

Endangered and Nongame Species Advisory Committee
DRAFT Meeting Minutes
September 15, 2021
Remote meeting via GoToMeeting

Members in attendance: Rick Lathrop (chair), Jim Applegate, Joanna Burger, Emile DeVito, Jane Morton Galetto, Howard Geduldig, Jim Shissias, Erica Miller, Howard Reinert. New ENSAC member appointments effective September 14, 2021: Russ Furnari and Robin Dougherty.

Absent: David Mizrahi

Staff in attendance: Dave Golden (Director DFW), Lisa Barno (Assistant Director DFW), John Heilferty (Chief ENSP), Kathy Clark (ENSP), Mary Monteschio (DFW), Gretchen Fowles (ENSP), Bob Longcor (DFW).

Public: Barbara Sachau, Tyler Christenson.

Meeting called to order at 9:03 am.

The public notice for this meeting was read by J. Heilferty.

Introductions of those in attendance.

Approval of Minutes

H. Geduldig had comments on three items in the July 21 minutes. Clarifying that law enforcement is “working to control” illegal ATVs; clarifying the status of Northern copperhead as “to be proposed for threatened status”; and that the copperhead RFP process will be subject to internal DEP review. With those changes, J. Burger moved for approval of the July 21, 2021, minutes, seconded by H. Geduldig. Minutes were approved by voice. Unanimously approved with two abstentions (RL, HG).

Director’s Report

Director Dave Golden

HR actions: Shawn Crouse was confirmed as Chief of the Bureau of Freshwater Fisheries, taking over for Assistant Director L. Barno who has served as Chief for 18 years. Law Chief Sean Cianciulli retired as of 9/1/21, and Frank Panico has stepped up as Acting Chief of the Bureau of Law Enforcement.

The Division has had 20 new hires and obtained approval for 20 promotions. Nine of the 20 new hires are for the black bear project in bear response. The DFW has about 230 employees. The new hires (besides the bear project) are in Freshwater Fisheries, ENSP, Wildlife Management, Law Enforcement, and Office of Business Administration; some will replace retired staff. At least two positions are for anticipated vacancies.

The five sections of WMAs that were closed temporarily are open as of today, Sept 15. There will be an assessment on the results of those closures that the staff will bring to the FGC and ENSAC in October. There was some discussion on the reasons for closures; there will be more DFW staff to answer questions at next month's meeting.

The Wildlife Habitat Supporter Program – the DFW is working with a marketing firm with rollout in October. Donations will be accepted through the license platform. It will be a digital marketing campaign.

Next month DFW is auctioning farm leases that have expired in recent years. There are three significant changes: about 3,500 acres of property will be auctioned. All the 3,500 acres will be required to maintain winter cover crops; a total of 133 acres that were previously leased for active farming practices were removed because they occurred in riparian zones; 500 acres of the land are set aside for organic farming pilot program. The Northeast Organic Farming Association are advising that program.

In the past week DFW staff attended the Northeast Fish and Wildlife Conference virtually. It's a good meeting for collaboration in our region. Common themes: 1) the importance of partnerships in our region for collaborative conservation, 2) post-Covid realities – change is happening quickly and how do agencies adapt?; 3) diversity-equity-inclusion in agency makeup and service to communities; 4) there are great opportunities on the horizon in terms of financial support. There are also conservation challenges like climate change.

Public Input

B. Sachau commented that funding from the federal government (not NJ license fees) supports the staff and the maintenance of wildlife management areas. She questioned the reporting of numbers and finances by the DEP. Director Golden noted that the approx. \$13 million the DFW receives in federal funding comes from taxes paid by hunters and anglers, not a general fund.

Legislative Updates

Mary Monteschio said the NJ legislature is on hiatus until after election day, so there is no update.

Updates

Status of Northern copperhead survey technique RFP: after more internal review, staff were advised to treat this as a grant. There is no further update at this time.

The white paper on Northern Diamondback Terrapin has been delayed; biologist B. Zarate has taken over the project from retired J. Bowers-Altman. An update should be available at the November meeting. J. Galetto asked if there's a deadline for BMF to take action if needed? M. Monteschio said the marine regulations do take time, but the DFW seeks to make changes by Notice of Administrative Change, which will be faster. J. Galetto asked about particular (possible) changes, which J. Heilferty notes will be part of the white paper once completed.

ENSAC member nominations were approved by Commissioner LaTourette yesterday. These changes are:

- Retirement of Jim Shissias. Per new Bylaws, the term limit is now two consecutive terms. Jim has served on the ENSAC since 1995, over many years that covered major policies of species listing and habitat planning. J. Heilferty thanked J. Shissias for continuing to serve for many years while nominations were pending. R. Lathrop added appreciation for the way Jim shaped the committee over the years. J. Shissias addressed the committee to express his long term and continuing interest in wildlife conservation.
- E. DeVito (presently in a “Public at Large” seat) has been reappointed to fill the vacant “Non-profit Conservation” seat that resulted from B. Brummer’s prior resignation. That leaves two vacancies in Public At Large.
- R. Furnari has been appointed to fill the seat vacated by J. Shissias’s retirement. J. Heilferty noted that R. Furnari recently won a national recognition for his work on NJ corporate wetlands partnership. Welcome to Russ.
- Robin Dougherty is also joining the ENSAC today, having been appointed to fill the Public At Large seat vacated by E. DeVito’s reappointment. Ms. Dougherty has recently served as the Executive Director of the Greater Newark Conservancy, and is uniquely qualified to advise the Division on topics of relevancy and diversity. Welcome to Robin.

