

MISSISSIPPI COMMISSION ON WILDLIFE, FISHERIES, & PARKS

Thursday, March 21st, 2024

10:00 AM Business Session

Percy Quin State Park
2036 Percy Quin Dr., McComb, MS 39648

MINUTES – BUSINESS SESSION

PRESENT: Commission Chairman Bill F. Cossar, Commissioners Leonard Bentz, and William Mounger II. Vice-Chairman Scott Coopwood attended the meeting via phone. Commissioner Gary Rhoads was not in attendance.

Among the MDWFP staff attending were Mr. Lynn Posey, Executive Director; Curtis Thornhill, Chief of Staff; Larry Pugh, Deputy Director; Brian Ferguson, Chief of Staff of State Parks; Jason Thompson, Director of Administrative Services; Russ Walsh, Wildlife Chief of Staff; Adam Butler, Turkey Program Coordinator, Jeremy Bass, Director of Marketing and Communications; Colonel Jerry Carter, Chief of Law Enforcement; and Drew Malone, General Counsel MDWFP.

OPENING PRAYER

Jason Thompson, Director of Administrative Services, opened the meeting with prayer.

MINUTES

ACTION: Upon motion made by Commissioner Bentz and seconded by Commissioner Mounger, the Commission meeting minutes for February 22nd, 2024, were unanimously approved.

AGENDA

Director Posey announced that the agenda would not include a Wildlife update, as that portion was covered earlier in the Education Session.

ACTION: Commissioner Mounger moved to approve the agenda for March 21st, 2024. Commissioner Bentz seconded the motion and the motion carried.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Chairman Cossar recognized Mr. Troy Orso, who wished to speak regarding fall turkey season. Mr. Orso, a landowner and hunter from Wilkinson County, expressed his concern about the CDC's recommendation to test deer meat for CWD prior to eating, which he said is a burden. He said that if banning supplemental feeding will slow the spread of the disease and prolong the time before it arrives in his area, he and his fellow hunters support the ban. Mr.

Orso explained that he uses a mobile feeder (seed spreader), in the fall months and recommended this type of feeder over stationary feeders to reduce the transmission of CWD.

Chairman Cossar recognized Ricky Flynt, who thanked the Commission and addressed them regarding his support of a statewide supplemental feeding ban. Mr. Flynt stated he is speaking on his own behalf as a citizen and MS hunting license holder, and not as the Executive Director of the Mississippi Outdoor Stewardship Trust.

Mr. Flynt said of the many elements related to the transmission of CWD that are not within the public's control (such as prions found in the soil, on feeders, under oak trees, on licking branches, scrapes, etc.), one factor that is within the public's control is the placement of feeding stations on the landscape. He suggested that feeding stations be removed in areas of the state that have been confirmed CWD-positive, since they are known to be vectors of the disease.

Mr. Flynt's second suggestion was to restore the regulations and guidelines set forth in the original MDWFP CWD management plan; particularly how the plan establishes CWD Zones, and as it relates to the supplemental feeding bans within those established zones.

Mr. Flynt stated that, in his opinion, one problem with supplemental feeding is the degradation of the tradition of hunting. He shared a quote regarding ethical arguments against baiting and feeding white-tailed deer cited in an opinion article in the "Wildlife Bulletin," written by Dr. Robert Brown, former MSU professor. Mr. Flynt distributed a copy of the publication to the Commission and asked them to consider his points when deciding whether to implement a statewide supplemental feeding ban.

Chairman Cossar recognized Mr. Joe Wood, board member of the MS chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF), who stated he speaks on behalf of himself and not the NWTF nor the MS chapter.

Mr. Wood shared a quote by Colonel Tom Kelly, poet laureate and author of "Tenth Legion," which supports the necessity of the fall turkey season. Mr. Wood stated that MS had a fall turkey season for 60 years until its suspension in 2023.

Mr. Wood mentioned that the 2023 hatch was the highest in decades, and that 39 states had a fall season in 2023. He said MDWFP has the difficult task of finding a balance between protecting the (turkey) resource and providing a hunting opportunity, and that a compromise was needed to satisfy both the proponents and opponents of the fall season.

Mr. Wood suggested shortening the spring season, reducing the spring bag limits, and requiring only gobblers be harvested in the fall. He stated that the fall season should not be eliminated completely, and that hunters should be allowed to experience the fall season in MS.

Commissioner Bentz asked when the appropriate time would be to reinstate the fall season should the Commission wish to do so.

Drew Malone answered that the right time to make such a motion would be when the WMA rules, regulations and seasons were presented before the Commission.

Chairman Cossar recognized Mr. Frank Dantone, president of the MS chapter of the NWTF, who also spoke regarding implementing a fall turkey season.

