

# Waterfowl Advisory Committee Meeting Summary

## November 17, 2025

Location: DNR Headquarters, 260 D Epting Lane, West Columbia, SC 29172

Duration: 9:37 am - 12:09 pm

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### Attendees

Chairman John Hilton, Vice Chairman Ernie Wiggers, Bill Mace, Bob Perry, Dr. Mark Hartley, Chief of Wildlife Billy Dukes, Assistant Chief of Wildlife Jay Cantrell, Assistant Chief Regions 1 & 3 Willie Simmons, Assistant Chief Regions 2 & 4 Sam Chappelle, State Waterfowl Biologist Molly Kneece, Region 3 Coordinator Barry Kesler, Region 4 Coordinator Alicia Farrell, Assistant Chief of Staff Kevin Ryan, General Counsel Susan Porter, Assistant Director of Public Information Jeff Dennis

### Agenda Outline

1. Introductions
  2. Approval of Previous Minutes
  3. Follow-Up on Previous Public Comments
  4. Main Topics Discussed
    - Hickory Top WMA: Senior/Youth Special Hunt Proposal
    - Waterfowl Habitat & Management Updates (Extensive, Region by Region)
    - Staff Reports: Detailed project and regional overviews
    - Waterfowl Lottery Hunt Access Opportunities
    - Waterfowl Annual Report and Legislative Reporting
    - Research Project Updates
    - Wood Duck Box Program - Funding, Participation, Data Quality
    - Santee Cooper Lake Water Levels/ Habitat Considerations
    - General Comments, Future Meetings, and Other Follow-ups
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### Main Topics Discussed

#### 1. Approval of Minutes

- Previous meeting's minutes were reviewed; no changes were requested.
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#### 2. Public Comment Follow-Up: Hickory Top WMA Special Hunt Days

##### Summary:

- A constituent's prior request (Charles Grant) to set aside special hunt days at Hickory Top WMA (Green Tree Reservoir, Clarendon County) for senior and/or youth hunters was revisited.

- Discussion included:
  - The difficulty seniors face in accessing spots due to competition and physical barriers.
  - Hickory Top being especially suitable for seniors due to relatively easy terrain.
  - The importance of intergenerational hunting and the role of older hunters mentoring youth.
  - Federal framework already provides for Youth and Veterans days; accommodating special senior days would reduce available days for general hunters.
  - Historical attempts at setting aside hunts have often seen low attendance for special groups.

### Key Points:

- Generally positive sentiment towards exploring a senior-specific hunt, potentially paired with youth hunts.
- A formal update/report will be requested from staff in the spring to consider implementation for the following year.
- Concern over broader precedent: special days at other locations may then be requested by more distant constituents.

## 3. Category 1 Waterfowl Habitat Updates

### Regions 1 & 3 (Beaver Dam, Clemson, Wateree, etc.)

#### Highlights & Specific Area Reports:

- *Beaver Dam WMA:*
  - Improved parking lot after creek-side sediment wash issues; food plantings (Sudan sorghum, Chiwapa millet); mobility-impaired blind maintained.
  - Key challenge: High rainfall leads to water management difficulty and infrastructure erosion despite recent improvements; stone spillway at subimpoundment is still frequently undercut by flow.
  - Action Item: Continue seeking engineering solutions for spillway robustness with partners (DU, engineers).
- *Clemson Waterfowl Area:*
  - Fields cleaned and planted (corn, millet, Sudan sorghum); successful pump installation improved drainage and allowed better crop growth.
  - Discussions with Clemson University for potential tree plantings and habitat acquisition to reduce disturbance.
- *Wateree River Heritage Preserve:*
  - Multiple impoundments (Goodwill Pond, Brickyard, Cypress, Cook's Mountain) with success in crop production (corn, millet), hog and deer fencing, and water management.
  - Greentree reservoir project paperwork now approved; anticipated to begin work soon.

