

FINAL MINUTES

Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Advisory Committee (NHESAC)

Thursday, April 10, 2025

DFW Field Headquarters, Southwest Meeting Room #103
1 Rabbit Hill Road, Westborough, MA 01581
Meeting held virtually via Zoom webinar

MEMBERS:

Present: Wayne Petersen, Mark Mello, Bill Brumback, Kevin Powers, David Small, Matthew Sisk

Absent: None

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS:

Present: Andy Finton

Absent: Russ Hopping

AGENCY STAFF:

Present: Jesse Leddick, Caleb Slater

OTHERS:

Present: N/A

– The meeting was called to order at 1:35 P.M. –

1. Acceptance of the Minutes of the January Quarterly Meeting

David Small motioned that the January 2025 minutes be accepted, Bill Brumback seconded, and members voted unanimously to approve.

2. Chair's Comments – Mark Mello

Mark entertained a brief discussion about the importance of members informing Jennifer Longsdorf of their willingness to remain on the Committee for another term. Wayne Petersen and Bill Brumback were reminded that their current terms will be up for renewal in December. All Members and Associate Members confirmed their willingness to serve another term.

Mark also noted that since Timothy Flanagan's (Vice Chair) departure, the Committee presently does not have a person to run a meeting in his absence. After some discussion, David Small volunteered to stand in as Vice Chair of the Committee until a new election (most likely in July).

There was discussion about the status of holding a possible July or October field trip meeting. Possible habitat restoration areas were considered for such a trip: Tidmarsh Wildlife Sanctuary in Plymouth, the Monatiquot River in Braintree, and Duck Harbor in Wellfleet. For various logistic reasons this topic remained unresolved at the meeting.

3. Board Member's Comments – Matthew Sisk

Matthew briefly summarized several important Fisheries and Wildlife Board meetings coming up, along with notes on selected topics at recent past meetings. Briefly these included:

- An update on deer management regulations including closures and adjustments of seasons, most notably an expansion of the deer hunting season on Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard Islands.
- A wide-ranging discussion on bear hunting regulations that was apparently complicated by a computer glitch.
- Overall concerns about federal budget and staffing cuts.
- Overall discussion about reorganization of the Agency's hunting seasons.
- Bringing into harmony Federal and MassWildlife salmon fishery regulations at the Quabbin Reservoir and Ware River.
- Changes in restrictions on seasonal limits of trout fishing and reduction in amount of local trout stocking.

4. NHESP & Assistant Director's Report – Jesse Leddick

- Jesse touched upon recent internal organizational changes within the Agency including the hiring of Emily Myron as the new Assistant Director for Land and Habitat Conservation, and other changes that are aimed at strengthening how things will work internally, such as hiring a new Habitat Restoration Project Manager for that section. He said that internal funding is generally in good shape so far, and that the large agency funding streams seem to be stable.
- The State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) is currently being revised for submission to USFWS in September. Accordingly, all of the existing plant and wildlife fact sheets on the website need to be updated, and new fact sheets created for species proposed to be added. Jesse plans to present on proposed SWAP revisions at the July meeting of the Committee.

5. Presentation – Overview of Turners Falls / Northfield Mountain Fish and Flows Settlement Agreement (Jesse Leddick and Caleb Slater, Chief of Hatcheries)

Provided an overview of various biodiversity concerns, particularly how the dam and river flow effects the Connecticut River, and how MassWildlife has worked to facilitate ecological improvements in the next FERC license. Relicensing of dams and river flow are central to biodiversity conservation in rivers and streams.

- Basic fact is that healthy large rivers support greater biodiversity than small ones.
- Dams can dramatically impact local ecosystems.
- The Connecticut River is one of the most extensively dammed rivers in the United States.
- The impacts of the dam and related flow issues extend far downstream.
- Major concerns include (a) inadequate downstream fish passage protection, (b) upstream fish passage is complex and underperforming, (c) there is no upstream eel passage, (d) the bypass reach is largely dewatered, and (e) dam operations cause hydropneumatics, with vast impacts to fish and wildlife species.

- Proposed improvements to downstream fish passage include replacing the existing Cabot Station spillway ladder with a fish lift at the dam and installing an upstream eel passage device.
- To address fishery passage issues at Northfield Mountain the plan is to install a barrier net to prevent water from coming into the river at Northfield Mountain.
- Dam operations will change to more closely mirror natural hydrology, significantly reducing the frequency and duration of hydropeaking in order to stabilize flows.
- Bypass reach will see significant increases in flows, particularly in the spring. Reach 1 will see more modest increases for various reasons, whereas Reaches 2 and 3 will see significant increases.
- These fisheries issues in western Massachusetts along the Connecticut River are both complex and expensive to solve.

6. Member's and Associate Member's Comments

- Kevin Powers brought to the Committee's attention that following historic efforts to restore East Harbor in Truro, Horseshoe Crabs returned. East Harbor became Pilgrim Lake after the diurnal tidal flow was blocked via the building of the railroad to Provincetown in 1868. Tidal flow was not restored until 2002 via a 4-foot-wide culvert. Horseshoe crabs returned to Pilgrim Lake (now East Harbor) by 2008 during a period of their overall decline in the Northeast U.S. Thus, in light of this notable recovery, fishing pressure, not habitat change, was further implicated as a principal cause of the crab's decline in the Northeast U.S.
- David Small informed the Committee that in his town of Athol, a concerted effort to build up a population of American kestrels is already showing modest success by kestrels investigating recently erected nest boxes. This is welcome news since this colorful little falcon has shown significant declines in many areas in recent years.

– The meeting adjourned at 4:07 P.M. as moved by David Small and unanimously agreed. –

Drafted & submitted by: Wayne Petersen

