

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE  
NJ FISH AND GAME COUNCIL  
Central Region Office  
Robbinsville, New Jersey  
June 10, 2025**

The regular meeting of the Fish and Game Council was held on the above date.

The meeting was called to order at 10:10 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 June 3, 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 - Absent  
Councilman Mitchell Jones  
Councilman Ed Kertz  
Councilman Russ Funarri  
Councilman Rob Pollock - Absent  
Councilman Jeffery Bowlby  
Councilman Loren Robinson  
Councilman Ken Whildin

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

There were several members of the public in attendance.

**Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to approve the May 13, 2025, F&G Council minutes.**

**Councilman Robinson made a motion to approve the May 13, 2025, minutes, seconded by Councilman Jones. Vote taken. Motion approved.**

Chairman Virgilio welcomed everyone to this meeting. As we open our meeting today, let us take a moment to reflect on Memorial Day and the anniversary of D-Day. These solemn days remind us of the ultimate sacrifice made by those who gave their lives in service to our country. We especially remember Private Hector A. Cafferatr, a Medal of Honor recipient and former member of the New Jersey Fish and Wildlife. His legacy reminds us that service doesn't end on the battlefield- it continues in the way we care for our natural resources.

The dedicated professionals of New Jersey Fish and Wildlife and the Fish and Game Council embody that of the same spirit of service through their commitment to conserving our lands, waters, and wildlife for all, whether you hunt, fish, watch, paddle, or hike. May the memory of those we lost continue to inspire unity, gratitude, and shared responsibility for the wildlife we all value.

Also remember David Flitcroft, a former member of the New Jersey Fish and Game Council, who passed away last week. David was the owner of Brook Hollow Farms in Warren County.

Assistant Commissioner Golden welcomed the newest Council member Jeff Bowlby and thanked him for his participation from the agriculture community as he replaces Councilman Puskas.

Assistant Commissioner Golden reported that not only in NJ but across the country, a large portion of the budget is from license sales and Hunter and Anglers. He shared a booklet with the council that shows when/where items are taxed and what funding source they come from.

### **Conservation Police Awards:**

Chief Panico presented an award to Conservation Officer Nicole Carmen, who went into an active fire to rescue a camper who was trapped. While retrieving the camper, she had to be redirected due to the fire surrounding them. CPO Carmen has been with us for 10-years who also trains the bureau in CPR. She is a very modest person who says she was just doing her job. We present her with the award of Valor, for unsafe conditions and without her actions we don't know if that camper would be here today.

Chief Panico presented an award to CPO Sean McManus who has been with us for about 24-years and with his communication was able to help CPO Carmen and the camper to safety. So for that, he is awarded as well.

CPO Allen Sutton who has been with us for 8 years and stepped up into a leadership role without being asked and really started to guide a very young region in a great way and for that is awarded Officer of the Year.

### **Agriculture Report:**

Councilman Jones reported lots of rain and hay is getting made. Reports of a few baby fawns but not a lot of twins. We also have had some turkey reports. We are hoping for some sunny days.

Councilman Kertz reported it has been wet; we have had over 9 inches of rain last month. Just finished planting vegetables yesterday. We are seeing deer, but no fawns as of yet, but we usually do not see them until July.

Councilman Bowlby reported it's been rainy. We are making a little hay. Seeing lots of fawns, the deer are repopulating rapidly. We are seeing turkey, and reports of a bear not too far from me. I had to start replanting corn due to the deer, rain, and groundhogs.

Dr. Reist reported another HPI positive in NJ in the last month, the same story as last month. This was passed through at the market from import out of country.

**Farmer/ Sportsman Relations:** no report

### **NJ State Federation of Sportsman's Clubs:**

Councilman Robinson reported he has been in contact with staff and would like to thank them for always assisting him information and contacts. He sent his notes to Ocean and Monmouth County. The Union County 220 out of the 238 deer taken in Union County this year came from their Park Hunt. We discussed the Community Deer Grant and would like to see feed corn added to the grant that they could use that money for. He attended Somerset, NJ Predator Hunters, and Law Enforcement meetings and Hunterdon County, where he is working with them on their community deer hunt. He went to the Ducks Unlimited BBQ for Hunterdon and Somerset this past weekend where they had 240 people.

Councilman Whildin reported he attended Cumberland County meeting; Megan was there and gave a presentation. He attended the Law enforcement meeting.

