

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
NJ FISH AND GAME COUNCIL
Central Region Office
Robbinsville, New Jersey
December 16, 2024**

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

The meeting was called to order at 10:02 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 December 3, 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
Councilman Mitchell Jones
Councilman Ed Kertz
Councilman Rick Lathrop
Councilman Rob Pollock
Councilman Bob Puskas - Absent
Councilman Loren Robinson
Councilman Ken Whildin

Fish & Wildlife employees included: D. Golden, J. Hearon, K. Meistrell, G. Kopkash, A. Ivany, P. Winkler, M. Monteschio, 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 November 13th Joint F&G Council and Endangered and Nongame Species Advisory Committee minutes.

Councilman Robinson made a motion to approve the October 13, 2024, minutes, seconded by Councilman Kertz. Vote taken. All voted in the affirmative. Motion approved.

Chairman Virgilio welcomed everyone to today's Fish and Game Council meeting during this most wonderful time of the year. I want to take a moment to honor the flag and reflect on its values, service, dedication, and commitment to the citizens of our state. As a veteran, I saluted this flag today in civilian clothes, a privilege granted to veterans under **Title 4, Chapter 1, of the United States Code**. I exercise that honor to salute the flag and dedicate this gesture on behalf of the Fish and Game Council members to the men and women of New Jersey Fish and Wildlife. Their selfless dedication to conserving our state's natural resources, supporting outdoor traditions, and serving the citizens of New Jersey deserves our deepest gratitude. Their tireless efforts ensure we can continue enjoying and protecting our state wildlife resources.

Please join me in reflecting on their contributions and honoring their service to New Jersey citizens.

Assistant Commissioner Golden introduced Kristen Meistrell to the Council as the Assistant Director overseeing BFF, BWM and the OHF. We are happy to have her serving in that role, as she did a great job as the policy advisor. Also, I would like to thank our staff for another successful bear season. We wrap up this Saturday, because we exceeded the 20% harvest rate, there is no 4-day extension.

Council Reports:

Agriculture:

Councilman Jones reported it is deer season, but we are not seeing many deer and most of the harvest is wrapping up.

Councilman Kertz reported that the clubs reported not see many deer but still had a great time. The Friday before deer season I received a phone call concerning Wharton State Park and road closures. Chairman Virgilio and I rode around Wharton to see the roads that were closed, turns out they are trails not roads that clubs are worried. This will cause a problem in years to come if hunters can't access that area. Not being hunted will lead to two scenarios, overpopulation of deer, and the coyote population is going to explode, which it already has.

Farmers/ Sportsman Relations:

Councilman Jones reported we had a committee meeting and met at the Farm Bureau Convention. There was a great turnout.

NJ State Federation of Sportsman's Clubs:

Councilman DeStephano reported he attended the Trappers meeting, the Morris County, and Bergen County meetings. The Warren County meeting was canceled, and Sussex is having their meeting this week.

Councilman Robinson reported he attended Somerset, Hunterdon, Middlesex, The State Federation Meeting, the Farmers/Sportsman's Relations meeting. He was not able to attend Ocean County and Monmouth's meeting but did send his council report for them to present to the sportsmen. He had a meeting this morning with Assistant Director Kopkash, Chief Springer and Barbara Stoff on end of year sales comparison 2024 which Barb will present at the January meeting.

Councilman Whildin reported he attended the Cumberland County meeting and Law Enforcement meeting which will be discussed later this afternoon. He believes the six-day firearm harvest for his area was down and he did some polls on the clubs, and they are down significantly in zones 34, 35, 36, & 37, which we anticipated and will be something that will have to address once all the numbers are in.

Chairman Virgilio reported he attended the NJ Farm Bureau Convention. He sat in on the Farm Bureau policy discussions as they related to NJF&W. At the Camden County meeting they introduced a new 4-multi-zoned permit up for consideration. I have also received calls concerning Wharton State Forest and the road closures.

