

MISSISSIPPI COMMISSION ON WILDLIFE, FISHERIES, & PARKS

Thursday, February 22nd, 2024

11:00 AM Business Session

Black Prairie WMA
1350 Fire Tower Rd., Crawford, MS 39743

MINUTES – BUSINESS SESSION

PRESENT: Commission Chairman Bill F. Cossar, Commissioners Leonard Bentz, William Mounger II, and Gary Rhoads. Vice-Chairman Scott Coopwood attended the meeting via phone.

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; Jeremy Bass, Director of Marketing and Communications; Colonel Jerry Carter, Chief of Law Enforcement; and Drew Malone, Special Assistant Attorney General.

OPENING PRAYER

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

Chairman Cossar welcomed guest Dr. Andrew Kouba, MSU Department Head of Wildlife, Fisheries, & Aquaculture. Commissioner Bentz welcomed Mr. Lake Pickle (Primos Outdoors).

MINUTES

ACTION: Upon motion made by Commissioner Rhoads and seconded by Commissioner Bentz, the Commission meeting minutes for January 25th, 2024, were unanimously approved.

AGENDA

Director Posey announced changes to the agenda to remove Mr. Barry Sullivan from Public Comments (not present), and that an Executive Session would be necessary to discuss a land matter.

ACTION: Commissioner Rhoads moved to approve the agenda for February 22nd, 2024. Commissioner Bentz seconded the motion and the motion carried.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Chairman Cossar recognized Mr. Johnny Stokes who wished to speak regarding dog deer hunting. Mr. Stokes addressed the Commission, stating that in Delta National Forest near Sunflower WMA, dog hunting season had been reduced to 25 days, with season dates now

being December 24th - January 17th, rather than the initial published dates of December 24th - January 31st. Mr. Stokes explained that season dates had changed mid-season, and that he and other dog hunters would like the season to extend through the end of January as in the past.

Discussion followed.

Chairman Cossar stated that the matter would be taken under advisement.

Mr. Stokes asked why the pamphlet dates were changed mid-season.

Mr. Pugh said historically, the season had been 25-26 days; however, this year the date discrepancy was an oversight, and that he would take responsibility. Mr. Pugh explained the steps of presenting WMA regulation recommendations (occurring each year in April), which are then brought before the Commission for a final vote in May.

Mr. Pugh stated that further public comments on the matter were welcome. He emphasized that the agency wants to arrive at a solution that pleases all involved.

Mr. Stokes thanked the Commission and MDWFP staff for any help they can provide.

LICENSE SALES REPORT

Jason Thompson presented the License Sales Report for the month of January 2024. The total revenue generated for the end of January was \$16.4 million—an increase of \$210,000 from last year.

Highlights of his report are as follows:

- Resident license sales – \$5.6 million.
- Resident WMA User Permit – 620 more sold versus 2023.
- Boating & Fishing Guide Permits – 68 sold in January = \$57,675. (75 RES and 9 NR sold this year).
- Archery/Primitive Weapon Permits – up 3% from last year.
- Non-resident Spring Turkey Draw – 2,154 applicants; 1,100 to be selected – a 25% increase from 1,700 applications received last year.
- Non-resident license sales – up \$319,000.
 - NR 7-day Small Game – up 2%.
 - NR Deer Permit – up \$867,000
- Permit category – up 3%.
- Lifetime License category – down 1%.
- License packages sold – 27,202 compared to 26,431 in 2023.
- Autorenewal customers increased to 21,567 from 17,424 in 2023.

Chairman Cossar asked Mr. Thompson how many Louisiana residents purchase non-resident licenses in Mississippi. Mr. Thompson did not have the quantity but said of the \$16.4 million in revenue from January sales, \$7 million is from Louisiana resident purchases.

Commissioner Mounger stated that non-U.S. citizens seeking hunting licenses can currently call in to obtain a license but can't do so online. He suggested that MWDFP implement that capability with the new Licensing system, since he has had inquiries from farmers with H1B workers. Commissioner Mounger asked about a motion for this issue.

Mr. Malone stated that the agency will need to determine whether the Licensing system can process those requests. No action was taken on the matter.

WILDLIFE

40 Miss. Admin. Code, Part 2, Rule 5.4 (FINAL)

Russ Walsh, Wildlife Chief of Staff, announced no public comments had been received on the proposal to strike the calendar year from Rule 5.4. during January's meeting. He turned the matter over to the commission for a vote.

