

THE MINUTES OF THE
NJ FISH AND GAME COUNCIL
EMERGENCY SKYPE MEETING
MARCH 30, 2020

The meeting was called to order at 1:03 p.m. by Chairman Virgilio.

Roll call was taken in attendance:

Chairman Frank Virgilio
Councilman Phil Brodhecker
Councilman Joe DeMartino
Councilman Agust Gudmundsson
Councilman Dr. Rick Lathrop
Councilman Ed Kertz
Councilman Bob Pollock
Councilman Loren Robinson
Councilman Ken Whildin

Division employees included: D. Golden, P. Nelson, L. Barno, C. Stanko, S. Cianciulli, D. Ogonofski, M. Monteschio, D. Bajek.

Also joining us was Assistant Commissioner Ray Bukowski.

There were many members of the public in attendance.

Chairman Virgilio started by thanking Director Golden, Assistant Director Nelson and Chief Barno for their continued leadership and support during these challenging times. He quoted from Governor Murphy "Social distancing is paramount to control the spread of COVID-19." The Division of Fish and Wildlife is recommending to Council the modification to the 2020 trout season. These modifications are aimed to help redistribute angling pressure usually seen on Opening Day. Chairman Virgilio encourages all anglers to practice proper social distancing in accordance with the Center of Disease Control guidelines along with Governor Murphy's strategy that will help contain COVID-19 while providing recreational fishing.

Director Golden mentioned we are meeting today to evaluate a strategy that will help keep the fishing season open during this crisis. The Division of Fish and Wildlife knows what typical

Opening Day crowds look like and we need to try to develop a strategy to maintain social distancing which would be consistent with Governor Murphy's Executive Order 107. We are fearful if we cannot develop a strategy where we diffuse anglers gathering around well-stocked areas, that we will find ourselves in a situation where there will be a ratcheting down on outdoor activities like fishing and may lose the opportunity to carry out the rest of the season during this COVID-19 crisis. Director Golden appreciates the Council coming together so quickly to brainstorm on scenarios to keep the season open and the public healthy and to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Chief Barno reported that the Spring Trout program consists of 570,000 trout ranging from 10.5 inches long distributed over a 10-week stocking program. Usually 3-weeks prior to the opener, then 7-weeks after. During the 3-week pre-season closure the vast majority of trout stocked waters are closed to fishing to allow the individual waters to be stocked with trout prior to Opening Day. The *Catch and Release areas*, *Trout Conservation Areas*, and Holdover Lakes remain open, however all trout caught must be released. We released approximately 183,000 trout typically distributed during pre-season closure and the remaining 387,000 trout are distributed across the 7-weeks in-season period. There are 14 waters stocked weekly on a specific day of each week, these waters are closed on the day of stocking until 5 p.m. In response to the COVID-19 outbreak on March 16, 2020, a week before the scheduled pre-season stocking was to begin, the Division implemented an accelerated stocking schedule due to the concerns with the hatchery being at maximum capacity and uncertainty of future staffing due to the potential for further COVID-19 restrictions. The Division's 10-week stocking program was consolidated into 4-weeks with approximately 92% of the hatchery spring allotment being distributed before the opener scheduled for April 11, 2020 at 8:00 a.m.

The breakdown of those numbers are; from March 16-20 with 63,000 trout distributed, March 23-27 with 148,490 trout distributed and this week another 161,740 will go out and the final week of April 6-10 164,460 trout will be distributed. This totals 540,000 trout being stocked prior to April 11 compared to the typical 183,000 trout stocked during the pre-season period. The Opening Day of trout season is very popular with NJ anglers especially after many of the waters are closed for 3-weeks prior to stocking. This is a particular concern as a closure to non-essential businesses and residents now are working remotely as a result of Executive order 107 on March 21, 2020. In light of the ongoing public health emergency due to COVID-19 pandemic declared by Governor Murphy, the Division of Fish and Wildlife recommends the following modifications to the 2020 trout season to help redistribute angling pressure usually seen on the season opening day to better maintain proper social distancing practices in accordance with the Center of Disease Control Guidelines.

The first recommendation is to remove the pre-season fishing closures on the trout stocked waters for catch and release fishing on trout beginning on April 1, 2020 at 8:00 a.m. and go

through until midnight of April 10, 2020 with size, season, and creel limit for all other species will still apply.

- This coincides with New York's opening day and should help reduce anglers traveling to New York to fish.
- Catch and release only prevents opening day level of interest on April 1 and assures plenty of trout remain for the ensuing weeks of the season as we are stocking on an accelerated schedule with 92% of the spring allotment being distributed prior to opening day.
- Ten days of fishing prior to the official season opener (April 11) will help reduce crowding on opening day and allow anglers to adhere to safe social distancing practices.
- Adds another outdoor recreation opportunity to residents and their families that are either out of work or working remotely.

The Pequest Trout Hatchery will continue to stock on an expedited schedule, distributing over 540,000 trout by April 11. However, in further efforts to redistribute opening day pressure the DFW will retain approximately 48,000 trout for distribution during the late in-season period as the status of COVID-19 and stream conditions (temps allow).

A motion was made by Councilman Gudmundsson to accept the Divisions proposal as written. Seconded by Councilman Lathrop. A vote was taken; motion carried.

The other recommendation is to remove in-season fishing closures on the fourteen designated waters that would typically be closed to fishing until 5:00 p.m. on their designated stocking date.

- As most of the in-season allotment has been stocked prior to opening day there will be several weeks where no stocking will occur.
- Removing the in-season closure reduces 5 pm crowding seen on these waters.
- Allows flexibility on stocking days once stocking resumes.

A motion was made by Councilman Gudmundsson to accept the proposal given by the Fish Committee seconded by Councilman Lathrop. Vote taken; motion carried.

Public Comment:

Steve, Clifton NJ, asked if Opening Day was going to be April 1, 2020.

Peter Hendricks, he has been fishing for 50 years and wants to thank the Division for taking action to give people the opportunity to get outside and enjoy fishing.

Carmen Giorgianni, Long Valley NJ, commented on what a great decision the Division is making and is there is any effort in trying to spread the fish out more to alleviate some crowds.

Harry Kimburis, wanted to know if trout fishing is artificial only.

Glenn, asked since in Bergen County, Ramapo Reservation county park is closed, any accommodations being made in that area?

A motion was made by Councilman Gudmundsson and seconded by Councilman DeMartino to adjourn the meeting at 1:37 p.m. Vote was taken, all approve; motion carried.

The next meeting will be April 14, 2020 at 1:00 p.m. through Skype.