Chairman Virgilio reported he attended a Non-lead Partnership meeting with Assistant Commissioner Golden and Assistant Director Meistrell. We set a date of July 11<sup>th</sup> for a day of non-lead workshop along with the signing of a partnership agreement. He also attended the State Federation meeting; the Jamboree will be held June 6 & 7<sup>th</sup> 2026 in Andover NJ. He attended the

newly constituted Wildlife Conservation Foundation startup meeting by NJ Outdoor Alliance. He attended the NJ Preator Hunting meeting, where discussions were held in season expansion to improve population management and address the concerns of stakeholder, farmers and landowners. Lastly, he attended the 34<sup>th</sup> State Governor Surf Tournament, at a post tournament meeting we discussed concerns about expanding veterans fishing areas to increase participation.

Assistant Director Meistrell mentioned that we have talked with Island Beach State Park and the issue was a lack of material so they did what they could. We did discuss the issue, and they will make sur that they have enough material to fence off and block off enough area for next year.

**Finance Committee:** No report

**Endangered & Nongame Species Advisory Committee:**

Councilman Furnari reported May 14<sup>th</sup> was their meeting and an update on the State Wildlife Action Plan and a stake holder meeting held where they got more information on prioritizing the Actions. The committee acted on approving the release of funds for snake work from the Natural Lands Trust to the department so work could continue. Update from staff on box turtle project and them being released into the wild and tracked to see how they are surviving. Diamond Back Terrapin project with BRD's, staff are working with folks to test a number of different sizes with BRD on crab traps. We should expect results back in about a year.

**Waterfowl Committee:** No report

**Law Enforcement Committee:**

Councilman Whildin reported they met and will discuss later in this meeting.

**Legislative Report:**

Mary Monteschio reported bill S4360/A5752 allows municipalities to adopt certain zoning ordinances pertaining to outdoor firing ranges. This was not on the list before because zoning ordinances do not affect State land, but we are adding it because it does affect firing ranges everywhere else.

## **Fish & Wildlife Reports:**

### **Business Administration:**

Barb Stoff gave the council a packet on license sales. Fishing sales are up 2.14%, combined with the All-Around license and trout stamp is up .5%, which are good numbers for this time of year. April 1-May31 is down a little. Saltwater registry over time since 2016, there is no estimate on total anglers from Marine Fisheries 917,000 combined, but not all are licensed.

### **Freshwater Fisheries:**

Chief Crause reported **Fish Code Update** – The Fish Code is in the governor’s office, and we hope for a publication in August with an adoption in December or January. We need to schedule a Fish Committee Meeting prior to publication and the Council Meeting

**Opening Day Angler Count** – I would like to thank the volunteers that make this survey possible. I would also like to apologize for the delay, which is due to some of those volunteers being slow to report back to us this year. Rather than give you an incomplete report, we opted to delay so that we could provide a comprehensive report and data set.

The Opening Day of the 2025 trout season was Saturday, April 5<sup>th</sup>. 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<sup>s</sup> and low 50<sup>s</sup>, cooling throughout the day as clouds and rain moved in.

Of the 42 surveys conducted by volunteers and Fish & Wildlife staff, 37 were on lakes or ponds and 5 were on rivers. Survey clerks observed a total of 1,101 anglers: of these, there were 971 anglers on lakes/ponds and 130 anglers on rivers/streams. The average catch rate during the 2025 Opening Day Angler Survey was 0.62 fish per angler. The weather forecast of rain across much of the state may have reduced the angler turnout somewhat.

Despite the less-than-ideal weather before and on Opening Day, determined anglers still saw success at many locations. The most attended waterbodies this year, Shaw’s Mill Pond (95), Dahnert’s Lake (55 anglers), Pemberton Lake (51), and Ponderlodge Pond (49). Waters with the highest catch rates included Blair Lake (6.3 trout/angler), Mountain Farm Pond (3.7 trout/angler), and Gloucester City Pond (2.0 trout/angler). Ponderlodge Pond, Mac’s Pond, and Silver Lake also had catch rates above 1.0 trout/angler.

This year’s survey also marks a major turn in New Jersey’s Trout Stocking program. Starting next year, lakes and ponds will be open for fishing in the three weeks prior to Opening Day, with a creel limit of two fish per angler for trout. The goal of this change is to provide access to these normally-closed waters for non-trout anglers, as early spring is a popular time for bass, crappie, yellow perch, and other panfish. It also opens the possibility for eager trout anglers to take

advantage of the often-unpredictable spring weather. Some early nice days would now be a bonus to eager anglers.

Overall, we believe that these changes are an overall benefit to anglers. However, Opening Day will no longer be a hard start to the season at lakes and ponds, which will make evaluating Opening Day turnout and success more difficult. There may be adjustments to the survey or creation of other approaches to collect data for evaluating the popularity and fishing success at waterbodies that are trout stocked.

