

FINAL MINUTES

Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Advisory Committee (NHESAC)

April 12, 2019

DFW Field Headquarters, Southwest Meeting Room #103
1 Rabbit Hill Road, Westborough, MA 01581

MEMBERS:

Present: Joseph Larson, Wayne Petersen, William Brumback, Tim Flanagan

Absent: Mark Mello

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS:

Present: Andy Finton, Dave Small, Kevin Powers, Russ Hopping, Bryan Windmiller

Absent:

AGENCY STAFF:

Present: Jesse Leddick, (Chief of Regulatory Review), Sarah Maier (Information Manager), David Paulson (Senior Endangered Species Review Biologist), Ronald Amidon (Commissioner, Department of Fish and Game)

OTHERS: Timothy Dexter (Massachusetts Department of Transportation)

– Joseph Larson, acting as Chair for this meeting, called the meeting to order at 1:30 p.m. –

1. Approval of the March Minutes

The March minutes were motioned to be accepted, and members voted unanimously to approve.

2. Acting Chair's Comments – Mark Mello

There were no Acting Chair comments because Mark Mello was absent.

3. Board Member's Comments – Joseph Larson

The Board is looking at the issues posed by a coyote hunting contest, promoted by a sporting goods store on Cape Cod and a sportsman's club in Granby. There is a hunting season for coyotes in Massachusetts, but no bag limit. A series of listening sessions throughout the state are planned to gather public opinion on the matter. The first session was held on the Cape and the discussion was very civil. A publication by the Mt. Grace Land Conservation Trust highlighted the efforts of NHESAC associate member Dave Small and NHESP Conservation Planning Botanist Karro Frost.

An article in the Economist highlighted the downward trend of insect populations worldwide. Additionally, an article in Science reported on the deadly amphibian disease that has now become global.

4. NHESP Report – Jesse Leddick

Jesse referred the Committee to a number of articles on relevant topics in their packet.

Personnel matters:

No update on when the new Assistant Director will start.

Tom French has officially retired, but is now on contract with the Agency.

The Aquatic Ecologist position is now empty, but will be posted.

5. *Linking landscapes for Massachusetts Wildlife: Innovation and Transportation Coordination* – David Paulson (NHESP) and Timothy Dexter (MassDOT)

This program is a partnership between NHESP and the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT). The purpose was originally to streamline regulatory review under the MA Endangered Species Act (MESA) for DOT construction and renovation projects (including over 200 bridges). The program has resulted in best management practices for transportation construction and design to protect and enhance wildlife. An example is the replacement of rock armoring on bridges, stream crossings, and retaining walls with other methodologies that provide needed structure, but with more wildlife friendly results. Early collaboration in these projects resulted in added design features that provided new solutions for both transportation design and habitat enhancement.

The project initially identified types of wildlife confrontations as well as problem locations by sifting through wildlife mortality databases (2010- 2017 data) for general mortality, vernal pool locations, turtle mortality reports (especially in May and June), and motor vehicle/wildlife collisions from various agencies. This emphasis on data collection resulted in the creation of a large database and a report on the findings at the end of 2017. Additional data from MA State Police collision reports and DOT animal collections from highways were added to the database. The initial result was installation of permanent signs alerting motorists to deer, moose, and other animals at “hot spots” for wildlife crossings.

Other examples of projects:

Fencing of turtle crossings at Beaver Brook and Rt. 119 in Littleton: Over 100 turtles had been killed here, but fencing reduced mortality by 90%. A new, animal-friendly stream crossing will eventually be constructed at this location.

Black bear: A UMass wildlife study has looked at bears and how they move and live in a populated area. At I-91 in Hatfield, the partnership looked at how bears move through a stream crossing near the road. This wildlife passage research, using cameras and other tools, shows what types of structures seem to work for various animals, and this informs the design of future construction.

Peregrine falcon nest boxes on bridges: These nesting peregrines help maintain bridges by keeping pigeons (and their excrement) off bridges and also play a significant part in peregrine recovery.

American kestrel boxes: Kestrel boxes on the back of signs and poles provide nesting habitat near their hunting grounds.

Orange Sallow Moth habitat restoration: Dense overgrowth along roadsides has been trimmed back to the top of the slope, thus helping the moths in appropriate habitat. This type of highway management has also resulted in an increase of false foxglove plants.

