

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
NJ FISH AND GAME COUNCIL
Central Region Office
Robbinsville, New Jersey
September 10, 2024**

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 August 28, 2024, 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 -Late 10:30
Councilman Mitchell Jones
Councilman Ed Kertz
Councilman Rick Lathrop
Councilman Rob Pollock - **Absent**
Councilman Bob Puskas- **Absent**
Councilman Loren Robinson
Councilman Ken Whildin

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

There were several members of the public in attendance.

Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to approve the June 11th F&G Council minutes.

Councilman Robinson made a motion to approve the September 10, 2024, minutes, seconded by Councilman Whildin. Vote taken. all approved. Motion approved.

Chairman Virgilio mentioned on behalf of the entire Fish and Game Council, we would like to wish "A belated Labor Day thank you to the dedicated men and women of NJ Fish and Wildlife for their unwavering commitment to managing our wildlife populations for the public and providing them wildlife viewing, recreational hunting, and fishing opportunities. He would also like to give a special thanks to the extraordinary effort of the Game Code team, who have spent countless hours updating, drafting, and producing a new game code that is almost ready for an adoption vote. I especially would like to thank the Herculean efforts of the Game Code reviewing team: Gary Bowers, Lisa Barno, Ted Nichols, Patrick Carr, Brian Schumm, Peter Stark, and Megan Mills. On a personal note, I would like to add my heartfelt gratitude for the incredible impact New Jersey Fish and Wildlife has had on my life. As someone who started as a hunter at an early age, I could never have imagined that my journey would lead me to become a passionate Conservationist. And finally, our council would like to welcome all the new staff members who are about to be introduced into our Fish and Wildlife Community.

Assistant Commissioner Golden Thanked Chairman Virgilio for the special thanks to our F&W staff. Today is a special day, we have a group of new employees that have been onboarded in the past 6-months and we started a program for our new employees, and we are calling it the Fish and Wildlife Experience. We set it up where over the course of several months, the cohort goes to a particular location and gets introduced to a bureau and what that bureau does. The intention behind it is to familiarize our employees of the diverse projects we have on within the agency and to create those personal connections with staff. This is their third session and they are all here today. Assistant Commissioner Golden welcomed the 16 new F&W employees and introduced them to the council.

F&W Budget Overview:

Ishia Morton gave a presentation on the financial account for Hunter & Angler resources and expenditure incomed for FY25.

Kelly Oneil gave a presentation on FY25 Federal Budget.

Council Reports:

Agriculture:

Councilman Kertz reported it has been hot and dry and not much wildlife damage on his farm.

Councilman Jones reported he attended the Sussex County Board of Agriculture meeting where they discussed some issues with bear depredation permits and getting them. There is lots of deer damage, more this year than last. There was a bobcat reporting yesterday. We are seeing quite a few turkeys around. Lastly, we are working with Warren County Community College to do a drone damage survey of the corn fields.

Dr. Reist reported HPAI in poultry. In dairy animals' the cross over, there is now 197 premises in 14 states that have had outbreaks in non-poultry. There have been some livestock animals that have been affected as well. There is a lot of work going on about HPAI becoming capable of crossing over readily into mammalian species including human beings. There is a lot of effort from every agency to try to determine what we can do, if we can do anything. We are currently working on a multi-state project with the dairies just to try to get a sense if we have any in the Northeast, because we haven't found any yet. The USDA is going to diligently get dairy farmers into more testing to be ahead of the curve.

Farmer/Sportsman Relations:

Councilman Jones is in the process of scheduling a meeting.

NJ State Federations of Sportsman's Clubs:

Councilman Robinson reported he attended meetings at Hunterdon, Middlesex, the Fish Committee meeting, Finance meeting, Union Deer Management meeting where they discussed 58 hunters with 10 being new hunters. They have three coolers for deer donations, they had 168 deer last year and donated 83 deer. The program this year will run from October 1 – February 14, they received a 9k grant from F&W going to use for processing deer for Hunters Helping the Hungry (HHH).

Councilman Whildin reported he attended the Fish Committee in August where they discussed potential changes to the fish code.