**Mountain Lake HAB** HABs have been a fairly regular occurrence at Mountain Lake since the summer of 2021. A HAB was reported at Advisory Level on Mountain Lake on April 2, just three days prior to opening day of trout season on April 5<sup>th</sup>. The Advisory Level means that public beaches are closed and fish should not be consumed. It is also our policy to not stock trout when under Advisory Levels, however trout were stocked before testing results were reported. This HAB sustained through the winter months and was the first time we had to deal with one on a Trout Stocked Water as early as opening day, as they typically subside during the winter months and don't typically return until the following summer. It tested at Advisory Levels again on April 22 and again on May 29 indicated that the HAB remains. Annual stocking of Muskellunge will not be impacted, as the fingerling Muskie will not be available for harvest until they reach 40 inches, which will take 7 to 10 years. The only other active HAB advisories at this time are on Greenwood Lake and Budd Lake. There is also a HAB watch on Lake Hopatcong. See table below regarding HAB Alert levels in NJ.

HAB Alert Level	Criteria	Recommendations
<b>HAB Not Present</b>	<b>HAB reported and investigated. No HAB present.</b>	<b>None</b>
<b>WATCH</b> <i>Suspected or confirmed HAB with potential for allergenic or irritative health effects</i>	Suspected HAB based on field survey <b>OR</b> Confirmed cell counts $\geq 20K$ - $< 80K$ cells/mL <b>AND</b> No known toxins above public health thresholds	<b>Public Bathing Beaches Open</b> Waterbody Accessible: Use caution during <b>primary contact (e.g. swimming) and secondary (e.g. non-contact boating)</b> activities Do not ingest water (people/pets/livestock) Do not consume fish
<b>ADVISORY</b> <i>Confirmed HAB with moderate risk of adverse health effects and increased potential for toxins above public health thresholds</i>	Lab testing for toxins Microcystins: $\geq 2$ $\mu\text{g/L}$ Cylindrospermopsin: $\geq 5$ $\mu\text{g/L}$ Anatoxin-a: $\geq 15$ $\mu\text{g/L}$ Saxitoxin: $\geq 0.6$ $\mu\text{g/L}$ <b>OR</b> Confirmed cell counts $\geq 80K$ cells/mL	<b>Public Bathing Beaches Closed</b> Waterbody Remains Accessible: Avoid primary contact recreation Use caution for secondary contact recreation Do not ingest water (people/pets/livestock) Do not consume fish
<b>WARNING</b> <i>Confirmed HAB with high risk of adverse health effects due to high toxin levels</i>	Toxin (microcystins) $\geq 20$ - $< 2000$ $\mu\text{g/L}$	<b>Public Bathing Beaches Closed</b> Cautions as above May recommend against secondary contact recreation.
<b>DANGER</b> <i>Confirmed HAB with very high risk of adverse health effects due to very high toxin levels</i>	Toxin (microcystins) $\geq 2000$ $\mu\text{g/L}$	<b>Public Bathing Beaches Closed</b> Cautions as above. Possible closure of all or portions of waterbody and possible restrictions access to shoreline.

### Information & Education:

Chief Ivany reported Planning continues for the Association for Conservation Information Conference being hosted by New Jersey in Atlantic City this July.

Production of the Hunting Digest is on schedule.

Another successful Governor's Surf Fishing Tournament was held on May 18 at Island Beach State Park. There were 426 individual anglers registered for the tournament and 10 High School teams consisting of 72 participants for a total of 498 anglers enjoying a great day of fishing.

The following update regarding Fish & Wildlife's Black Bear Outreach Program was provided to Council:

### Black Bear Awareness Outreach Campaign

The FY25 multi-media black bear outreach campaign launched on March 15 and is currently underway. The current marketing strategy incorporates results of previous marketing campaigns

and includes educational and safety messages that focus on securing trash and other attractants, as well as educating the public on what to do in the event of a black bear encounter.

The creatives air in flights during the spring, summer and fall on various channels such as Meta social media platforms, streaming radio, YouTube, and streaming TV channels like ESPN, CBS Sports, Fox News, and Peacock TV. A brand lift study will be conducted during the latter portion of the campaign, and it is anticipated that millions of residents will be reached in their homes and on their mobile devices with safety information during the campaign.

### **Bear Presentations and Exhibit**

There have been 32 black bear education and safety presentations given, reaching 1,714 people in 10 counties including Bergen, Morris, Middlesex, Mercer, Sussex, Burlington, Ocean, Essex, Hunterdon, and Passaic. Audiences include scouts, schools, retirement communities and clubs, library patrons, campground patrons and staff, wildlife rehabilitators, and nature clubs.

