



MASSWILDLIFE

DIVISION OF FISHERIES & WILDLIFE

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

PRESENT: Steve Sears/Chair, Bob Durand/Vice Chair, Ernie Foster/Secretary, Sasha Dyer, Emma Ellsworth, John Organ, Matthew Sisk, Mark S. Tisa/Director, Tom O'Shea/Commissioner/DFG, Eve Schlüter/Deputy Director, Mike Huguenin/Assistant Director/Wildlife, Trina Moruzzi/Assistant Director/Operations, Todd Richards/Assistant Director/Fisheries, Pat Huckery/Northeast Wildlife District Manager, Todd Olanyk/Central Wildlife District Manager, Joe Rogers/Connecticut Valley Wildlife District Manager, Andrew Madden/Western Wildlife District Manager, Colonel Christopher Mason/OLE, Captain Bill Woytek/OLE

DATE: October 2, 2024

LOCATION: MassWildlife Field Headquarters, 1 Rabbit Hill Road, Massachusetts, and on Zoom

Chair Sears opened the October business meeting at 10:00 a.m.

Acceptance of Minutes

A motion was made by Mr. Durand to table the minutes from the September business meeting. The motion was seconded by Mr. Foster; the vote in favor was unanimous.

Chair's Comments

Chair Sears announced a celebration in the Western District honoring longtime outdoor writer for the *Berkshire Eagle*, Gene Chague. The Chair spoke of Mr. Chague's long career and the importance of his voice in keeping Berkshire County hunters and anglers aware of the issues and engaged with MassWildlife. He made a motion to nominate Mr. Chague for the Fisheries and Wildlife Board's Francis Sargent Award, in honor of his contributions to disseminating and explaining the conservation work of MassWildlife through the decades. Mr. Durand seconded the motion; the vote in favor was unanimous.

Chair Sears reported that MassWildlife, members of the Board, and representatives from Southeastern sporting organizations would be meeting with officials from the Cape Cod National Seashore the next day to discuss the cessation of pheasant hunting on the Seashore. He also reminded the meeting that listening sessions were planned on October 17, at 1:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m., for the public to hear about and comment on an external request to the Board to stop stocking the Upper Deerfield River with rainbow trout. He noted that Zoom links would be announced, posted, and distributed well in advance.

He thanked staff for a smooth rollout of the ADPs [Antlerless Deer Permits] this year and said it was a job well done. He congratulated the new Colonel and Director of the Massachusetts Environmental Police, Chris Mason, and stated that he was present and would introduce himself shortly. Mr. Sears also reported that he wanted to dedicate the meeting to George Wislocki, a longtime environmental advocate and founding executive director of the Berkshire Natural Resources Council. Mr. Durand seconded the motion; the vote in favor was unanimous.

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Director's Comments

Director Tisa recognized R3 Coordinator Astrid Huseby as being selected for a national team, the Special Assessment Group for the Council to Advance Hunting and Shooting Sports. He reported that Ms. Huseby was also given a special merit award at the AFWA Annual Meeting for her national leadership in the development of R3 [Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation] strategies and initiatives.

Director Tisa notified the Board that there is potential federal legislation and regulation that would affect MassWildlife's funding for the better. He reported that a major source of funds for state fish and wildlife agency programs and operations comes from federal excise taxes at the manufacturers' level. There was a loophole in that legislation for third parties, as, for example, purchases through Amazon for equipment manufactured in China. Third-party sellers are growing bigger every year, particularly for fishing and bow hunting equipment. American manufacturers have some competitive disadvantages as a result, but sales through third parties also represents a minimum of \$17 million from the sale of firearms and ammunition, \$13 million from fishing equipment, and \$4 million from bows and arrows, conservatively. The Director reported that the AFWA is expecting legislation to be released to close that loophole and require payment of those excise taxes. Another issue that is still outstanding is the air gun industry, which is currently not paying into the system. Director Tisa noted that it is a matter of equity for the other industries who are paying the excise taxes. He stated that he would keep the Board apprised of developments.

Commissioner's Comments

Commissioner O'Shea acknowledged the new Massachusetts Environmental Police Colonel, Chris Mason, and noted that his office has been working with the MEP on the new firearms legislation.

The Commissioner reported that he had attended an event hosted by State Rep. Casner that included Governor Healey and Lieutenant Governor Driscoll, and he noted that Deputy Director Schlüter had attended with him and officials from Mass Audubon and the Essex County Green Belt that spoke during the event. MassWildlife is part of a landowner group that is restoring the Great Marsh, and Commissioner O'Shea remarked that it is amazing that such a small idea 8 years ago has turned into a large, multi-partner project with federal funding that is being celebrated by the Governor. It underscores the importance and relevance of the habitat restoration work the Department does.

