

MISSISSIPPI COMMISSION ON WILDLIFE, FISHERIES, & PARKS

Wednesday, September 18, 2024
10:00 AM Education Session
MDWFP Headquarters
1505 Eastover Drive, Jackson, MS 39211

EDUCATION SESSION MINUTES

PRESENT: Chairman Scott Coopwood and Commissioners Gary Rhoads, Billy Mounger, Todd Hairston and Colin Maloney.

Among the MDWFP staff present were Executive Director Lynn Posey, Larry Pugh, Curtis Thornhill, Brian Ferguson, Col. Jerry Carter, Lt. Col. Scottie Jones, Amy Blaylock, Jerry Brown, Jason Thompson, Andre' Hollis, and Doug Mann.

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the Educational Session and asked Russ Walsh to introduce the presentation.

2024 Alligator Hunting Season Report

Russ Walsh introduced Andrew Arnett, Statewide Alligator Coordinator, to the Commission. Mr. Arnett has been the state's alligator program coordinator since Ricky Flynt left to become the administrator of the Mississippi Outdoor Stewardship Trust Fund. Mr. Arnett noted that there was still another weekend of hunting opportunity on private lands/waters remaining in the season; however, the preliminary numbers were worthy of reporting to the Commission.

Mr. Arnett stated that for the 2024 season, the MDWFP had received some 6,576 applications for alligator permits and 981 permits were issued. Of those, approximately 692 permitted hunters actually hunted along with the assistants they were allowed to have with them, which represents a total of 3,536 hunters. As of the date of the meeting, 785 alligators had been harvested and more are expected by the end of the Private Lands season.

The department issued 122 permits for Private Lands Alligator Hunting Season. That season will not close until September 23rd.

Andrew then gave a brief overview of all activities of the Alligator Program which includes tagging alligators to track movement and range; conducting population surveys to determine how many alligators we have in Mississippi and research into various aspects of alligators.

Commissioner Mounger asked Mr. Arnett what are some factors affecting the annual alligator hatch. Andrew responded that one of the factors having a significant negative affect on hatch was depredation of nests and eggs by raccoons. A general discussion followed with several of the Commissioners offering personal examples of alligator hunting experiences and/or nuisance alligator activity. Mr. Arnett explained that the MDWFP maintained a statewide

network of "agent trappers" with the experience and qualifications to catch and relocate nuisance alligators.

Chairman Coopwood thanked Mr. Arnett for his work with the MDWFP and congratulated him on another productive Alligator Hunting Season.

Kenny Prince of the Mississippi Trappers Association for a brief presentation on the current state of trapping in Mississippi.

Mr. Prince stated that although fur prices (and demand) were very low, we still have a healthy number of sportsmen trapping in Mississippi. Most trappers trap lands they own or lease, but many more hire out to landowners to control nuisance animals. The only aspect of trapping that still produces a good return on the time and effort invested is live coyote trapping and sales.

Currently, the trapping season is set in statute and only lasts a few months. Mr. Prince requested that the Commission and Department use their influence to get the legislature to allow more trapping opportunity, especially for species that deplete or otherwise impact other wildlife populations, such as raccoons and coyotes.

Chairman Coopwood thanked Mr. Prince for his service as a former Conservation Officer, and assured him that the Commission was already working with the department and our legislative committee chairs to identify and expand opportunities for trapping.

The Commission then recessed before coming into session to conduct official business.

MISSISSIPPI COMMISSION ON WILDLIFE, FISHERIES, & PARKS

Thursday, August 22, 2024

1:00 PM Business Session

MDWFP Headquarters

1505 Eastover Drive, Jackson, MS 39211

BUSINESS SESSION MINUTES

PRESENT: Chairman Scott Coopwood and Commissioners Gary Rhoads, Billy Mounger, Todd Hairston and Colin Maloney were in attendance.

Among the MDWFP staff attending were Executive Director Lynn Posey, Larry Pugh, Curtis Thornhill, Brian Ferguson, Col. Jerry Carter, Lt. Col. Scottie Jones, Russ Walsh, Amy Blaylock, Jerry Brown, Jason Thompson, Andre' Hollis and Doug Mann.

The Chairman gavelled the meeting into order and welcomed guests, both those watching the live stream video and those attending in person.

OPENING PRAYER

Chairman Coopwood requested that Jason Thompson, Director of Administrative Services, open the meeting with prayer.

MINUTES

Chairman Coopwood asked the Commission to review the minutes from the July meeting and when done called for a motion to approve the minutes.