Councilman DeStephano reported no meetings, but the new bear proof trash cans work great, and he will talk to the trash men to see how they feel about them.

Chairman Virgilio reported he attended Union County, Initial Habita Planning meeting with members of Camden County Federation, and the NJ Hunter Fishing and Trapping meeting. He also attended a Fish Committee meeting, a planning Committee meeting, and Salem County Youth Outdoor Day,

Finance Committee:

Councilman Robinson reported he attended the meeting this morning and a presentation was given earlier in this meeting.

Fish Committee:

Councilman Robinson reported we have to have the draft code ready in the fall of this year and code in place by fall 2025. We talked about establishing the same Saturday every year for Opening Day, preseason closures, bag limits, and presentations from the biologists.

Game Committee:

Chairman Virgilio reported everything is moving faster than expected and we will probably have something to look at next month.

Endangered & Non-Game Species Advisory Committee:

Councilman Lathrop reported they had a meeting back in July and another meeting next Friday.

Waterfowl Stamp Advisory Committee:

Councilman Whildin reported there is a meeting today right after the F&G Council meeting.

Wildlife Rehabilitators Advisory Committee: No meeting

Law Enforcement Committee: No meeting

Legislative Update:

Mary Monteschio reported nothing happening in Congress right now. There was no legislature report this month because the NJ Legislature finally goes back into session Thursday and it's only the Assembly. The Senate goes back into session later this month.

Fish & Wildlife Reports:

Business Administration:

Chief Springer handed out a packet to council of all license sales. For the month of August hunting licenses are down 1.4% and fishing sales are up by 3.3% as compared to last year. Overall sales are up with WMA permits seeing the highest increase at approximately 32% over last year. Trapping and Trout stamps had a slight increase in sales. All-around archery, firearm and stamp sales all experienced a slight decline. The Saltwater registry, 67.4 % of the individuals that registered, only registered on Saltwater and did not purchase a Hunting/Fishing license or other permit.

Freshwater Fisheries:

Chief Crause reported this has been a busy month for Bureau of Freshwater Fisheries staff. Biologists have been busy both in the office and in the field. Typical summer-time fieldwork finds staff in freshwaters across the state for a variety of projects. I'll use this month's Bureau Report to highlight a few activities that took place late this summer.

- In anticipation of some changes to our trout stocking program, which you will hear about next month, at least 13 small ponds were seined so that we have up-to-inventories of our fish populations in places being considered for addition to our trout stocking program.
- At least 26 streams were sampled to assess wild trout populations.
- The removal of wild Brown Trout in Rinehart Brook that began in 2017 resulted in the successful rebound of Brook Trout. Brown Trout removal projects have been expanded to Trout Brook (in Hacklebarney SP), a tributary to the Pohatcong Creek referred to as the Willow Grove Tributary, and Turkey Brook, a tributary to the South Branch of the Raritan River. Multiple backpack electrofishing passes have occurred this summer, with final removals planned shortly, in an attempt to capture any additional Brown Trout to this falls spawn.
- As part of the North Atlantic Aquatic Connectivity Collaborative, BFF staff has assessed over 162 culverts as part of a network of individuals from universities, conservation organizations, and state and federal natural resource and transportation departments focused on improving aquatic connectivity across a thirteen-state region, from Maine to West Virginia. This will put the Bureau of Freshwater Fisheries in a position to guide and prioritize management of road/stream crossings that may be barriers to aquatic organism movement.
- Staff continues to track the presence of Invasive fish species. One example is that of White Lake in Warren County. Unfortunately, 2 Snakeheads were reported by anglers. An electrofishing crew dispatched in an attempt to confirm their presence and to determine the extent of their invasion. None were collected, an indication that it is not a well-established population. Property managers were instructed to keep us abreast if additional fish are caught or observed by anglers.
- Fish Kills were investigated. For example, a fish kill was reported on Lake of the Lillies, located in Point Pleasant Beach, on 8/12/2024. A site investigation was conducted the on