Commissioner O'Shea reported that he had attended a Resilient Lands Conservation Coalition event with Assistant Commissioner Jen Ryan and Deputy Director Schlüter at which Secretary Tepper announced funding of over \$27 million for conservation, including park improvement projects and open space acquisition that will conserve 2,375 acres across the state.

Commissioner O'Shea reported that his office is in the early stages of working on initiatives to be included in the new Environmental Bond coming up next year. Chair Sears noted the hatchery infrastructure work that is needed, and Commissioner O'Shea said it is very early days but that the hatcheries are on the list. Director Tisa added that the hatcheries have been an issue for at least 6 years and DFG and MassWildlife have done a lot of hard work to show its importance and impact.

Commissioner O'Shea also reported that the Department is about to post the public comments received on the Biodiversity Initiative. Noting a large number of comments, he reported that they contain many great ideas and that the public is very enthusiastic and supportive of the work being planned to implement it. He complimented Assistant Commissioner Ryan on a great job that entails a lot of work. Next steps involve a report with specific goals that will go the governor's office.

The Commissioner stated that he planned to attend a Goose Pond event on the following Friday in Tyringham, where boat ramp improvements partially funded by the community are being dedicating to the memory of a popular local angler.

He also reported that hiring controls have been in place since the beginning of the fiscal year for the entire Department and noted that MassWildlife has been able to largely avoid them thanks to its federal funding. He explained that there is a hiring cap on the Department, which does include MassWildlife, so the hiring controls have had an impact on the other divisions and may start to impact MassWildlife.

Law Enforcement Comments

Captain Bill Woytek introduced Colonel Chris Mason, the newly appointed colonel of the Massachusetts Environmental Police (MEP). Colonel Mason introduced himself briefly, saying that he has a degree in Environmental Science from UMass Amherst. He started his career as a local game warden on Cape Cod, and then served with the Massachusetts State Police. He explained that he was tapped as the MEP Colonel after he retired and is looking forward to helping the MEP move forward.

Captain Woytek announced his promotion 6 weeks previously, noting that he is still getting his feet under him, is very happy to be in charge of the Western area, and is looking forward to working with Berkshire County and the other leagues.

Director Tisa reported that Colonel Mason had met with him prior to the meeting and made an excellent suggestion that their respective staffs get together, which Director Tisa thinks is a great idea. The Director also noted that, with the Colonel's background, his contacts and connections are immensely valuable regarding the new firearms legislation.

Personnel Report

Assistant Director of Operations Trina Moruzzi presented a candidate for promotion at the Central Wildlife District. She provided some highlights of Mr. Manty's resume and qualifications.

Promotion

<i>Employee</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Location</i>
Jessi Manty	Central District Aquatic Biologist Aquatic Biologist III	West Boylston

Mr. Durand made a motion to accept the Personnel Report as presented; Ms. Dyer seconded the motion; the vote in favor was unanimous.

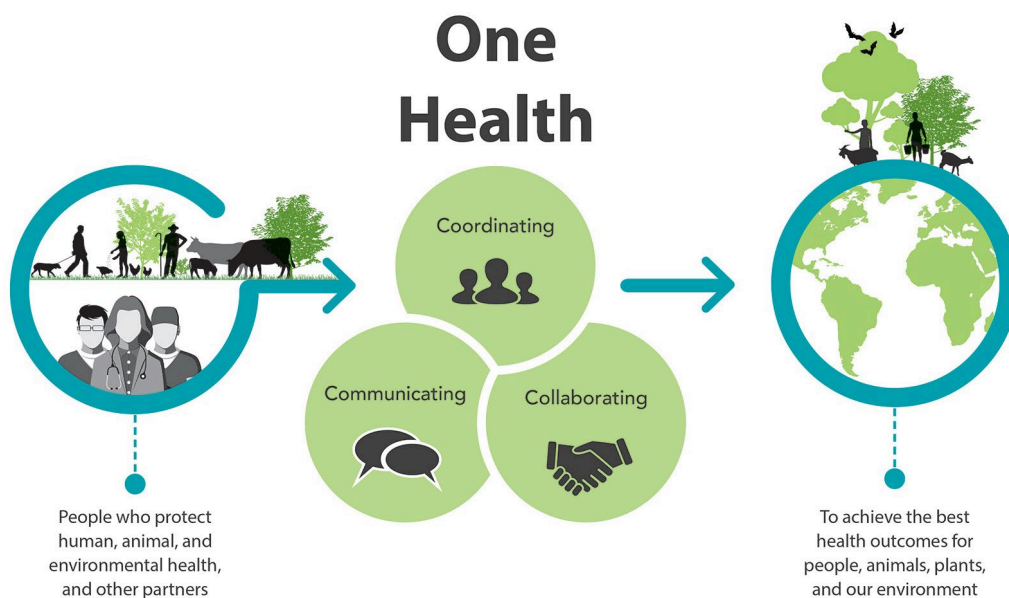
The Development of the MassWildlife Health Program: An Update on the Zoonotic Disease Initiative (Martin Feehan)