J. Heilferty will share background information for the new committee members.

New Business

RAWA

J. Heilferty presented a PowerPoint on Recovering America’s Wildlife Act (RAWA), federal bills HR-2773 and S-2332. House and Senate versions are similar; the Senate bill specifies funding from natural resource damage fines and penalties. These may advance after the federal infrastructure legislation clears. RAWA could provide \$15.5 million to NJ, but would require 25% non-federal match (roughly \$5 million).

Currently, ENSP matches federal funds with state funds (limited), donations (wildlife license plate and tax check-off), mitigation funds, and in-kind (e.g., volunteer value). RAWA is written to allow more potential sources of match, including funds from license sales under certain conditions. It also includes identifying the value of land and easements, and the value of land where habitat management is conducted. Also significant is the allowance to use certain federal funds as match – primarily funds excluding those from Depts of Interior and Agriculture. This means work done at military facilities (Natural Resource Management Plans, habitat management, etc.) and Dept of Transportation highway departments (wildlife crossings) could be claimed as match.

Other ideas for RAWA match are 1) contractors in pass-through grants, 2) habitat restoration done using state NRD funds; 3) within-DEP staff who are state-funded, among others.

G. Fowles presented on research and management for Allegheny Woodrat

There is one single population in NJ. Woodrats are nocturnal, solitary except for breeding. They do not hibernate and they cache food, living in rocky outcrops surrounded by forest. They have a metapopulation structure. They have 2-3 young and may have 2 litters/year; they live up to 3 years, generally. Their historic range extended north from Massachusetts, west to Indiana, and south to northern Alabama. In the late 1970s population declines were first noticed and it is now endangered or threatened in much of the remaining range. In our region, it is extirpated in MA, CT, NY, while the states of MD and PA have lost 65-75% of their historic populations.

Causes of declines: habitat fragmentation, food loss, and parasite mortality. Loss of habitat (deforestation/conversion to ag) was followed by loss of the American chestnut food resource, followed by habitat fragmentation from development. Chestnuts were replaced by oaks as a food source, and oaks were frequently defoliated by gypsy moth. Since 1970's, raccoon roundworm infection via raccoon scat/seeds, has been a big source of mortality.

Historically in NJ, Allegheny woodrats were found in north Jersey only. Surveys were conducted in 1984-89, and by 1989 only the Palisades population was extant. The Palisades Interstate Park is about 12 miles long and half mile wide, surrounded by development. It's composed of oak forest and some soft mast plants (plus non-native plants). G. Fowles monitors annually with standard trapping protocol. Animals are tagged, examined for condition, and measurements and genetic samples are taken.

The trapping showed the population hit a low point in 2008 and remained low for years following. In 2014, genetic samples taken in 2009-2012 showed a very low heterozygosity. In 2015, woodrat experts agreed that a genetic rescue was warranted. In 2015-2017, two individuals per year were translocated from PA to NJ. Animals had a health assessment and were held prior to release. Following release, they were tracked with radio telemetry and motion-triggered cameras. Two died within the first two months, but the other four lived and GF confirmed successful breeding by three of the translocated animals using genetic analysis of their descendants, or camera captures.

The translocation effort has resulted in a significant improvement in the capture index in 2016-2020. A lower capture index in 2020 was confounded by an unusually high number of non-target species, including 18 captures of gray squirrels, that made traps unavailable to woodrats. The observed heterozygosity increased after 2015, and that improvement has persisted.

The other benefit of the genetic rescue is that we documented animals settling into additional areas, helping to document additional habitat. Amanda Menasion conducted camera surveys in a wider range of the Palisades, as well.

Raccoon roundworm is a known mortality cause, so staff continues to distribute medicated baits aimed at raccoons, to kill the roundworm eggs in raccoons. As of 2016, there are 16 bait

dispensers about 1 km apart in the woodrat range both above and below cliff. After 2015, incidence of raccoon roundworm is near zero, which minimizes roundworm as a mortality factor.

The NJ population is completely isolated from other populations by distance and habitat fragmentation. We have mitigated the impacts of isolation with the translocation work, resulting in improvements in genetics and population. We are also mitigating the parasite mortality by treating for raccoon roundworm reduction.

Other research underway: We started monitoring other, historic woodrat sites using baited motion-activated cameras. We will do hard-mast surveys in the Palisades to understand the food available; other research would identify the foods woodrats are consuming using genotyping chloroplast DNA.

G. Fowles helped initiate the Allegheny Woodrat working group, which includes 60 biologists from 12 states, meeting monthly. One of the topics is captive breeding that has the potential for supporting existing populations and possible reintroductions.

Committee members thanked Gretchen for her presentation.

Other Business

None.

Looking ahead

J. Heilferty reminded there will be an October meeting held jointly with the Fish & Game Council. That date is **Tuesday, October 12**, at 10:00 AM. J. Heilferty will advise about the agenda when that becomes available.

Next regular ENSAC meeting is Wednesday, November 17, anticipated to be virtual and starting at 9:00 AM. Possible agenda items include the beach-nesting bird project. Bureau of Lands Management and the Pond Creek restoration.

J. Galetto made a motion to adjourn, seconded by H. Reinert. Meeting adjourned 12:05 pm.

Summary of Action Items

- 1) Action item: ENSP will report on the status of the “white paper” at the November meeting if it is completed and available.
- 2) DFW assessment of the WMA closure to be addressed in October meeting.