Mr. Dantone stated the MDWFP had consulted the MS chapter of NWTF in 2023 to provide its opinion on fall turkey hunting and the turkey stamp. He said during that meeting, Mr. Adam Butler, Turkey Program Coordinator for MDWFP, had provided the chapter with details on scientific studies, surveys, and opinions.

Mr. Dantone said that Mr. Butler recommended that the fall season be eliminated considering all the data gathered. He said that this decision was fully supported by the chapter. Mr. Dantone stated that he wished to present the position of the state chapter, which was to cancel the fall season.

Mr. Dantone stated that the MS chapter of NWTF is in full support of the turkey stamp since revenue generated will support turkey conservation in MS, benefitting both the turkey and the hunter. He asked that those in attendance contact their senators and representatives to get the turkey stamp passed in legislation.

Director Posey thanked Mr. Dantone for his comments and announced that the state turkey stamp bill had in fact passed the Senate and House and will move forward to Conference, and that the agency would be negotiating details toward the end of the spring turkey season.

Chairman Cossar recognized John Overby, who spoke on behalf of the MS Dog Hunting Association regarding Delta National Forest, managed under the Sunflower WMA. He expressed his concern over the change of dates for dog deer hunting season. (This issue was addressed in detail during the February 2024 Commission Meeting).

Mr. Overby asked that the Commission consider reinstating the Thanksgiving Hunt for Dog Hunters November 16th – December 1st, 2024, which would give children more time to hunt than the regular season would.

Chairman Cossar said the matter would be discussed during the season recommendations in the April meeting or when the Commission took up WMA regulations.

Chairman Cossar recognized Mr. Wayne Smith, a member of the MS chapter of NWTF, who spoke against the fall turkey season.

Mr. Smith stated he'd like to correct Mr. Wood's statement that MS has had a fall turkey season for 60 years—that the first season was between 1-12 years ago following three of MS's worst hatches, according to the state's data. He also stated that he was present during the 2023 discussion mentioned by Mr. Wood, and that no one voted to eliminate the fall turkey season.

Commissioner Bentz asked for clarification on when the last statewide fall season was.

Commissioner Mounger answered that there is currently no fall turkey season in the state.

Mr. Butler stated that a fall turkey season was in place behind the MS River levee for about 60 years, but that the season in other parts of the state had only existed since 2006 in about 20 counties until 2023.

Mr. Smith stated that he stood corrected on the matter, but said since the turkey population is now increasing, no turkeys should be harvested other than during the spring season.

Chairman Cossar thanked Mr. Smith for his comments and opened the floor to any other public commenters.

Mr. Jimmy Hutson, a retired conservation officer from Amite County, addressed the Commission on his opposition of the fall turkey season. Mr. Hutson said MS does not have the turkey population it once had, and that fall turkeys congregate in herds, and some hunters violate the law by taking advantage of this. He stated that he feels very strongly about the matter and asked the Commission to consider his comments.

Mr. Landon Moore from Amite County spoke to the Commission against the fall season because of the low turkey population and stated the need to preserve them in any manner possible. Mr. Moore suggested killing predators, shortening the season, and continuing to eliminate the fall season. He added that he believes the MS spring turkey season is entirely too long. Mr. Moore thanked the Commission for their time.

Commissioner Mounger thanked everyone for their comments and stated that the Commission would take all comments into consideration. Commissioner Mounger agreed with Mr. Wood that the decision would be to balance protecting the resource with providing hunter opportunity.

Commissioner Bentz asked whether the fall permit (when in place) was on private lands only.

Mr. Butler stated this was correct.

Mr. Bentley Spears of Amite County approached the Commission to explain why he opposed the fall turkey season. Mr. Spears said the turkey population near his home was thriving in the early 1990's but had gone down significantly in the early 2010's due to the destruction of turkey habitat and a reduction in predator trapping.

Mr. Spears said the turkey hatch in the last two years has been higher than in the last two decades. He said he does not believe that MS should never have a fall season, just only until the population is stable and more habitat management is in place.

Chairman Cossar asked Mr. Spears what he does for predator control. Mr. Spears answered that he traps heavily in the fall and in February and is part of a predator competition put on by Mr. Moore.

Mr. Jock Smith, a retired conservation officer, addressed the Commission on his opposition to the fall turkey season. He stated that about 90% of the land in MS is privately-owned, and the Commission should consider that since most wildlife reside on those lands.

Commissioner Mounger thanked Mr. Smith for his comments, and referenced new programs available through MDWFP, including a Turkey Management Assistance Program (TMAP) for private landowners who turkey hunt, and encouraged those interested to take a brochure from Adam Butler. Mounger also mentioned "Fire on the Forty," one of the agency's burning programs, and other burning programs available through MOSTF that aids turkey habitat.