The bear exhibit was staffed at an event in Essex County where 1,500 attendees were reached with information. A presentation outlining the agency’s black bear outreach efforts was also given at the Alliance for New Jersey Environmental Education (ANJEE) Winter Conference.

The bear presentation and exhibit continue to be promoted statewide to private campgrounds, scouts, schools, and state parks. Through August, 9 more bear presentations are scheduled with more requests expected to come in.

### **Literature Distribution**

The ‘Know the Bear Facts’ English brochure and Spanish information card, the camper card, Tyvek informational signs, and the kid’s activity booklets were updated and reprinted to replenish depleted inventory.

More than 8,000 pieces of black bear safety literature were distributed upon request statewide to state parks, residents, and attendees of the bear exhibit and presentations.

<b>Resource Title</b>	<b>Distributed since 1/1/25</b>
<b>Know the Bear Facts English</b>	2756
<b>Know the Bear Facts Spanish</b>	2305
<b>Bear Facts Kids Activity Guide</b>	1304
<b>Camper Cards</b>	1187
<b>Tyvek Bear Safety Signs</b>	825

<b>Total</b>	8377
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Bulk literature deliveries to state parks are currently underway for distribution to patrons for the summertime, with 35,135 more pieces of literature scheduled to be delivered in coming weeks.

### **Eastern Black Bear Workshop**

The annual Eastern Black Bear Workshop in Lake Placid, NY was attended by Fish & Wildlife's black bear outreach coordinator. This provided the opportunity to meet, converse, and collaborate with bear outreach staff from other state agencies and organizations and gain insights from professional and community human-bear conflict experts that can be applied in New Jersey.

### **Partnership with DEP Division of Sustainable Waste Management**

Collaboration continues with NJDEP Division of Sustainable Waste Management's bear specialist on their Division's garbage management and municipal ordinance efforts. Fish & Wildlife staff worked with Waste Management to obtain trash complaint data by town to determine eligible municipalities for the second wave of distribution of bear resistant cans.

### **Educational Lessons**

The development of bear educational lesson plans for educators are underway in response to educators requesting more content about black bears for use in schools. Once finalized, the lessons will be made available for teachers to use both the classroom and during field days with students. Lessons will build upon content provided in the 'Know the Bear Facts' presentation and may include a citizen science component.

### **Land Management:**

Assistant Commissioner Golden reported in the northern region; Round Valley dock construction started, and install should be in July. A crew supervisor, Fall/Spring/summer plantings with over 1000 acres planted.

In the central region dams are being repaired at Colliers Mills and preparing for inspection.

The south is Spring planting due to rain delays but should wrap up in the next 2 weeks. We tried frost seeding and had mixed success. In the South around Millville was great but at Buck Shuteam was not great.

We are grading roads at Winslow, and we are installing two new access points at Tuckahoe and Port Republic.

Assistant Commissioner Golden reported Greenwood Lake at Browns Point ramp is being installed for public access. We are working on the RFP that went out and we have a firm trying to get them to lower the price. Once it starts it will be around a year and a half for ribbon cutting.

### **Law Enforcement:**

Chief Panico reported the bureau is transitioning to summer and assisting with Hunter Education, Fairs, and the I&E Trailer. Tomorrow is graduation at Cape May and on July 12 we will have two new recruits on.

The new CAD system is certified with the courts for E-summons and E-tickets, we are still working out glitches. We will have an increase of enforcement on the ranges.

### **Wildlife Management:**

Chief Oxley reported we are finishing up bear research trapping. We trapped 81 bears so far, and should be over 100 by weeks end. All calls are down from this time last year, which is typical after a successful hunt.

CAT 1 bears we had 8 vs 10 last year.

CAT 2 bears we had 37 vs 87 last year.

CAT3 bears we had 55 vs 101 last year.

Staff continue to attend county meetings, updating them on detailed harvest results, Gloucester and Atlantic County this week. We are reviewing CBDMP Grant applications and expect to have the announcement by the end of the month. I also attended the Sportsman Jamboree

Turkey- we have 10 hens incubating in the North with 2 having successful nests, 26 hens in the South with 3 having successful nests. Spring Gobbler, we are up 147 birds with a total of 2,468, and we are meeting with Parks & Forestry tomorrow on a restoration project in Wharton.

Coyote- we had a total of 660 for all hunting/trapping including all incidental from spring turkey.

Waterfowl- We finished ahead of schedule on 92 plot surveys and are gathering now for goose banding, which will begin the week of June 23<sup>rd</sup> in the South.