8/13/2024 on this 20-acre coastal impoundment. Upon arrival approximately 5,000 3-6" White Perch, Yellow Perch, Largemouth Bass, and Sunfish were observed dead along the shoreline of St. Louis and Elizabeth Avenues. A couple larger adult bass, perch, and eel were also observed, however, the bulk of the kill consisted of small perch. No actively dying fish were observed. All fish were white in color suggesting they died over a week ago and were too decomposed to be collected for testing. Numerous live American Eel were observed laying against the shoreline in inches of water. This is not a common behavior and suggests low dissolved oxygen levels or other stressful conditions exist within the lake. Water chemistry was collected at 3 locations and dissolved oxygen levels were well below lethal levels (0.58-1.29 mg/L) for freshwater fish. The combination of recent heavy rains and a potential herbicide application may have depleted DO levels resulting in the kill especially in shallow lakes/ponds with no deepwater refuge. Lake of the Lillies has periodic fish kills, with plenty of stressors, as much of the water is stormwater runoff (no inlet or outlet). Salinity is often elevated given its proximity to the ocean. Future stocking efforts are not recommended given its history and condition.

- On the education front, Fisheries Biologists teamed up ENSP and Law Enforcement to host DEP's Youth Inclusion Initiative by providing programming for dozens of youth across the state. Groups from the United Community Corporation (Newark) and Groundwork Elizabeth (Elizabeth) visited Wilson Park in Linden Township. BFF staff assisted attendees in pulling seine nets in the pond to capture fish. ENSP staff taught the groups about identifying various non-game species and provided the opportunity to use radio telemetry equipment. Law Enforcement staff taught attendees about the various ways our conservation officers protect our state's resources and utilized mock scenarios to teach attendees how to think like a conservation police officer. Three additional programs were held at Stone Tavern Lake for participants were from Trenton, Camden, and Alloway. Each group arrived weekly, enthusiastic and ready to learn about fisheries management and sampling methods in New Jersey. Overall, the days were action-packed, and youth were very engaged in all aspect.
- On the office end of things, staff continued to gather information and make contacts with public waterbody owners in regards to finding new waters to add to our trout stocking program. They have also refined recommendations that were presented to the Fish Committee on August 15th.

Information & Education:

Chief Ivany reported on the Governor's Surf Tournament, we had a committee meeting last night and it will be held May 18, 2025. In July 2025 we will be hosting The Association for Conservation Information Conference in Atlantic City with planning moving forward on that. Black bear Outreach, preparing for our Fall campaign, we have a news release in the works. We will be doing social posts and Fall marketing posts with Princeton partners. Hunter Education have been busy with courses filling up fast, we are seeing a 9% increase from last year. We will

have 4 Trappers Education classes starting this fall starting this weekend in Tuckahoe another 3 in October with spots still available. R3 program has been busy as well, staff have offered an intro to Duck Hunting Workshop partnering with DU, also an introduction to muzzleloader shooting was held this past weekend for 13 people at the Collier Mills range, Both the Tuckahoe managed waterfowl hunt and the Take a Kid Pheasant Hunting applications opened last week and are filling up very quickly. R3 is also partnering with the Freehold Fin, Fur and Feather Club in Monmouth County for a Women's Introduction to Clay Shooting on September 22nd. Two Southern region Deer Butchering workshops are being bombarded with applications. Two mentor squirrel hunts are being scheduled for this fall. Update on our mobile education trailer, we have been on the road a bit this year, we have attended several county fairs as well as several other events. For the Fall, we are going to be down at the Bedminster Township Community Day October 12th and Batsto Living History Fair on October 20th.

Land Management:

Assistant Director Hearon reported the Chiefs position is out and hopefully will fill this position in the near future. Staff is preparing for stocking season and dog training in October. We are all set for Pheasant and Quail stocking across the state. On WMA, gates are open, if your down south then you know we shut the gates to try to limit the ability for people to turkey hunt, turkey breeding and cut down on trash and has reopened to full access again. Boat ramp update: our launch for Jakes Landing in south jersey and we had a meeting with the engineers on what the design will look like. We are moving into feasibility state on Great Bay Boulevard. We have two other areas to highlight, for the first time we are partnering with DOT on Round Valley will be going into the design phase and will be going to construction for new ramps, Spicer's Creek will get new commercial style aluminum docks instead of wood. On the habitat side, Hyper humus, we are making progress and is going to the permit stage. Higbee beach Pond Creek project is going very well and is right on schedule. We have been working towards getting a deployment in the Delaware Bay Reef for a number of years and we were able to obtain materials at free of cost and may happen at no cost to F&W in November or December of this year.