Finance Committee: No report

Fish Committee: No report

Game Committee: No report

Endangered and Non-Game Species Advisory Committee:

Councilman Lathrop reported they had a meeting in November. There was one presentation on second generation anticoagulant rodenticides and its implications it has working its way up the food chain. There are definite concerns about how that might be impacting the Endangered and Nongame species.

Waterfowl Stamp Advisory Committee: No report

Wildlife Rehabilitators Advisory Committee: No report

Law Enforcement Committee:

Councilman Whildin reported they had met and will discuss later under restorations.

Public Member:

Councilman Pollock reported that the Island Beach State Park mobile permits system crashed and will reopen tomorrow to purchase, and it is posted on the website.

Legislative Report:

Mary Monteschio reported one update for A682/ S699, acquisitions of development on privately owned woodlands. This bill was heard in Committee Thursday, and it had its second reading, but it has been referred to the Senate Budget and Approp Committee.

Fish & Wildlife Reports:

Business Administration:

Chief Springer reported that in the month of November the hunting sales were down by 2% while fishing licenses saw a little over 4% increase as compared to last year. Overall sales are up with WAMA permit seeing the highest increase at 41% over last year. Archery, trapping, fishing and trout stamps all had increases in sales. However, All-Around sales decreased by almost 2%. Firearm sales decreased by 3.5% and Waterfowl Stamp sales decreased by a little less than 2.5%. With respect to the Saltwater Registry, 66% of the individuals that registered for the Saltwater registry only registered for the saltwater and did not purchase any fishing/hunting or other permits. Additionally, individual saltwater registrants were down 15.5% from last year.

Freshwater Fisheries

Chief Crouse reported The Pequest Trout Hatchery met and exceeded production goals for this year's 2024 Winter Trout Stocking Program with 4,680 two-year old Rainbow Trout that were loaded on stocking trucks and distributed into 18 lakes and ponds on November 25th and 26th.

<u>#FISH</u>	<u>#LBS.</u>	<u>AVG. LENGTH</u>
4,680	6,997	14.5"

All lots of 2026 production Rainbow Trout are approximately 2 inches and are on feed and have now been dropped out of the troughs into the tanks. Staff are preparing the B-line in preparation to move out approximately 360,000 fish from the Nursery building this week.

We are initiating a CBT funded Well Rehabilitation project for all seven wells, well houses, and backup generators. We attended the pre-proposal meeting on 12/11/24 for the that moved into the process of choosing architectural and engineering (A&E) firms to provide services for a project. It went over the scope review, some dates for the consultants, and on onsite look at the existing well houses and electrical.

Hackettstown

All stocking for the year has been completed. It concluded with the Landlocked Salmon program. We recently stocked 3,000 Landlocked Atlantic Salmon. The fish averaged 14.7 inches and just under a pound and a half. Five-inch fingerlings were acquired from Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife’s Roger Reed Salmon Hatchery in September of 2023 and raised in Hackettstown’s Intensive Culture Facility until stocking last week. This year’s stocking was a couple weeks later than normal waiting for water temperatures to cool below 55 degrees.

Tilcon Lake – 480 fish

Lake Aeroflex – 520 fish

Merrill Creek Reservoir – 680 fish

Wawayanda Lake – 1,320 fish

Research & Management

Staff continues to communicate with the NJDEP Drought Response Advisory Group for weekly updates. Not a whole lot to report there, but all are hoping for more rain.

BFF staff jointly participated in the Career Immersion Experience hosted by NJDEP staff at the NJ School of Conservation. The program ran last month and focused on creating experiences for motivated students in grades 7-12 who are curious about career pathways within Fish and Wildlife. Various groups within DEP participated, giving presentations and hands-on experiences related to their field. BFF set and checked trap nets within Lake Wapalanne to teach attendees about fisheries sampling, fish identification, and actual data collection. Students learned how to handle, measure, and weigh fish.

The Skillful Angler program saw an increase in the number of qualifying entries. In 2023 we had 101 applicants submitting 279 applications, while in 2024 we had 99 applicants submitting

422 applications. So we didn't have more people participating in the program, we just had more quality fish submitted.

