



MASSWILDLIFE

DIVISION OF FISHERIES & WILDLIFE

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COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
DIVISION OF FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE BOARD
MEETING MINUTES

PRESENT: Dr. Joseph Larson/Chair, Michael Roche/Vice Chair, Bonnie Booth/Secretary, Dr. Brandi Van Roo, Ernest W. Foster IV, Stephen Sears, Bob Durand, Ron Amidon/Commissioner/DFG, Mary-Lee King/Deputy Commissioner/DFG, Mark Tisa/Director, Jon Regosin/Deputy Director, Kris McCarthy/Associate Director/Finance and Administration, Michael Huguenin/Assistant Director/Wildlife, Trina Moruzzi/Assistant Director/Operations, Todd Richards/Assistant Director/Fisheries, Marion Larson/Chief/Information and Education, John Scanlon/Supervisor/Habitat Program, Lynn Harper/Habitat Protection Specialist, Lt. Col. David Loos/OLE

DATE: June 16, 2020

LOCATION: Via Zoom Meeting

Chair Larson opened the June meeting at 1:10 p.m.

Acceptance of Minutes

A motion was made by Mr. Durand to accept the minutes from the May meeting as presented. The motion was seconded by Mr. Foster.

Chair Larson: yes

Vice Chair Roche: yes

Secretary Booth: yes

Dr. Van Roo: yes

Mr. Foster: yes

Mr. Sears: yes

Mr. Durand: yes

The motion passed unanimously.

Chair's Comments

Chair Larson reported that he was very happy to read the 2019 Annual Report. He stated that he found it very helpful to read the District Reports, in particular, because he feels less versed in activities in the District than the ones that originate at the FHQ.

He reported that the Board had some time ago heard a presentation from Rebecca Quiñones, MassWildlife's Stream Project Leader. He stated that Dr. Quiñones was a co-author of a recent article and it was fascinating. The Chair reported that he had told the Director that he would like a presentation from Dr. Quiñones on her research sometime in the coming months.

Commissioner's Comments

Commissioner Amidon stated that he is a big fan of Mr. Scanlon's program and was looking forward to his presentation. Given the concerns about carbon sequestration statewide, the Commissioner had requested a meeting with EEA Secretary Theoharides and her staff, DCR staff, members of private conservation organizations, and others, to discuss applying habitat-management in a united effort to help sequester carbon, with a 2008 timber harvest at Savoy State Forest as an example. Despite its negative press at the time, the site visit during the meeting showed how beneficial the cut has been for wildlife values and increased growth of young forest at Savoy. Commissioner Amidon reported that he is working on a statewide plan that will be participated in and coordinated among all the departments in the EEA.

Director's Comments

Director Tisa reported that he would reserve his comments until he introduced Mr. Scanlon.

Law Enforcement Comments

Office of Law Enforcement Lt. Col. David Loos reported a large spike in calls for service during the previous month, mostly related to the large numbers of people using the state forests and parks. He also reported working with Town of Winthrop Police to make them aware of protected Piping Plover habitat on a beach that the Town patrols. The Lieutenant Colonel also reported working with the MassWildlife Hunter Education Program to help develop the laws and regulations segment of the online hunter-education classes the program is offering. He stated that it is going very well.

MassWildlife Habitat Management Program Review (John Scanlon)

Director Tisa reported that the Habitat team has done some amazing work at Habitat Program Supervisor John Scanlon's direction on MassWildlife lands for decades, and especially in the past 5 years, which Mr. Scanlon would report on in some detail.

Mr. Scanlon reported that MassWildlife is making good progress toward achieving its landscape habitat goals and is seeing increases in numbers of both rare species and game species at managed sites. He reported that the agency's statutory responsibility is to conserve wildlife and plants and, at the same time, the staff's analysis has shown that state wildlife lands have a net annual increase in carbon storage, even after accounting for carbon release from restoration and management activities. He also noted that MassWildlife recognizes the importance of forest reserves, and that the Board has formally established reserves on MassWildlife lands.

In the course of his remarks, Mr. Scanlon reviewed MassWildlife's landscape habitat goals; detailed its habitat restoration and management activities from FY2015-2020, by habitat type and by habitat treatment; discussed its carbon budget; and provided examples of its cooperative habitat management efforts.

Mr. Scanlon explained that human infrastructure has greatly restricted natural disturbance processes that historically provided diverse open habitats for wildlife on the portions of the landscape that are now developed. In particular, flooding and fire are greatly constrained today on those portions of the landscape where they formerly occurred. While control of flooding and fire is essential to protect human life and property, it also creates an obligation on MassWildlife's part to provide through prescribed burns and other active management the dynamic habitats for wildlife that these natural processes formerly created.

In reviewing the history of the Habitat Program, Mr. Scanlon reported that, in 1996, the Fisheries and Wildlife Board reviewed and approved landscape goals for grassland, shrubland, and young forest

habitat, what was then often lumped together as “early seral or early successional” habitat. At that time, the board approved a statewide goal of 20%-25% of MassWildlife’s upland habitat to be maintained in or converted to one of these open habitats. In developing its recommendations at that time, MassWildlife staff undertook an extensive review of the scientific literature relating to long-term decline in Massachusetts and the northeast region of species that use open habitats, historical and pre-historical habitat composition, techniques for forest and old-field management to create and maintain open habitats, and the results of this habitat creation on species populations.

He also reported that, in a 2006 review, the Board established a landscape goal of 10%-15% of MassWildlife’s lands for biologically mature forest in forest reserves and designated several forest reserves on MassWildlife properties. And in 2010, MassWildlife staff and the Board underwent an extensive, public review process of the agency’s habitat management program, and established details for the components of that open habitat, namely, 1%-2% grassland, 7%-9% shrubland, and 10%-15% young forest. Mr. Scanlon also noted that public support for these goals was significant during the 2010 public review process.