ACTION: Upon motion by Commissioner Rhoads and seconded by Commissioner Hairston, the Commission meeting minutes of August 22, 2024, were unanimously approved.

AGENDA

The Chairman asked Executive Director Posey if there were any changes to the proposed agenda. Mr. Posey stated that there were three individuals to be added to the Public Comments period to address the Commission, and that during Other Business, Attorney Mann would present a request from Jackson County for the designation of a "No Wake" Zone. There would be a need for a brief Executive Session.

ACTION: Upon motion by Commissioner Rhoads and seconded by Commissioner Mounger, the Commission unanimously approved the meeting agenda for September 18, 2024.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Bill Marcello – Yazoo County. Mr. Marcello has owned property in Yazoo County since 1995. He bought the property for hunting and light agriculture. He wished to discuss the MDWFP's practices for issuing deer depredation or "animal control permits" (ACPs) to take deer that are causing significant crop losses by eating the emerging plants. His complaint is that there is seemingly no or insufficient oversight over the number of deer depredation permits issued to farmers. In his experience, many farmers using the permits are killing too many deer because they are allowed to shoot at night, using night vision or thermal imaging equipment and suppressed rifles. Too many deer end up being wounded and may expire in the agricultural field. Mr. Marsala feels we should only allow shooting during daylight hours and without suppressed rifles to allow the noise to drive the deer off the fields.

Bill Kyle – Yazoo County. Mr. Kyle lives outside of Benton, Mississippi. He owns about 540 acres on the Yazoo/Holmes County line. All of his land is enrolled in the CRP program, but he is surrounded by actively-farmed agricultural lands. He has seen a decline in the size and quality of buck deer over the past few years. He is managing his land to be quality deer habitat; however, he believes the abuse of depredation permits is resulting in fewer deer. More specifically, of the dead deer he finds on his property, there are both bucks and does. He is an active participant in the DMAP program and tries to harvest deer as recommended by the biologists. He also sees too many deer that were wounded and died in fields. He recommends no more night shooting, suppressors, or night vision and that permits only be issued after exhausting non-lethal methods. He is concerned that his property value will suffer without more control over depredation permit practices, and that control over the process needs to rest with biologists.

Jay Shackelford – Yazoo and Holmes Counties. Mr. Shackelford began by stating that he understands the need a farmer has to protect his livelihood, but that must be weighed with protecting the resource (deer) from overkill. Mr. Shackelford agreed with the other speakers that the whole process needs better oversight.

Phillip King – Madison County. Mr. King echoed many of the previous comments and added that one attraction for him and many others when buying rural property, was the abundance of natural resources on the land to include white-tailed deer. Mr. King's concern is that current depredation permit practices are allowing for the depletion of the white-tailed deer resource.

Chairman Coopwood thanked all of the commenters for coming to share their thoughts and experiences. He noted that this is valuable feedback for the Commission to consider when developing policies that will affect our resources. The Chairman asked Mr. Posey if there were any other comments. Mr. Posey replied that there were no others who had asked to address the Commission. He went on to say that staff was currently evaluating the animal control permit process and would be addressing this with an updated program and possibly a new administrative rule in the very near future.

Commissioner Mounger offered his thanks to the commenters for expressing their views and noted that any new rules would be in place prior to the next planting season.

LICENSE SALES REPORT

Jason Thompson, Director of Administrative Services, presented the License Sales Report for the month of August 2024. The total revenue for the end of August was up about 8% (\$1,422,117.80) compared to August 2023 (8.44%).

Highlights of his report are listed below:

- Resident license sales – \$824,480.70 (up 12.56%)
- Non-resident license sales – \$432,963.10 (up 8.81%)
- Other Licenses – \$55,674.00 (down 14.42%)
- Lifetime License category – \$109,000.00 (down 6.03%)

ACTION: Upon motion by Commissioner Rhoads and seconded by Commissioner Maloney, the Commission unanimously accepted the License Sales report for August of 2024.

MARKETING AND OUTREACH

Jeremy Bass, Director of Marketing and Outreach gave a presentation to the Commission on current efforts to promote conservation in general and the agency specifically.

Mr. Bass stated that all marketing efforts were developed with the ultimate goal of natural resource conservation in mind. However, not enough people are familiar with the agency and its role in conservation. To that end, the Marketing bureau has created a Brand Book for the MDWFP.