Deer and Moose Project Leader and Wildlife Health Specialist Martin Feehan began his detailed presentation by providing background on the Zoonotic Disease Initiative (ZDI). The ZDI launched in 2022, funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), to fund 3-year projects focused on wildlife disease prevention and preparedness. The highest priority for the program was to increase organizational readiness and to develop a network of state and tribal managers to respond to zoonotic disease outbreaks.

Dr. Feehan reported that MassWildlife was awarded over \$773,000 in June 2023 in a competitive grants process. The project in Massachusetts aimed to develop a formal, integrated wildlife health and public outreach program, MassWildlife Health, for the Commonwealth. He stated that the ZDI came at an auspicious time for Massachusetts, with multiple efforts occurring at the time of the award that work in

synergy with the development of MassWildlife Health under the ZDI. These included dealing with several high-profile disease issues, including the HPAI outbreak, SARS CoV-2 transmission amongst wildlife, PFAS [Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances] contamination issues, and multiple emerging disease threats for amphibians and reptiles. Regional wildlife health coordinator positions were created by the AFWA, the USFWS, and the Wildlife Management Institute, including Dr. Melanie Kunkel for the Northeast. Dr. Kunkel has already been an essential resource in the early development of MassWildlife's program, Dr. Feehan said. In 2022, the CDC funded the New England Regional Center of Vector-borne Diseases (NEWVEC), based at UMass Amherst, as a regional Center of Excellence for Vector Borne Disease, with a primary focus on tick-borne diseases at the deer and small-mammal interfaces. In 2022, MassWildlife had also begun increasing collaboration with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) for launching Hunters Share the Harvest, the venison donation program, and MassWildlife expanded that relationship further in 2023 with PFAS sampling of harvested deer in collaboration with the Environmental Toxicology Program within DPH's Bureau of Climate and Environmental Health. Lastly, the biodiversity executive order that Commissioner O'Shea is leading showed the commitment of Massachusetts to maximizing biodiversity, for which maximizing wildlife health is essential. Collectively, these initiatives integrate directly with the development of MassWildlife Health.

Dr. Feehan explained that MassWildlife Health is first and foremost being developed in the framework of One Health, a program of the CDC in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. He listed several initiatives in which MassWildlife is already working extensively at the nexus of the three parts of the One Health Triangle: Human, Animal, and Environmental Health. As staff developed MassWildlife's proposal for the ZDI and subsequently in the actual development of MassWildlife Health, the agency has focused on integrating core One Health principles, including to increase coordination within MassWildlife, with other state agencies, with our tribal and federal partners, and with regional state wildlife agency partners.



MassWildlife staff has worked to strengthen existing collaborations and develop new ones with academic institutions and non-profit organizations, and to improve interagency communication strategies for disease response and implement education about zoonotic disease prevention, particularly focusing on underrepresented and vulnerable communities.

Due especially to the proximity of mostly small states in the Northeast, particularly within New England, out-of-state regional partners become essential for wildlife health management as issues very rapidly spill over borders and the resources required for diagnostics, pathology, and consultation are often not available for each state within its boundaries. While MassWildlife Health is certainly focused on Massachusetts, in development there is deliberate attention given to making the process, networks, and resources transferrable to other states within the region. Ultimately, anything done to foster wildlife health in other states in the region will yield wildlife health benefits back home within Massachusetts' borders.

Dr. Feehan then identified the regional expertise he's drawing on and outlined the objectives of MassWildlife Health:

- 1) increasing MassWildlife's capacity to develop the program through contracting for a Wildlife Health Specialist and a Wildlife Health Communication and Data Management Specialist;
- 2) developing an interagency task force for wildlife disease response and prevention;
- 3) establishing a formal network of diagnostic and pathology labs throughout the region;
- 4) developing a communication plan for intra/interagency coordination;
- 5) addressing disparities in impact of zoonotic diseases with underrepresented communities by implementing communication plans and programming targeting these groups with strategies to overcome language and resource barriers;
- 6) increasing disease surveillance capacity for staff through training opportunities and equipment procurement;
- 7) hiring a doctoral student within the Cooperative Research Unit at UMass to develop model systems, conduct disease surveillance, and study the human dimensions of wildlife disease; and
- 8) strengthen zoonotic disease resilience across New England through shared testing resources, open trainings, and coordination of program development for applications in other states.