Wrapping up his remarks on MassWildlife’s landscape habitat goals, Mr. Scanlon advised the Board that the goals it set in 1996 and affirmed in 2006 and 2010 remain relevant and appropriate. Noting that MassWildlife staff have made good progress on creating Grassland and Scrub Oak Shrubland habitat, thanks in part to the Key Sites initiative, Mr. Scanlon reported that Habitat staff is currently focusing on the creation of Young Forest Habitat, and would likely be ready to propose limited additions to the forest reserves by the end of the year.

Reporting on carbon storage on MassWildlife lands, Mr. Scanlon stated that, in 2006, MassWildlife lands stored 13.4 million tons of carbon. Since 2006, 5.2 million tons of storage has been added, thanks to new land purchases. An additional 1.9 million tons of carbon storage has been added by forest growth. Habitat management activities since 1966 released 0.13 million tons, less than 7% of the carbon storage gained through forest growth.

Mr. Scanlon next went through the habitat restoration and management planning process that staff conducts before any work begins, which includes assessing the Natural Community Type of the given parcel, determining its desired future condition (DFC), and assigning to the parcel a level of priority for restoration and management. Staff then conducts initial biological monitoring and prepares a habitat site plan to identify grassland, shrubland, and forest units; fine-tunes the DCF for each unit; and prepares a prescribed-fire management plan as needed. At that point, staff prepares and submits the necessary environmental permitting applications and prepares any management contracts that must be put out for competitive public bid.

Mr. Scanlon detailed two ongoing habitat projects that illustrate MassWildlife’s processes and the kinds of work being done to restore habitats across the state. He also highlighted some of the partnerships the agency has developed to expand its habitat management capabilities, including with EEA through the MassWildlife Biodiversity Initiative (BDI) and Habitat Management Grants, and the NRCS’s [the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service] Working Lands for Wildlife, New England Cottontail Initiative, Northeast Turtles program, and its Regional Conservation Program Partnerships.

Chair Larson observed that the sand-plain habitat in Montague Plains an example of the sandy, fire-prone environments that you find along the Connecticut River Valley and on Cape Cod in abundance. He noted that fire departments in these areas have had a real problem because of the natural fires that develop and threaten the houses and other development that has gone into these areas. Purposeful, controlled burns not only help restore the habitat but also help control fuel loads that can generate much larger fires in those dry areas where no controlled burns are conducted.

After a brief discussion and questions from the Board members, the members and Chair Larson thanked Mr. Scanlon for his excellent work and very informative presentation.

Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Advisory Committee Report

Dr. Larson reported that the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Advisory Committee's June meeting was held the previous week. He noted that state tax return donations for the last year that was completely reported showed 2016-2018 as the highest years on record and reported that the donations for 2019 had risen considerably over the previous month. If donations keep to the current pace, the Chair reported that the total will be at least as high as during the 2016-2018 period.

The Chair reported that the Advisory Committee had a presentation at its last meeting from State Herpetologist Mike Jones on the Spotted Turtle conservation efforts being coordinated from Maine to Florida, and noted that basic research and habitat management being done has been shared throughout the East Coast.

Confirm Meeting Date

Members confirmed the date of the July meeting as July 14, 2020, at 1:00 p.m.

The members also discussed the August date, and after a brief discussion chose August 25, 2020, at 12:00 p.m.

Member's Comments

Secretary Booth, Vice Chair Roche, Mr. Foster, Mr. Sears, and Mr. Durand reported no comments.

Dr. Van Roo asked the Director and Deputy Director to bring the Board up to speed at a future meeting about any progress being made after she met with staff and began exploring way to more specifically incorporate climate change into the lands acquisition process. In response to a related question, Mr. Scanlon reported that the Lands Committee does periodically revisit the components of the 'heat map' used to prioritize attributes, both positive and negative, that contribute to parcels rankings, but that the results of the analysis of climate-change factors would likely be completed no sooner than the end of the calendar year. Dr. Van Roo elaborated that her main concern is the challenge of explaining how climate change considerations impact a given parcel when incorporating threats, i.e., whether it lowers its ranking or increases it, how resiliency is factored in, and what other factors affect a parcel's climate-change ranking.

Dr. Van Roo also asked Director Tisa whether [State Ornithologist] Drew Vitz is doing bird surveys in the current circumstances and what his plans are for holding the statewide bird-banding conference this year. She stated that she had urged Dr. Vitz to hold the conference via Zoom, and that she does not want to see the conference be postponed or cancelled. The Director confirmed that Dr. Vitz is doing bird surveys currently, and that the Director would investigate the state of conference planning for the current year with Assistant Director of Wildlife Mike Huguenin, to confirm that it will be going forward.

A motion was made by Chair Larson to move into executive session for the purpose of discussing certain land acquisitions whose negotiations would be compromised by discussion in open session and to not return to open session. The motion was seconded by Secretary Booth.

Chair Larson: yes

Vice Chair Roche: yes

Secretary Booth: yes

Dr. Van Roo: yes

Mr. Foster: yes

Mr. Sears: yes

Mr. Durand: yes

The motion passed unanimously.

Executive Session

Habitat Protection Specialist Lynn Harper presented 2 proposed acquisitions, which were both reviewed and were unanimously approved by the Board.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 3:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Bonnie Booth

Secretary

List of documents presented to the Board in its June meeting packets

June meeting notice with agenda and Zoom access information

Draft May meeting minutes for review

OLE Calls for Service report to May 31, 2020

PDF copy of the Habitat Program presentation

NHESP report on state tax form donations to June 1, 2020

Documentation for the executive session