Gillnetting for Lake Trout in Round Valley Reservoir occurred during October and November. Data have not been analyzed.

Staff are now in the data entry and report writing portion of the year.

Finally, we have been hard at work drafting the 2026 Fish Code proposal document and we are scheduled to present proposed changes to the Department at our launch meeting scheduled for this Wednesday.

Information and Education:

Chief Ivany reported staff from the Bureaus of Information and Education, Wildlife Management and the Endangered and Nongame Species program staffed the Fish & Wildlife booth at the NJ League of Municipalities Conference held in Atlantic City on November 19, 20 and 21. The Mobile Outreach Trailer was also on site. Attendance was high and visitation to the booth steady. Questions were answered on a variety of wildlife and programmatic issues, and a significant amount of literature and promotional items were distributed.

The 2025 NJ Freshwater Fishing Digest is complete and has been approved for printing. We are currently waiting for the publisher to provide an on-the-shelf date. The Digest will be posted on the Fish & Wildlife website as soon as it is received.

There are 38 entries in 14 categories that have been submitted for the 2025 Deer Classic. This includes 9 youth entries in 5 youth categories and 29 adult entries in 9 adult categories. Participants will be notified by email by Friday, December 20 regarding their ranking and provided some information regarding the April 26 Deer Classic.

Supervising Biologist Linda DiPiano, Assistant Director Kopkash and I met with staff from the Sheraton Hotel in Atlantic City recently to review logistics and confirm on site details for the Association for Conservation Information Conference being hosted by New Jersey in July 2025. Planning is now moving forward in earnest.

Land Management:

Chief Winkler reported pheasant and quail stocking resumes today after the 6-day firearm break, so we have 5 stockings left for this year. Early successional habitat projects will be starting soon at Winslow and Assunpink WMA's. An update for our Coastal Program, beneficial use of dredging material project at Scotch Pine Island at Cape May Coastal Wetlands WMA, the placement of the sand is completed. This is a joint project with the Wetlands Institute and the Army Corps, so they will just be moving the sand around and grading. This morning, I just got

forwarded a pretty cool video from the Wetlands Institute of a time-lapse of the entire project. Lastly, Delaware Bay Artificial Reef Project had a delay with the Noah permit, hopefully the placement of the artificial reef will begin in January/February.

Law Enforcement:

Chief Panico reported had a great bear season without incident. We have two new CPO's graduating the police academy January 10th, and then January 20th two new ones are starting the academy. We keep rolling with the hiring process, we have a NOV posted right now that will close in the first week of January and we are looking for three more new ones.

Wildlife Management:

Chief Oxley reported we had a successful bear season, segment A harvested 397 bears and total for Segment B was 75 with a total for the year at 472 bears and a 24% harvest rate. Fall bow is up 13.1%, permit bow is up 16.4%, permit muzzleloader is up 7.5%, permit shotgun is up 32.1%, Youth was up 14.7%, and 6-day was down 6.1% which we believe is due to weather conditions. Total harvest is up 11.3% and hopefully continue that way for the rest of the season.

Turkey harvest had a total of 98 birds, 54 female, 43 male, and 1 unknown. Earlier this month we had 30 plus staff at F&W go through rocket deployment training in preparation for the upcoming trapping season. We have a new employee starting today to help with trapping. I attended the Farm Bureau Convention, which was my first time, I was a little overwhelmed with the size of it and it was a very productive day.

Endangered and Nongame Species:

Chief Clark reported a regulatory update: the Shore Protection rule was proposed today in the NJ Register, and has a 60-day comment period open until February 13. This regulation could be adopted as early as July and ready for enforcement in the field by the second half of the beach-nesting bird season. This is a regulation that will enable law enforcement protection of endangered species in the intertidal zones and associated shoreline areas. This would also apply to the spring migratory shorebird season on Delaware Bay beaches.