Commissioner Mounger also made referenced of a bill in the MS Legislature to increase trespassing fines and encouraged meeting attendees to speak to their legislators about restitution. He also recognized officers who are part of "Operation Longbeard," which serves to reduce turkey poaching in the state and expressed his appreciation to them.

Mr. Nelson Estes from McComb, former state board chairman of the MS chapter of NWTF, as well as a member of the national NWTF board, addressed the Commission. He stated that MDWFP is doing the best it can with limited resources. Mr. Estes emphasized the importance of trusting data, research, and science to determine the best way to preserve the turkey resource, and those factors currently point to eliminating the fall season.

Lt. Gary Crum, an MDWFP conservation officer of 35 years, approached the Commission to clear misconceptions about the 2012 fall season. Lt. Crum explained the turkey tagging process among private landowners. He said he has never encountered a fall turkey hunter in the woods or caught an illegal turkey hunter out of season.

LICENSE SALES REPORT

Jason Thompson presented the License Sales Report for the month of February 2024. The total revenue generated for the end of January was \$16.9 million—an increase of \$230,000 from last year.

Highlights of his report are as follows:

- Resident license sales – \$5.9 million.
- Resident WMA User Permit –733 more sold versus 2023.
- Boating & Fishing Guide Permits – 93 sold in February = \$65,450. (82 RES and 11 NR sold this year).
- Archery/Primitive Weapon Permits – up 3% from last year.
- Non-resident license sales – up \$363,000.
 - NR 7-day Small Game – 87 more sold versus last year.
- Permit category – up 3%.
- Lifetime License category – down 1%.
- Autorenewal customers increased to 22,756 from 18,163 in 2023.
- License packages sold – 28,098 compared to 27,132 in 2023.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Law Enforcement Update

Colonel Jerry Carter, Chief of Law Enforcement, wished to recognize retired Master Sergeants Smith and Hutson and thanked them for their service. He reported 307 license/compliance

check citations issued for the month of February, with the top five as: No License (114); Trespassing (31); Headlighting (13); No Boat Registration (13); and PFD Violations (8).

Colonel Carter presented the Commission with a cadet update, stating that first-round interviews were complete with 45 applicants. Second-round interviews are scheduled for April 10-11 with approximately 29 applicants. Colonel Carter said MCOTA training would begin May 6th, and non-sworn officers would begin training at MLEOTA July 7th.

Colonel Carter announced that members of the Special Response Team (SRT) conducted their annual training at Holmes County State Park, which included tactical search, inflatable swift water training, hand signal drone support, K-9 usage, and other exercises.

He also announced that the MSSP tournament was held at McIvor Shooting Facility, with 35 schools and clubs represented at the tournament. One hundred fifty-five (155) shooters participated in the event. East Rankin Academy took top honors, breaking 529 clays out of 600.

Colonel Carter presented an update on AIMS, which held its South State Tournament in Hattiesburg March 18th through March 21st, with 3,229 total participants and 52 total officers assigned. The event was an effort to increase youth involvement in hunting.

MDWFP Shooting Range customer counts for February 2024 were as follows: McIvor – 498; Turcotte – 585; McHenry – 494.

PARKS

Mr. Andre Hollis presented the Commission with an outline of current construction projects on State Parks campgrounds and cabins to include start dates and estimated completion dates. He noted that all projects have been funded by ARPA Tourism funds, except for Natchez Lake Repairs, which have received bond funds. State Parks undergoing current or planned improvements are as follows:

- Percy Quin State Park Campgrounds
- Roosevelt State Park Campgrounds
- Paul B. Johnson State Park Campgrounds
- Clarkco State Park Campgrounds
- Natchez State Park Cabins
- Percy Quin State Park Cabins
- Clarkco State Park Cabins
- Paul B. Johnson State Park Cabins
- Roosevelt State Park Cabins
- Natchez Lake State Park Repairs

Chairman Cossar and Commissioner Mounger congratulated State Parks on their hard work.

Chairman Cossar said the reason the Commission meetings have been held at MS State Parks is so that the Commissioners can see what wonderful resources Parks has to offer, and that many of our citizens are unaware that the state boasts 20 state lakes and over 700,000 acres of land in Wildlife Management Areas.

Mr. Hollis thanked the Commission for their support throughout the improvement process.

Commissioner Mounger mentioned MDWFP's new State Parks brand. Mr. Hollis asked Mr. Jeremy Bass to come forward and update the Commission on media projects for State Parks.

Mr. Bass informed the Commission that the Media/Communications branch is working to implement online/offline initiatives such as a comprehensive marketing strategy plan in place for FY25, which will include tactics to increase awareness of State Parks.

NEXT MEETING DATE

Director Posey stated there would be no need for an Executive Session and announced the next meeting date.