ACTION: Upon motion by Commissioner Mounger and seconded by Commissioner Rhoads, the Commission unanimously approved the recommendation to strike the calendar year "2023" from 40 Miss. Admin. Code, Part 2, Rule 5.4.

Commissioner Bentz asked how the public knows to submit public comments. Mr. Walsh stated that in addition to the televised Commission meetings, proposed rule changes are displayed on the MDWFP website, and public comments can be made through the site's portal, social media, and newspaper articles.

CWD Update

Mr. Walsh distributed information to the Commission regarding CWD (available on the MDWFP website's CWD dashboard) and provided updates from the 2023-2024 sample season. Mr. Walsh noted that six new counties have had cases this season (July 1st, 2023, through June 30th, 2024), including Claiborne, Desoto, Harrison, Lafayette, Tate, and Tishomingo Counties. Benton and Marshall Counties continue to have the most CWD-positive cases.

Mr. Walsh said of 8,300 samples taken this sampling period, 110 positives were identified, which is a 50% increase over the 2022-2023 season. In total, there have been 317 positive cases since CWD was discovered in Mississippi in February 2018. Mr. Walsh said 16 CWD-positive counties have been detected statewide in 2023-2024.

Mr. Walsh mentioned MDWFP's taxidermy program, which began several seasons ago, has proven successful. He thanked taxidermists who have helped in collecting samples and saving carcass heads for testing.

Discussion followed on the involvement of food processors and taxidermists in providing samples to assist in identifying CWD.

Mr. Walsh stated that he would like to recommend that Claiborne County be added to the CWD Management Zone due to its recent positive case detection.

Commissioner Bentz requested clarity on whether the area of Claiborne County west of the Mississippi River was already in a CWD Management Zone, since a positive detection occurred in a Louisiana parish last year.

Mr. Walsh answered yes, due to an agreement MDWFP holds with the state of Louisiana.

ACTION: Upon motion made by Commissioner Coopwood and seconded by Commissioner Mounger, the recommendation to establish all of Claiborne County to be placed in a CWD Management Zone was passed. Commissioner Bentz voted against the motion.

Chairman Cossar mentioned supplemental feeding as a major factor in the spread of CWD. Mr. Walsh agreed, stating carcass transport is another factor.

Commissioner Bentz asked what the temperature of the Wildlife Bureau would be on creating a statewide supplemental feed ban, rather than picking and choosing from CWD-positive counties.

Mr. Walsh answered that the issue would be how to couch that discussion, and that in this context the discussion would be couched under disease management and risks to resources, whether that be deer or other wildlife disease concerns.

Walsh stated that in the context of disease management, he thinks a supplemental feed ban is a worthy discussion to have. He said to determine whether MDWFP staff would be for or against a feed ban, the first step would be to lay out the pros, cons, and risks associated with supplemental feeding in order to make an informed decision.

Chairman Cossar recognized Vice-Chairman Coopwood, who requested that MDWFP staff research pausing supplemental feeding and whether doing so would slow the spread of CWD in Mississippi.

Vice-Chairman Coopwood suggested that the staff gather research and feedback from the public to see if pausing supplemental feeding would be a possible way to address the spread of CWD.

Chairman Cossar advised agency Wildlife biologists to conduct research and report their findings to the Commission before any action is taken.

Discussion followed.

Wildlife Bureau Awards

Mr. Walsh recognized Wildlife Bureau employees nominated by their peers who exemplify outstanding work within wildlife management conservation and WMA conservation. Each recipient was awarded a gift certificate and plaque.

WMA Conservationist of the Year 2023 – Austin Prestage of the Northeast MS WMA Program.

Wildlife Conservationist of Year 2023 – John Harris, coordinator of the Wildlife Bureau Training Program.

Commissioner Mounger inquired about possibly raising the squirrel season bag limit from eight to 10 and suggested a motion to do so.

Mr. Walsh replied that he had investigated the matter before and raising the bag limit would not be a resource concern.

Commissioner Mounger made a motion to increase the squirrel season bag limit from 8 to 10, with a second from Commissioner Bentz. Mr. Malone stated that the motion could not be voted on at this time given that such bag limits were contained within the WMA rules and there was no rule currently before the Commission to effect such a change. The change to the squirrel bag limit could be brought up at the proper time when the annual WMA rules were presented to the Commission for approval.

Chairman Cossar tabled the motion for a change in the squirrel bag limit until the Wildlife's WMA regulations were presented properly before the Commission.

Commissioner Bentz raised a question regarding WMA dog collars/hunting and whether a rule change was necessary. Chairman Cossar requested that this item be added to the April agenda as well.