Foxtail clubmoss: DOT was spreading wood chips onto rocky roadsides along Rt. 2, which was burying the habitat of the endangered foxtail clubmoss. They have since stopped the practice in order to help enhance the clubmoss, which spored itself onto the rocks after they were blasted to build the road.

Copperhead snake habitat: DOT treated both pale and black swallowwort, which had overrun areas along a highway roadside where the snakes bask. The two invasive plants had created shade, forcing the snakes onto the highway to bask.

Invasive species removal at various sites: DOT is helping to eliminate Phragmites at important sites, not just along the guardrails.

Staff training across both agencies: By training staff from both agencies in wildlife identification and habitat use, there have been a number of new species occurrences reported including mussel and turtle records. Understanding how wildlife uses habitat has also led to design improvements for DOT construction. The collaborative is partnering with The Nature Conservancy in the Berkshires and also with and the Sudbury Valley Trustees to design ways to avoid conflicts and improve habitat.

MassDOT has also provided lots of data on the northern long-eared bat, and may have the best data in the Northeast. They are also performing multiple years of monitoring for the rusty patch bumblebee on Cape Cod where the bee was last seen. DOT bridges are also providing cliff swallow nesting locations.

This has been a model partnership between MassDOT and MA Fish and Wildlife. They co-hosted the Northeastern Transportation and Wildlife Conference (NETWC) in 2018 in Amherst, and received the 2018 NETWC award.

6. Member's and Associate Member's Comments

Bill Brumback – The New England Wild Flower Society has a new name: Native Plant Trust. Its mission will remain the same.

Dave Small – Dave reported that it has been an odd season for vernal pool activity: rainy, but cooler and not a frog or salamander moving. The weekend following this meeting should be better. He also reported that Jennifer Longsdorf (NHESP Program Coordinator) gave a very good bat lecture at the Athol Bird and Nature Club. Dave also reported that the Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources is supposed to have opened the comment period for the legal framework that governs the construction of solar arrays, but he has not seen a notice as such. The kilowatt threshold triggering a review and comment period has been reached, but solicitations for comments have not yet been posted on their website. The issue of forest removal to create solar

fields was discussed at a MA Conservation Commission meeting. Dave is hoping to move the incentives to create solar fields to the eastern part of the state where there are more disturbed sites and more power is needed.

Kevin Powers – To date, there have been seven right whale calves born this year and one calf with a mother was recently identified in Cape Cod Bay. Kevin reported that new technologies are allowing different forms of conservation to develop. He cited the World Seabird Twitter Conference, staged over three days, as an example. He also mentioned that the state bald eagle count was occurring tomorrow through MA NHESP.

Wayne Petersen – Noted that the memorial for Kathleen Anderson will be held on April 27th at the MA F& W Headquarters. Regarding the eagle count, Wayne noted that they were especially interested in new eagle nests, which despite of their size can be difficult to find.

Bryan Windmiller – Agreed that the timing of vernal pool emergence was late this year, and suggested that climate change was affecting vernal pools. This year's very wet February has had an effect. He also cited an article on Kemp's ridley turtles showing that there are many more of this species than 30 years ago. Scientists and the media often highlight only the negative, but they should mention more of the positive actions of conservation, such as this rebound of turtles. He also mentioned that the fourth City Nature Challenge, a biodiversity blitz, will be held April 26-29.

Russ Hopping – Saw Blanding's turtles in vernal pools last week in Essex County. He also saw a white form of red tailed hawk in North Andover. This hawk has been around for four years. Albinism is apparently fairly frequent in Red tails. He also mentioned that several towns in his area, including Newburyport have banned glyphosate, and asked the members for information on other towns also acting to prohibit this chemical or pesticides in general.

Tim Flanagan – Mentioned that vernal pool activity was later than expected, but that is always the case in the Berkshires. It has been a very quiet year so far; even the peepers have been quiet. Gray Tree frogs, however, have been calling since March 16.

Andy Finton – Mentioned that there will be a bog turtle blitz at Schenob Brook preserve in the near future.

Ronald Amidon, Commissioner of the MA Dept. of Fish and Game, mentioned Earth Week celebrations were being held by the Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, including the Holmes Dam Removal project on 22 April. He also mentioned that an event (State House Day) will be held in Boston in late May and asked that Committee members do their best to attend; the Commissioner will provide additional information regarding this event at a later date.

– The meeting adjourned at 4:00 P.M. –

Drafted by: Bill Brumback, Advisory Committee Member