Briefly, the Brand Book contains comprehensive information about the department and its capabilities, powers and duties. It is an overview of all aspects of the agency from Parks to Law Enforcement. It is a printed/published book that can be obtained upon request. The Brand Book and content is already being used in targeted marketing for specific programs in various media.

Marketing has also been involved in the development of the new agency website and its value as a marketing tool.

Social media has become a well-used platform for marketing and the bureau has personnel that post for the agency and respond to requests. Events are advertised as well as services the department provides.

The bureau also collects and performs data analytics for agency exposure. We have contracts with outside entities that collect numbers of visits and “mentions” in various media. This helps us to ascertain where and how we can get the best exposure.

Mississippi Outdoors television show has always been a valuable marketing tool. Recently we have developed a new logo and are working on increasing production of new content to expand the show's influence.

The Mississippi Outdoors Magazine also continues to be a valuable marketing tool. We are currently surveying subscribers to see what content they desire and other aspects of the magazine that can be enhanced to improve circulation. Many suggestions are being phased in as we speak.

Most recently, the Department launched a Mississippi Outdoors podcast. It has proved to be extremely popular and is also growing the agency YouTube channel. The podcast has produced over 5 million "impressions" or visits/views/downloads of the podcast, shortly after its inception. Different episodes have caused significant spikes in "impressions," but we seem to be maintaining a good baseline which is indicative of popularity. We are maintaining a good base of followers and significant "shares" of individual episodes.

Finally, Mr. Bass noted that the Marketing bureau is actively involved in preparing for the agency to host the annual meeting of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies or SEAFWA, in 2025. We have produced a brief promotional video that will be presented at the end of this year's SEAFWA conference to invite the members to attend. The video was then played.

Chairman Coopwood congratulated Mr. Bass and his staff for their very professional work and efforts in promoting the department.

WILDLIFE

Russ Walsh, Wildlife Bureau Chief of Staff presented the following for Commission approval. First, is a request from G6:2 Outdoors for approval to have a special youth hunt and a waiver or exemption from having to have a license for that hunt to be held from December 6th through the 8th.

ACTION: Upon motion by Commissioner Mounger and seconded by Commissioner Rhoads, the Commission voted unanimously to grant the request for a special youth hunt for G6:2 Outdoors from December 6th through 8th.

Next is a request from the Dream Hunt Foundation for approval to have a special youth hunt outside of the regular season and a waiver or exemption from having to have a license for that hunt to be held from November 1st through the 2nd.

ACTION: Upon motion by Commissioner Hairston and seconded by Commissioner Maloney, the Commission voted unanimously to grant the request for a special youth hunt for the Dream Hunt Foundation from November 1st through 2nd.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Law Enforcement Update

Colonel Jerry Carter, Chief of Law Enforcement, reported that during the month of August, 2024, a total of 344 citations were issued with "No Resident License" being number one (69), "No Personal Floatation Device" was number two (39), followed by Trespassing (34), "No Boat Registration" (27), and No Running Lights (20).

The Colonel continued his report noting several details where officers worked enforcement details for Alligator Hunting Season and served search warrants for the Investigations unit in Smith County. The Colonel also presented photos where conservation officers conducted Hunter Safety classes in August.

Customer counts for the department's shooting ranges for the month of August were: Mclvor – 954; Turcotte – 983; and McHenry – 647 customers.

The Colonel also announced that our current class of cadets would be graduating from MLEOTA next week.

License Reinstatements

Colonel Carter brought three (3) individuals before the Commission, requesting to have their hunting licenses restored.

Preston Langley of Itawamba County was asked to address his petition to the Commission. Mr. Langley stated that he was going night fishing but decided to take a .22 rifle along with him. Upon arriving at the area he planned to fish, there were deer standing in the field and on impulse, he took out the rifle and shot at one of the deer. The Commissioners asked several questions and discussed the events of the evening with Mr. Langley.

The Commissioners questioned him if he had ever done this before and he admitted he had, but assured the Commission that he had learned his lesson.

The Chairman asked Colonel Carter if the young men had satisfied all requirements for reinstatement, to which Colonel Carter responded that he had.

ACTION: Upon motion by Commissioner Hairston and seconded by Commissioner Maloney, the Commission voted unanimously to reinstate the hunting license of Mr. Preston Langley.

Auston Armstrong of Grenada County, Mississippi was next to present his request to have his license reinstated. Mr. Armstrong believed he was acting under a depredation/animal control permit and was challenged to shoot a deer that was "way out there." The landowner stopped and held him until Law Enforcement arrived. He was cited for headlighting.