Law Enforcement:

Captain Scott reported all 6 of our newest officers have completed the FTO program out in the field on their own. We have two new recruits attending the Camden County Police Academy with an anticipated graduation date of mid-January. We are in the process of conducting background investigations for five additional new hires, which are anticipated to be in the police academy in January 202 and will also be attending Cape May County Police Academy. CPO's continue to work the WMA's as summer winds down and officers will be shifting to more deer enforcement as bow season opens this upcoming weekend. Officers up north are preparing for the first segment of bear season.

Wildlife Management:

Chief Oxley reported we had 308 bear calls in the past month compared to 235 last year. There was 48 CAT 1 calls compared to 34 last year. We are on the second round of research trapping, with the first round yielded around 160 bears. The deer project is finishing up final details of the Community Based Deer grant with 160k to distribute throughout the state and regarding logistics for the upcoming CWD testing locations and equipment. We are coordinating with USDA for Covid testing on deer. Deer staff are preparing for the season. Turkey: The south study, out of the 25 hens, we have 17-alive and 8-confirmed dead. The North we have 26 hens, with 8-alive, 7-dead, 6-unconfirmed dead and 5-missing. Quail: Jimmy Sloan attended the meeting in Mississippi. Waterfowl is finishing up duck banding with 11 different day and 14 different locations throughout the state. They banded 223 mallards, 99 wood ducks, 6 black ducks, and out of all of those we had 68 recaptures. We will continue to band until the end of the month.

Endangered and Nongame Species:

Assistant Director Hearon reported the rule to amend the list of endangered and nongame wildlife is moving towards adoption, which we expect will be in early November. That rule will result in the delisting of bald eagles from Endangered to Special Concern, and osprey from Threatened to Stable. It will also add 30 species to the Endangered Species list, including 4 fish, 3 reptiles, 7 birds, and 12 insects. There were over 100 species status changes in the rule proposal, and staff overlooked 1 species: the NJ Chorus Frog, whose status should change from Unknown to Special Concern. Therefore, we are filing a concurrent proposal to make that one correction. Staff from ENSP and OIS have been working together to produce an updated Landscape Project map that will reflect the new species statuses and have the mapping available at the time the changes are adopted. ENSP staff have been working with other bureau biologists on the State Wildlife Action Plan revision, we are moving into the phase of writing “actions” that address priority threats that have been identified by staff and technical stakeholders. As draft products are completed, they will be posted on the NJFW website for public review and comment.

New Business:

Wildlife Management Area Rules:

Mary Monteschio reported we had intended on presenting what changes we were proposing for the WMA Rules. We have not updated these rules in about 30 years, and we have learned a lot in the past 10 years about managing those lands, especially regarding compliance with the USFWS’ regulations. We will present this to council at another meeting

2025 Game Code Update:

Chief Oxley gave a presentation on the 2025 Game Code Update Timeline, which right now is with the Office of Legal Affairs.

Brook Trout Conservation:

Chief Crause gave a presentation on Brook Trout Conservation, Multi-State Partnership, and Mason's Run.

Norvin Green:

Kristen Meistrell gave an update on Norvin Green and the final draft and response.

Greenwood Lake:

Assistant Commissioner Golden reported public access to the lake is at Brown's point. The design is going out to Treasury and will have 19 trailer parking spaces and 17-car spaces. Staff reviewed the scope of work and budgeted around 1 million dollars.

Public Comment:

Christopher K. commented on Snakehead fish and he does not like the idea of killing it. He would like to try and get something where we could embrace them in nature.

A motion was made by Councilman Jones to adjourn the meeting at 12:46, seconded by Councilman Robinson. Vote taken; all approved.

Next meeting October 8, 2024 at the Assunpink Office- in-person.