Senate. Should the House version of the budget hold up, DNR will be \$4.9 million short making of payroll on July 1st in state appropriated dollars. The agency has requested the use of Water Recreational funds to help offset the reductions, and the DNR is asking that the Senate restore \$2 million in state appropriated dollars back to what the House passed. Carmichael stated should these requests be granted, the agency can survive another year without a massive reduction in force.

Chief of Staff Don Winslow stated if the House budget goes through as it is currently written, and the agency is not able to utilize Water Recreation funds, there is a real possibility the agency will be restructured and will no longer have a Land, Water and Conservation Division. Law Enforcement will also be further negatively impacted.

Carmichael highlighted recent activity on several pieces of the agency's key legislation.

OLD AND/OR NEW BUSINESS:

None reported.

DATE, TIME AND PLACE OF NEXT MEETING:

July 13, 2010, time and location to be announced.