After some general questioning and discussion from the Commission, Chairman Coopwood called for a motion.

ACTION: Upon motion by Commissioner Maloney and seconded by Commissioner Rhoads, the Commission voted unanimously to reinstate the hunting license of Auston Armstrong.

Austin Curtis of Pontotoc County was the last to petition the Commission for reinstatement of his license. Mr. Curtis stated that he and friends were out riding. He had just bought a new .17 HMR rifle and had yet to shoot it. As they were riding, they were also shining the adjacent fields. As they were shining, they were hit with blue lights and Mr. Curtis tried to outrun the pursuing officer. Realizing the futility of this action, he pulled over and followed the commands of the officer to exit the vehicle. He and his friend were placed under arrest and taken to jail. He ended up receiving six citations, \$5,000 in fines and had to spend six (6) days in jail over the course of several weekends.

General questions and answers from the Commission followed. Commissioner Rhoads asked the Colonel for his recommendation for Mr. Curtis. The Colonel responded that he had paid all fines and satisfied all requirements for reinstatement.

ACTION: Upon motion by Commissioner Maloney and seconded by Commissioner Rhoads, the Commission voted unanimously to reinstate the hunting license of Austin Curtis.

Colonel Carter concluded his report by noting that all these cases resulted from reports/complaints from the general public and follow-up work from the officers. Without public involvement and support, law enforcement could not be effective.

OTHER BUSINESS

The Chairman recognized Attorney Doug Mann for an item of "Other Business." Mr. Mann advised the Commission that, as successor to the Boat and Water Safety Commission, the Commission had the authority to adopt certain county ordinances regarding boating, and adopt them as administrative rules.

Jackson County, Mississippi is presenting a Resolution requesting the designation of a "No Wake Zone" on Bluff Creek which is a tributary of the Pascagoula River. All requirements for a public hearing on the proposed No Wake Zone had been met by the County. Mr. Mann requested that the Commission accept this request and direct staff to draft an appropriate administrative rule for adoption at the next meeting.

ACTION: Upon motion by Commissioner Hairston and seconded by Commissioner Mounger, the Commission voted unanimously to accept the request of Jackson County for a No Wake Zone on Bluff Creek and to direct staff to prepare a proposed rule to that effect.

NEXT MEETING DATE

Executive Director Posey announced the proposed date and time for the next meeting as follows:

Date: Thursday, October 24, 2024

Location: Jackson Headquarters – 1505 Eastover Drive

Time: 10:00 AM Education Session and 11:00 AM Business Session

EXECUTIVE SESSION

The Executive Director stated that there was a need for an Executive Session to discuss transactions in real property.

ACTION: Commissioner Maloney made a motion to close the meeting to determine the need for an Executive Session to discuss transactions in real property. Commissioner Hairston seconded the motion, and the Commission voted unanimously to close the meeting.

The Meeting was closed, and the room was cleared. Counsel made the announcement to the public outside the meeting room that the meeting was closed to determine the need for Executive Session.

Discussion followed.

ACTION: Commissioner Mounger made a motion to enter Executive Session to discuss transactions in real property. Commissioner Hairston seconded the motion, and the Commission voted unanimously to enter Executive Session.

The Commission entered Executive Session.

Mr. Mann made the announcement to the public outside the meeting that the Commission had entered Executive Session to discuss real property transactions.

Mr. Mann reminded the Commission that they had voted to pursue a tract of land in George County last month. However, another tract of land had recently come onto the market in Marion County, contiguous to the Marion County WMA. The Department was seeking Commission authorization to pursue both tracts and possibly less of the George County land. The Marion County tract would provide additional access to the WMA and provide more of a buffer with neighboring land.

The Commission authorized staff to move forward, by acclamation.

There were no further matters for Executive Session.

ACTION: Upon motion by Commissioner Maloney and seconded by Commissioner Hairston, the Commission voted unanimously to exit Executive Session.

Counsel announced to the remaining members of the general public that the Commission had authorized pursuing the purchase of lands in Marion County.

The meeting was opened.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the Commission, Chairman Coopwood called for a motion to adjourn. Commissioner Hairston made the motion to adjourn which was seconded by Commissioner Maloney. The motion passed unanimously. Chairman Coopwood gave the meeting into adjournment.



Scott Coopwood, CHAIRMAN

10/24/24

Date



Gary Rhoads, VICE CHAIRMAN

10/24/24

Date