Director Posey asked Mr. Walsh to provide the Commission information regarding the CWD-positive deer found in Tate County. The Tate County deer was the first CWD positive deer to be found inside a high-fenced enclosure in Mississippi.

Commissioner Bentz asked Mr. Walsh about the process to determine whether suspect-positive cases were in fact positive prior to alerting the public. Mr. Walsh discussed the USDA's requirements for testing suspect-positive cases utilizing both the ELISA test and IHC test, which he said is the "gold-standard" definitive test in confirming CWD-positive cases.

Commissioner Bentz stated that he had heard of another deer located in a high-fenced enclosure in Benton County that had tested positive for CWD. Mr. Walsh stated that there was a deer that did test positive utilizing the ELISA test in that high-fenced enclosure but that the positive results were not confirmed via ICH.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Law Enforcement Update

Colonel Jerry Carter, Chief of Law Enforcement, reported 1,216 license/compliance check citations issued for the month of January, with the top five as: "No License" (185); Trespassing (94); Hunting from a Public Road (89); No Hunter Orange (65); and Supplemental Feeding (60).

Colonel Carter presented the Commission with details of an illegal dumping case in Jones County with Officer Hulon as the arresting officer. The subject was charged with three (3) separate counts of trespassing; nine (9) counts of dumping dead wildlife, and one (1) count of an unlawful antler-sized buck harvest.

Commissioner Bentz asked Colonel Carter the proper way to dispose of a deer carcass. Colonel Carter explained that designated dumping sites are located at hunting clubs and within each county. He added that dumping carcasses on private land, on sides of the road, off bridges, and in creeks is illegal.

Mr. Pugh mentioned House Bill 1281 regarding illegal dumping, which would provide the Commission with the authority to revoke a person's hunting and fishing license if convicted of the offense.

Colonel Carter announced that MDWFP's Law Enforcement Bureau has collected all applications, and 168 packets (of 240 applicants) would be sent to potential cadets meeting the requirements. He stated that the next step would be the interview process, and training would begin March 8th.

MDWFP Shooting Range customer counts for January 2024 were as follows: McIvor – 230; Turcotte – 356; McHenry – 360.

Bentz made comments commending efforts made by law enforcement and the importance of the statute that allows the Commission to revoke licenses.

Discussion followed.

OTHER BUSINESS

Mr. Posey announced that the MDWFP turkey stamp bill had been introduced on both sides of the Legislature and had passed the House.

NEXT MEETING DATE

Director Posey announced the next Commission Meeting date information.

Date: Thursday, March 21st, 2024
Location: Percy Quin State Park
2036 Percy Quin Drive
McComb, MS 39648
Time: 10 A.M. - Business Session

EXECUTIVE SESSION

Director Posey announced that an Executive Session for the Commission was necessary.

ACTION: A motion was made by Commissioner Mounger to close the meeting to determine the need to go into Executive Session. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Rhoads and the Commission voted unanimously to close the meeting to discuss the need to go into Executive Session.

The attorney announced to those present that the meeting was now closed to determine the need to go into Executive Session.

The meeting was closed. Discussion was held and it was determined that there was a need to enter into Executive Session to discuss possible land purchases.

ACTION: Commissioner Coopwood made a motion to enter into Executive Session to discuss Commissioner Rhoads seconded the motion and the Commission voted unanimously to enter Executive Session.

The attorney announced to those present that the Commission had entered into Executive Session to discuss possible land purchases.

Art Kennard, MDWFP Lands Coordinator, updated the Commission on certain tracts of land for sale or which were in the process of making offers to purchase.

Upon motion by Commissioner Bentz and seconded by Commissioner Mounger the Commission unanimously voted to authorize the Department to pursue and complete the purchase of certain lands adjacent to existing MDWFP property.

There being no further items for discussion in Executive Session, Commissioner Bentz made a motion to open the meeting. Commissioner Mounger seconded the motion and the Commission voted unanimously to open the meeting.

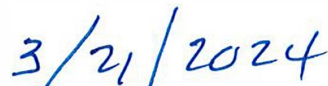
The attorney announced to the public that the meeting was now open and that during Executive Session the Commission voted to make an offer to purchase a certain tract of land.

ADJOURNMENT

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



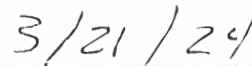
Bill F. Cossar, CHAIRMAN



Date



Scott Coopwood, VICE-CHAIRMAN



Date