New Jersey has always been an important migration area for rails and woodcock, although not nearly as popular as in the past, NJ still has a tradition of "mud hen" or clapper rail hunting in early September along the Atlantic Coast with ample hunting opportunities and public land access abound for all these species.

Impoundment levels at Tuckahoe are being manipulated for the upcoming hunt, the lottery opens Sept 1.

The Game Code comments are down to 25 comments with OLA, so that's getting there.

### **Endangered and Nongame Species:**

Chief Clark reported Red Knot numbers from spring migration 2025 were 25,600 in peak count conducted 2 weeks ago, which is a slight increase. Horseshoe crab density in Delaware Bay crab spawning started early and looked good despite a few cool, stormy days that suspended crab activity.

Staff are working on the revision of the State Wildlife Action Plan, and expecting to release it on the website for public comment on July 1 for a 30-day period.

### **Old Business:**

#### **Wharton State Forest Vehicle Access Update:**

Assistant Director Meistrell reported at the last Federation meeting they asked members to what roads are most important and gave the list to the GIS team, which just finished mapping the high priority roads. We will look over and schedule a meeting with NJ State Parks & Forests. We talked to Parks & Forests about posting signage and they have around 50% of the roads posted.

NJ State Parks & Forests have had some issues with vandalism and NJ State Park Police will be focused on restricted roads, if a visitor is found on one of the restricted roads it will be up to the officer what action will be taken. It is up to each visitor to have an updated map of where they can and can't go.

#### **Oak Ridge Reservoir Update:**

Assistant Director Meistrell reported we are in the process and almost a final draft of the memo to send to Newark for a water lowering permit necessary to do dam repairs..

### **License Restorations:**

#### **Thomas Hughes - Present**

Captain Soell read aloud the statement for the revocation appeal for Mr. Hughes who was present. Mr. Hughes was convicted on May 15, 2024 of violation N.J.S.A./N.J.A.C. 7:25-5.12(b) Fail to remove traps at end of season, and N.J.S.A./N.J.A.C. 7:25-5.12(i) Fail to check traps during 24-hour period. A second violation on February 10, 2025 of violation N.J.S.A./N.J.A.C. 7:25-5.12(a) Did trap with equipment bearing another CID number, N.J.S.A./N.J.A.C. 7:25-5.9(c) Did trap beaver without valid permit.

Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to open the floor for discussion.

**A motion was made by Councilman Robinson to open the floor for discussion, seconded by Councilman Kertz. Vote taken, all in favor; motion approved.**

After the council discussed Mr. Hughes violations, Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to close the floor for discussion.

**A motion was made by Councilman Robinson to close the floor for discussion, seconded by Councilman Jones. vote taken, all in favor; motion approved.**

Chairman Virgilio stated that the council has three options, reinstate, continue revocation, or delay for additional information. If there is a motion to reinstate, for the record justification is needed.

**Councilman Whildin made a motion Not to reinstate Mr. Hughes license, seconded by Councilman Funari. vote taken, all in favor. Motion approved.**

#### **Brett Ekelman - Present**

Captain Soell read aloud the statement for the revocation appeal for Mr. Ekelman who was present. Mr. Ekelman was convicted on December 28, 2023 of violation N.J.S.A./N.J.A.C. 7:25-5.3(a) Hunt small game in closed season. A second violation on December 18, 2024 of violation N.J.S.A./N.J.A.C. 7:25-5.13(i)1 Hunt with an invalid NJ Waterfowl stamp.

Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to open the floor for discussion.

**A motion was made by Councilman Robinson to open the floor for discussion, seconded by Councilman Whildin. Vote taken, all in favor; motion approved.**

After the council discussed Mr. Ekelman's violations, Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to close the floor for discussion.

**A motion was made by Councilman Robinson to close the floor for discussion, seconded by Councilman Jones. vote taken, all in favor; motion approved.**

Chairman Virgilio stated that the council has three options, reinstate, continue revocation, or delay for additional information. If there is a motion to reinstate, for the record justification is needed.

**Councilman Robinson made a motion Not to reinstate Mr. Ekelman's license, seconded by Councilman Funari. vote taken, all in favor. Motion approved.**

**Public Comment:**

Ron Lee commented that dog training areas on WMA's have two facilities in the North for water training/retrieval, one in Millville, and NONE in the Central region area. Will there be one in the future to prevent safety hazards with the dogs such as broken glass and fishhooks.

**Councilman Kertz made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 12:17 pm, seconded by Councilman Robinson. Vote taken; motion carried.**

**Next meeting July 8, 2025 at 10:00 am at the Assunpink Office.**