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## Regions 2 & 4: Pee Dee and Coastal Regions

#### Highlights & Area-Specifics:

- *General Themes:*
  - Record food production and habitat quality improvements observed after several years of investment—corn, several millet types, rice, and moist soil manipulations.
  - Active adaptive management: hydrology manipulations, habitat burns, and controlling invasive/exotic plants (*Sesbania* as deliberate screens; Cuban bulrush sprayed/disturbed at Donnelley).
- *Broad River:*
  - Significant hardwood loss from Hurricane Helene mitigated, better crop production, new staff on-board.

- *Sandy Beach:*
  - Multiple millet types did well, but some issues with rice (late planting, over-application of herbicide/stunting; plan corrective actions for following year).
- *Samworth:*
  - Successful impoundment management, physical infrastructure enhancements; field days held for staff skill-building with external experts.
- *Santee Delta & Coastal Reserve:*
  - Infrastructure work ongoing post-Hurricane Ian (dike repairs); good to excellent food production; drone spraying of phragmites on 1,500 acres.
- *Donnelley & Bear Island:*
  - Best crops recorded in recent memory; Bear Island struggles with delayed maintenance permissions due to regulatory hold-ups concerning Black Rail habitat and required pre-construction notifications.
- *Coosawhatchie WMA:*
  - First year as Cat 1, good millet and rice crops (latter heavily hit by blackbirds). 6 hunters/hunt for initial year of lottery hunts; will be adjusted based on duck numbers and success as appropriate.
- *Bonneau Ferry (Youth Only):*
  - Excellent food present, but impoundments cannot be flooded for lack of water (unique for this site).
- *Ramsey Grove State Park:*
  - Deer predation on corn dealt with by installation of fencing; strong rice/millet production.
- *Cedar Island Renovation:*
  - Project cost overrun managed by securing extra funds; construction to start March 2026 pending state approvals; will take at least a year.

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#### Cross-Regional Themes & Outcomes:

- All Cat 1 sites expected to hunt at full capacity, barring flooding limitations at Bonneau Ferry.
- Reported “highest number drawn in 20 years”-1,103 waterfowl lottery hunters for 2025.
- Regional and site staff commended for remarkable year-over-year improvements in both habitat quality and management capacity.

#### Action Items:

- Monitor and continue major infrastructure projects (Cedar Island, Samworth Carr Complex, etc.).
  - Address maintenance backlogs at Bear Island due to continued regulatory delays (especially Black Rail and Corps of Engineers reviews). Proactive communication with regulatory agencies ongoing.
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## 4. Waterfowl Lottery, Hunter Access, and Legislative Reporting

### Discussion Points:

- Waterfowl lottery hunts have yielded over 1,100 hunters drawn; believed to be the highest—or almost the highest—on record.
- Restoration or improvements in habitat have permitted several previously understaffed or storm-damaged areas to return to, or approach, full draw capacity.
- Noted that increased hunter access correlates with recent legislative increases in state duck stamp price, and that this correlation should be highlighted in legislative reporting.

### Legislative Report:

- Must highlight increased access and habitat improvements as a direct result of increased duck stamp funds.
- The penultimate report is due by 12/31/26, with renewal sunset on 12/31/27.
- Plan to produce a first draft in <30 days, circulate via email, include detailed financial and access/participation numbers and infrastructure investments.

### Action Items:

- Finalize and circulate legislative report draft for committee/ST staff review.
  - Gather and incorporate data on financials, access increases, and infrastructure use/trends.
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## 5. Waterfowl Annual Report

### Summary:

- The comprehensive annual report for 2024-25 is completed or near completion (to be posted on DNR website).
  - Includes:
    - Research updates (Mallard/Eastern Mallard Ecology Project, banding/isotope studies on dabbling ducks)
    - Aerial/midwinter surveys and ground counts
    - Expenditures and budget summaries (with more photos and details than previous years)
    - Habitats and infrastructure updates
    - Peer review processes and reports (already posted for several properties)
    - Outreach, education, and staff acknowledgments (special recognition for Deputy Director Emily Cope for her tenure and leadership)
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## 6. Waterfowl Habitat Assessments & Energy Day Calculations

### Summary:

- Waterfowl Energy Days (WEDs) trending at record levels—preliminary data for moist soil, corn, rice at ~3 million WEDs.
- WED calculations used for planning and comparative assessment, but no formal numeric target/goal set statewide (reflects habitat/food abundance over true population needs).
- Ongoing rapid assessment studies and ground/aerial survey counts aim to connect habitat output to actual use over time, especially site by site.