Date: Thursday, April 18th, 2024
Location: Tombigbee State Park
264 Cabin Drive
Tupelo, MS 38804
Time: 10 A.M. - Business Session

OTHER BUSINESS

Chairman Cossar recognized Commissioner Bentz for a point of personal privilege.

Commissioner Bentz thanked the Chairman and outlined several points of personal concern he had with "SuperTalk Mississippi" radio host Ricky Mathews. Mr. Mathews had expressed his concerns with Commissioner Bentz's position in his support of high-fenced enclosures containing white-tailed deer.

Commissioner Bentz stated that he would like to address further allegations or statements made by Mr. Matthews regarding him (Bentz), including, but not limited to:

- Views on Federal Duck Stamp funds – Bentz said he voted against sending \$250,000 for duck habitat to Canada through Ducks Unlimited and Delta Waterfowl (to which he stated he currently donates money annually). Commissioner Bentz said he requested data on MS duck populations, which did not reflect an increase that could be attributed to monies sent to Canada. Bentz stated that the appropriation of Federal Duck Stamp money should be the Legislature's job, not the MDWFP Commission's, as state taxpayers would not support their money going outside the U.S. Bentz stated he does support other areas of Federal Duck Stamp revenue funding.
- Conversations with the U.S. Forest Service – Bentz referred to an "unprofessional" exchange he had with the Regional Manager of the USFS during a past Commission meeting and stated he had apologized to her personally (which he said she accepted), and now apologizes publicly. He did not use the USFS's representative's name. Bentz mentioned two points of concern with USFS Safety Orders he still has, despite several conversations with the said USFS representative:

- 1) The gun case rule: Bentz stated that since his vehicle is by law an extension of his home, he does not believe he should have to keep his gun in a case in his truck.
 - 2) Possession of alcohol: Bentz said he believes anyone caught intoxicated while hunting should be arrested, although he does not think possessing alcohol in one's vehicle should be against the law if not in a dry county.
- Views on CWD – Bentz said he voted against proposed CWD Zones because we do not know, nor can any biologist provide studies which show that stopping supplemental feeding reduces CWD. He added that after 50 years, there should be at least one study proving so. He stated that another issue he has with CWD is the fearmongering brought about by biologists, radio personalities, state institution professors, and “celebrity hunters” who have implied that CWD can spread to humans, which is unproven to date. Bentz added that he is prepared to make a motion on the supplemental feeding ban if MDWFP can conduct its own study regarding whether supplemental feeding in fact impacts the spread of CWD. Bentz added that he does agree with the current deer carcass transport rule.
 - Support of supplemental feeding – Bentz stated he has always supported supplemental feeding. He noted his acceptance of MDWFP's consistency in opposing supplemental feeding, but said he takes issue with agency biologists appearing on “SuperTalk” with a commentator who “lacks credibility.” Commissioner Bentz played multiple sound bites from Ricky Mathews speaking against corn feeding and suggesting CWD could be transferred to humans. Commissioner Bentz later displayed pictures from Mr. Mathews' social media page of Mr. Mathews using corn feeders.
 - Issues with the WFP Foundation – Bentz spoke regarding the Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks Foundation, a the 501(c)(3) organization set up for the sole purpose of the MDWFP, which has a Board consisting of private sector individuals. He said he hopes his fellow Commissioners join him to ensure Foundation funds are spent prudently and properly but expressed agreement with the Foundation Board's decision to retract funding for “SuperTalk.”
 - Communication with Ricky Mathews – Bentz said that since his appointment in 2021, he has not been asked to appear on “SuperTalk” to express his views or answer questions. Bentz noted a text he received from Mathews in February 2023 asking whether (Bentz) would support a supplemental feed ban, to which Bentz said he replied and requested Mathews print the response, which did not occur.

Commissioner Bentz stated that since his appointment, he has remained consistent and owned his actions as a commissioner and is not a “go with the flow” type of person. He said he recalls only once reversing his vote (regarding a Pelahatchie Bay alligator issue). Bentz said he has made efforts to respond to all who have contacted him and has advocated for both the public land hunter and private landowner. He emphasized that it is false that he has not communicated with MDWFP biologists.

Bentz said he believes all accusations from “friends of Ricky Mathews” who serve on the WFP Foundation are an attempt to prevent his Senate confirmation. He said he serves as commissioner for the sake of the employees of MDWFP, especially the Law Enforcement Bureau, and the sportsmen/women in the state of Mississippi.

Bentz thanked Chairman Cossar for the opportunity to speak on these issues.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the Commission, Commissioner Coopwood made a motion to adjourn, which was seconded by Commissioner Mounger. The Commission voted unanimously in favor of the motion and the meeting was adjourned.



Bill F. Cossar, CHAIRMAN

5/16/24

Date



Scott Coopwood, VICE-CHAIRMAN

5/16/24

Date