

FINAL MINUTES

Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Advisory Committee (NHESAC)

Thursday, July 11, 2024

DFW Field Headquarters, Southwest Meeting Room #103

1 Rabbit Hill Road, Westborough, MA 01581

Meeting held virtually via Zoom webinar

MEMBERS:

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

Absent: None

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS:

Present: Andy Finton, Russ Hopping

Absent: None

AGENCY STAFF:

Present: Jesse Leddick, Jennifer Ryan, Amanda Veinotte

OTHERS:

Present: N/A

– The meeting was called to order at 1:33 P.M. –

1. Approval of the 11 April 2024 Minutes

David Small motioned that the April minutes be accepted, Matt Sisk seconded, and members voted unanimously to approve.

2. Chair's Comments – Mark Mello

Chairman Mello commented on a successful season for Piping Plover conservation.

3. Board Member's Comments – Matthew Sisk

Matthew Sisk expressed appreciation for the work of staff and agencies noting the DFW purchase in fee of 1,619 acres and the conservation easements applied to another 146 acres. Additional work addresses the 2024-2025 bird hunting season, discussion related to male eider trophy hunting, and general concerns regarding out-of-state guide services.

Mr. Sisk thanked the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Advisory Committee for their work done in support of the proposed MESA list changes.

The Department of Fish & Game's Strategic Plan is being crafted to create a unifying vision across the four DFG divisions. The DFW operations are aligning with the main challenges of biodiversity loss, the climate crisis, and environmental justice.

The Fisheries & Wildlife Board has been considering issues pertaining to deer review including chronic wasting disease, captive deer, decoy use, and primitive arms.

Mr. Sisk shared some personal observations about positive aspects of dam removals and the restoration of the Monatiquot River in Braintree.

4. Overview of the Biodiversity Executive Order and Draft Biodiversity Goals for Discussion and Feedback – Jen Ryan, Assistant Commissioner for Strategic Initiatives and Climate Policy

Jen Ryan presented an overview of how the Department of Fish & Game is developing biodiversity conservation goals for 2030, 2040, and 2050 in accordance with Executive Order No. 618 of the Healey administration. This action builds upon and compliments existing state plans and efforts such as: BioMap, State Wildlife Action Plan, Clean Energy & Climate Plan, Resilient Lands, Resilient Coasts, and others, all coupled with environmental justice.

Jen's presentation referenced the Department of Fish & Game's mission "to conserve the Commonwealth's abundant marine and freshwater fisheries, wildlife, plants, and natural communities, as well as the habitats that support them, for the benefit and enjoyment of all people." Embodied within this mission, including the critical work of DFW, is the concept of preserving biodiversity as a climate resilience strategy.

A general timeline was given for implementation. During Phase #1 in Fall 2023 through Winter 2024, a working group has conducted assessment and research to identify goals, strategies, and metrics. Phase #2 in Spring through Summer 2024 focuses on engagement with state agencies, biodiversity workshops and presentations, and public listening sessions. Phase #3 in Fall 2024 is intended to continue engagement, including outreach to Tribes and environmental justice groups. This leads into reporting to the Governor.

Jen continued with examples of the main talking points framing the public discussion.

- On the message "Biodiversity Sustains Us" examples discussed included: Human Health, Climate Resilience, Carbon Sequestration, Outdoor Recreation & Tourism, Sustainable Fisheries, Food Security.
- On the message "Threats to Biodiversity" examples discussed included: Pollution of Lands & Waters, Habitat Loss, Environmental Justice, Invasive Species, Habitat Fragmentation, Climate Crisis.
- On the message "Biodiversity in Crisis" a discussion pointed out species protected by the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act and the State Wildlife Action Plan naming Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

Jen called for feedback, questions, and comments from the NHESP Advisory Committee. All present engaged in a vigorous and wide-ranging series of topical discussions. Many of the comments were centered on protection goals with performance standards, opportunities for statewide agency coordination, and suggestions for additional ways to open communications with the public, advocacy groups, corporate stakeholders, and municipalities.

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

Staff Updates:

Jesse Leddick reported that Dr. Rebecca Quiñones has been hired as the NHESP Conservation Science Program Manager. Rebecca has significant prior experience in conservation, climate change, and aquatic ecology.

The process is underway to backfill a position in regulatory review. The position was vacant as reported in the NHESP 11 April 2024 minutes. It is desirable to have an approved candidate available to start in August.

Jesse will be taking paternity leave starting in August through the end of September. Plans are in place to provide continuity in staff support. NHESP Advisory Committee members extended congratulations to Jesse.

MESA Update:

The DFW board approved the recommendations for the MESA list changes on 15 May 2024. Public comments were received at hearings held on 9 April and 23 April 2024. Jesse noted that the majority of 77 comments submitted indicated support for listing the Atlantic horseshoe crab. While Natural Heritage agrees that this is a species of conservation concern, the staff takes the position that the external proposal did not satisfy the criteria required in the regulations to list the species as Special Concern under the MESA.

Forests as Climate Solutions Update:

Jesse expressed appreciation to the NHESP Advisory Committee for the time and effort leading to comments on the Forests as Climate Solutions Report. The Commonwealth's response to comments were released on 10 June 2024. The DFW board will continue to address the issues at a meeting on 25 July 2024.

6. Member's and Associate Member's Comments

Wayne Petersen – Announced that he left his position with Mass. Audubon Society on 30 June 2024. Wayne provided an updated personal email address.

Bill Brumback – No comment.

Tim Flanagan – No comment.

Dave Small – No comment.

Kevin Powers – A Blue Whale recently sighted off Gloucester is recognized as a female formerly seen in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Andy Finton – The Department of Energy Resources SMART Program Straw Proposal protects biodiversity by defining projects as ineligible for incentives when the "Project footprint overlaps with BioMap Core Habitat and Critical Natural Landscapes."

Russ Hopping – A Sperm Whale has attracted public notice as it washed up on a beach on Martha's Vineyard.

Matthew Sisk motioned to adjourn the meeting, David Small seconded, and members voted unanimously to approve.

– The meeting adjourned at 3:17 P.M. –

Drafted & Submitted by: Tim Flanagan