

**South Carolina Department of Natural Resources
Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Committee
February 13, 2025 Minutes
SCDNR Headquarters Board Room
260 D. Epting Lane, West Columbia, SC 29172**

Members Present:

Chairman Mike Hutchins, Vice Chairman Cleve Smith, Stan Haliday, Eddie Kinsey, Martha Herbert, Jonathan Rabon, Titus Duren, Will Shirley, Mac Baughman, Trey Watford

Staff Present:

Emily Cope, Billy Dukes, Willie Simmons, Jay Butfiloski, Ross Self, Matt Lerow, Amy Tegeler, Mark Warren, William Wood, Kelsey Huffstetler

There were no constituents in attendance.

Chairman Hutchins called the meeting to order.

The minutes from the November 14, 2024 meeting were approved with adjustments.

Molly Kneece, State Waterfowl Biologist, gave a report on the 2025-2025 waterfowl season. Ground count reports were conducted by scouting properties managed for moist soil, as well as plant and flood properties. An emphasis is placed on reducing disturbance to waterfowl habitat during ground counts. Total minim counts came in at 13,889 birds which was down from 16,347 in 2023-2024. The largest factor in decline was due to habitat damage at Donnelly caused by multiple storm weather events. Aerial mid-winter surveys were conducted in partnership with the USFWS on January 28, and again on January 30. A final report on those surveys is expected sometime in May of 2025. Hunter participation on active Category 1 waterfowl hunt areas remained generally unchanged from previous years with an average participation of 87%. The average ducks-per-hunter harvest rate for 2025-2025 season was 2.8, which is above the long-term average. There was a 9.2% decrease from the 6-bird bag long-term average.

Matt Lerow, Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Project Leader, provided a project update and explained why the USFWS downlisted red-cockaded woodpeckers from endangered to threatened. Red-cockaded woodpeckers have historically been present from Virginia to Texas. A colony consists of a breeding pair, and helpers, which are offspring from previous

years. They live together in a “cluster”, which is a group of cavity trees where a family group roosts and nests. They are the only woodpeckers to excavate cavities in living pine trees that they use for roosting year-round, and nesting seasonally. Artificial cavity inserts can create recruitment clusters to be filled naturally, or translocation clusters to place captured birds into. The goal is for the birds to use the inserts while creating natural cavities. Red-cockaded woodpeckers are keystone species, ecosystem engineers, and play a critical role in the pine savanna community. In November of 2024, the USFWS finalized its decision to downlist the RCW to the list of threatened species. There were an estimated 1500-3500 family groups when they were listed in 1973, and there are now roughly 7800 groups. They still receive a similar level of protection, although some prohibitions have eased on federal lands.

William Wood, Region 1 Fisheries Biologist, presented on sticked brown trout survival in Lake Jocassee. Lake Jocassee is a 7567-acre reservoir that is home to Bad Creek pumped storage facility and Jocassee pumped storage facility, as well as a two-story fishery that supports trout year-round. Lake Jocassee was impounded in 1972 and has been stocked annually with brown trout and rainbow trout. Rapid growth rates have produced fish with trophy potential. Previous studies included gill nets, and bioenergetics, but those studies didn't produce answers regarding survival rates. Current study goals are to estimate post-stocking survival, determine if ploidy affects survival, and to determine if stocking location affects survival. Recent stockings have taken place between December and January, with a goal of stocking 7500 triploid brown trout, 7500 diploid brown trout, and 15000 diploid rainbow trout, spread across the lake. Diploids are fertile fish, and triploids are sterilized with a pressure-induced method, and typically result in faster growth, and larger overall size. Ten of each fish were tagged and stocked at four different locations to determine difference in survival. Measurement methods included acoustic tagging, floy tagging, variable stocking locations, and manual tracking. Results indicated even survival among sites, and a survival rate of 21% in triploids and 7.7% in diploids. In the future, staff hope to repeat the study to attain better statistical strength. They also hope to use stationary receivers, and tags with a longer tag life.

Ross Self, Freshwater Fisheries Chief, gave a presentation on the Sport Fish Restoration Act, in the wake of it's 75th anniversary. The North American Wildlife Conservation model is that fish and wildlife belong to all North American citizens, and must be managed in such a way that their populations will be sustained forever. The Sportfish Restoration Act passed on August 9, 1950, and was modeled after the Wildlife Restoration Act from 1937. The 1984 Wallop-Breaux Amendment created the Aquatic Resources Trust Fund, broadened taxed items, authorized spending for aquatic education, mandated that 10% minimum for

apportionment be spend for motorboat access, and provided for additional funds captured from a portion of the federal gasoline excise tazes attributable to motorboats by a formula based on boat registrations. The Sportfish Restoration and Boating Trust Fund generates revenue from manufacturers' excise taxes on sportfishing equipment, import duties on fishing tackle, yachts, and pleasure craft, portions of the gasoline fuel tax attributable to small engines and motorboats, and interest earned on the trust fund. The 2025 South Carolina total apportionment was \$5,424,482.00. Total Sportfish Restoration Act funds provided nationally since 195 are \$12,169,222,442.00, with South Carolina receiving \$157,859,738.00 since 1952.

Emily Cope, Deputy Director of the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division, provided an update on new and current legislation. Chief Billy Dukes attended a meeting with the full House Ag Committee to discuss proposed changes for the bear season, which would provide landowners with more flexibility, and more opportunity. A blue catfish bill that introduces limit changes is expected to be dropped. A venomous reptile bill has dropped, that would put restrictions on private ownership of venomous reptiles in South Carolina. The captive wildlife bill is to be reintroduced soon, as well as amendments to a Diadromous Fishes bill and to threatened and endangered species legislation.

Date, Time, and Location of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Committee is to be determined.

Chairman Hutchins adjourned the meeting.