### Action Items:

- Action: Continue compiling, evaluating, and publicizing waterfowl habitat/energy day data as it is finalized.

- Continue improving documentation of field manipulations, management actions, and annual outcomes for continuity as staff transitions.
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## 7. Research Updates (Mallard, Wood Duck, Other Waterfowl)

### Active/Recent Projects:

- Eastern Mallard Ecology Project:
  - Ongoing since 2022; GPS tagging (\$1,200/unit plus data costs) of wintering mallards to track migratory linkages between SC and Canadian breeding grounds.
  - Analysis will inform Atlantic Flyway population trends and future regulatory approaches.
  - PhD/MS students involved; first publications expected summer 2026.
- Wood Duck Recruitment (Regional, with Nemours Wildlife Foundation):
  - Large-scale project to analyze the actual contribution of nest boxes to wood duck recruitment.
  - Data analysis complicated by incomplete or unreliable reporting and lack of standardization in the public program.
  - Action: New recruitment analysis planned. In process of securing funding and research agreement with Principal Investigator
- Other active research with Clemson and SUNY:
  - Banding/isotope project for Atlantic Flyway origin study (Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, Wigeon).
  - Drone-survey method development (Clemson).
  - Upcoming study on PFAS impacts on waterfowl (potential for tissue sampling/collaboration).

### Future/Needed Research:

- Need to focus future agency funding on applied management outcomes vs. purely theoretical studies, especially as federal support for surveys/data is declining.
  - Discussion on the value of disturbance/sanctuary research and its application to public land.
  - Opportunities to collaborate with new faculty at Nemours/Baruch Kennedy Center who focus on waterfowl research.
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## 8. Wood Duck Box Program: Funding, Participation, Data Quality

### Summary of Discussion:

- Annual expenditure of ~\$100,000 for free distribution of boxes (+ hardware) = questionable business model, especially with persistently poor public reporting.
- Up to \$90/box (w/ predator guard).
- Historical flagship program since 1981-82, often justified via historical public/legislative support of the duck stamp.
- Recent studies (Nemours et al.) suggest variable, often low recruitment benefits; often not possible to verify boxes are even deployed.
- Ideas discussed:
  - Charging recipients for boxes (\$50/box).
  - Potentially tie future eligibility to report/data compliance.
  - Consider abolishing the program or shifting funding to higher ROI research/habitat priorities.

## Action Items:

- Staff and committee chair to develop draft plan to:
    - Institute cost-sharing/buy-in (\$50 minimum suggested).
    - Enhance and possibly require data reporting (explore technological and programmatic mechanisms).
    - Circulate proposal for board/committee review and policy decision.
  - Consider reallocating funds to research/habitat priorities if data or participation cannot be improved.
  - Prepare outreach materials for correct box installation/use.
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## 9. Santee Cooper Lake Levels and Hydrilla Management

### Summary/Follow-up:

- Committee previously urged Santee Cooper to keep lakes Marion/Moultrie at low winter guide-curve level to benefit waterfowl habitat.
  - No formal DNR follow-up with Santee Cooper since the request; present level is 72', attributed mainly to drought.
  - Committee encouraged continued advocacy for optimal lake levels and careful tracking of sterile grass carp release and Hydrilla control impacts.
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## 10. Future Meetings & Public Engagement

### Future Meetings:

- Next meeting planned for March 12, 2026, at DNR HQ.
  - Discussion regarding combining meetings with public "Community Field Day" type events—staff agreed major field events are too resource-intensive to run concurrently, simple public invitation to attend regular WAC meetings is preferred.
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