The species status changes that we proposed in June will be adopted with publication in the NJ register on January 6 that will formally update the Endangered Species List and Nongame Species List. The rule amendment will delist Bald Eagle and Osprey while adding 30 species to the Endangered Species list; those include 11 butterflies, 1 bee, 4 freshwater fishes, 3 reptiles, 5 birds (breeding), 2 birds (nonbreeding), and 4 mammals. The Nongame List will add 18 species to the Special Concern status category and will remove 10 species that do not regularly occur in NJ. The rule proposal received 103 comments with around 100 people concerned with the delisting of Bald Eagle and Osprey and the impacts of that change. We will be working with the

Bureau of I&E and the Press Office on a press release to address the changes and those concerns the public have expressed by: 1. continuing to monitor Eagle and Osprey populations in NJ. 2. Identify the continued protection for eagle nests that's provided by US Fish & Wildlife Service laws. 3. Identify the continued protection for Osprey nests and for some other species that have persistent nest structures pursuant to the NJ Endangered and Nongame Species Conservation Act and the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

In 2024, beach-nesting Piping Plovers had the worst season for nesting and productivity since our monitoring program began in 1987. Report will be posted on the NJFW website soon.

January marks the start of the Bald Eagle nesting season, they are already underway working on nests. It is also the beginning of the Tiger Salamander breeding season.

New Business:

Ranch Hope Lease Agreement:

Chief Winkler gave a presentation on the Lease at Ranch Hope

Public Comment on Ranch Hope: No comment

Chairman Virgilio asked for a motion to accept the lease agreement as presented.

Councilman Robinson made a motion to accept the lease agreement as presented, seconded by Councilman Kertz. Vote taken; all approved.

Old Business:

Game Code Update:

Assistant Commissioner Golden reported that we are behind schedule, and it is unlikely that the changes will be adopted and in the registry by January. We received comments back from the Office of Legal Affairs just last week after presenting this back in August and they are extensive. Assistant Director Meistrell, Chief Oxley and Mary Monteschio are all reviewing the comments and are working hard on this document. We will be able to give you a better update at the January meeting.

Greenwood Lake Public Access Update:

Assistant Commissioner Golden reported not much progress since the last meeting. We are still waiting to get the scope of work out for bid. We have gotten universal support for this project both internally and externally.

Lunch: 11:30 – 12:30

New Business continued:

License Restorations:

James Gravatt – Present

Captain Soell read aloud the statement for the revocation appeal for Mr. Gravatt who was present. Mr. Gravatt was convicted on March 26, 2024, of violation N.J.S.A./N.J.A.C. 7:25-5.12(f)6, trap with a jaw spread greater than 12 inches. A second violation on May 8, 2024, of violation N.J.S.A./N.J.A.C. 7:25-5.11(b).

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. Gravatt'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 Kertz. 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 Lathrop made a motion To reinstate Mr. Gravatt's license, seconded by Councilman Kertz. vote taken, 4-in favor; 2-oppose; motion carried.

Jake Kline- Present

Captain Soell read aloud the statement for the revocation appeal for Mr. Klien who was present. Mr. Klien was convicted on March 10, 2020 of violation N.J.S.A/N.J.A.C. 7:25-2.5(A), Possession of 4 undersized summer flounder. A second violation on February 12, 2024 of violation N.J.S.A./N.J.A.C. 7:25- 18.1(c)4– possession of 3 undersized black sea bass.

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. Klien’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 Kertz. 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 DeStephano made a motion Not to reinstate Mr. Klien’s license, seconded by Councilman Kertz. vote taken, all in favor; motion carried.

James Walsh- Present

Captain Soell read aloud the statement for the revocation appeal for Mr. Walsh who was present. Mr. Walsh was convicted on January 11, 2022 of violation N.J.S.A/N.J.A.C. 23:4-12, Hunting Waterfowl after legal hours. A second violation on July 11, 2024 of violation N.J.S.A./N.J.A.C. 23:7-9a(4)– possession of alcohol on a wildlife management area.

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 Jones. Vote taken, all in favor; motion approved.

After the council discussed Mr. Walsh'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 Kertz. 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 Kertz made a motion To reinstate Mr. Walsh's license, seconded by Councilman Robinson. vote taken, all in favor; motion carried.