Dr. Feehan discussed the deliverables projected by September 2027 and the goals for the first year, which runs through September 2025, with work on many of them already begun. He then provided several examples of existing ZDI collaborations, including to study SARS CoV-2 in deer, to conduct PFAS sampling of deer, to study the vectors of tick-borne diseases, and an in-depth review of the work of the Cape Cod Rabies Task Force to address rabies transmission through oral vaccines.

After a brief discussion, the Chair and members thanked Dr. Feehan for his work and his detailed report.

Board Election of Officers

The Secretary asked for a motion to turn the meeting over to the Secretary for the purpose of holding the annual election of officers. Mr. Durand motioned, and Ms. Dyer seconded; the vote in favor was unanimous.

Secretary Foster called for nominations for Chair. Mr. Durand nominated Mr. Sears; Dr. Organ seconded the nomination. Secretary Foster asked if there were any other nominations. Hearing no more nominations, the Secretary moved to close the nominations. Mr. Durand seconded the motion; the vote to close the nominations for Chair was unanimous. The vote for Mr. Sears as Chair was taken; Mr. Sears abstained. The vote was six in favor with one abstention.

The Secretary called for nominations for Vice Chair. Mr. Durand nominated Ms. Ellsworth; Mr. Sears seconded the nomination. Secretary Foster asked if there were any other nominations for Vice Chair.

Hearing no more nominations, the Secretary moved to close the nominations. Mr. Sisk seconded the motion; the vote to close the nominations for Vice Chair was unanimous. The vote for Ms. Ellsworth for Vice Chair was taken and was unanimously in favor.

The Secretary called for nominations for Secretary. Mr. Durand nominated Mr. Foster; Mr. Sears seconded the nomination. Secretary Foster asked if there were any other nominations for Secretary. Hearing no more nominations, the Secretary moved to close the nominations. Mr. Sisk seconded the motion; the vote to close the nominations for Secretary was unanimous. The vote for Mr. Foster for Secretary was taken and was unanimously in favor.

The elections being over, Secretary Foster returned the meeting to the Chair. Chair Sears thanked Mr. Durand for his service as Vice Chair and for his larger contributions to conservation in the state. He also congratulated Mr. Ellsworth and thanked her for being willing to serve as Vice Chair.

Confirm the November Meeting Date

Members confirmed the November meeting on November 13, 2024, at 10:00 a.m., at the Westborough Field Headquarters.

The December date was discussed; the members selected December 4, at 3:00 p.m., in Dalton. The Chair noted that the Sargent Award would be presented at an event following that meeting. He also noted that if there is inclement weather, the meeting can switch to fully online via Zoom.

Members' Comments

Mr. Sisk advised that the next Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Advisory Committee meeting had been rescheduled to November.

Ms. Dyer reported that she had seen posts from a few people online frustrated with the Antlerless Deer Permit sales, and she applauded the screen shots that MassWildlife social media staff created to help. She said she appreciates the great attitude from staff in its social interactions. She also reported that the tree stand safety refresher she recently took came in handy. She reported that she had participated in the Youth hunt with her daughter, which was the last time her daughter is eligible, and she offered her thanks, including from her daughter, to all who make this possible.

Mr. Foster acknowledged the county leagues and their efforts to help hunters understand the implications of the new firearm law.

Ms. Ellsworth thanked Mr. Durand and honored his work and influence on her development as a board member. She noted that she lives at the base of Mount Tully and saluted Mr. Durand for the Tully Initiative that protected all that land for everyone to enjoy.

Mr. Durand followed up on Mr. Foster's comments on firearms law, noting that the Board needs to be careful to support hunters in the state, especially muzzleloader users. Mr. Durand said he was glad to have served as Vice Chair and was thankful for the MassWildlife staff's help with the Tully Initiative.

Dr. Organ also acknowledged Mr. Durand with his skill set and long record of service in the state, including in the legislature, and his work to pass the budget amendment to reimburse MassWildlife for free and discounted licenses. He thanked Mr. Durand for all he does. Dr. Organ reported that his team recently taught an overflowing Hunter Education course, which he said is typical at this time of year, but there were also many people who wanted to get the completion certificate before the inception date of the new law. He also reported that he will be attending the annual meeting of The Wildlife Society, which is being held in Baltimore this year, adding that he hoped to see some MassWildlife staff attending because there is much to gain in the professional interactions and knowledge shared.

There being no further business, Ms. Ellsworth moved to go into executive session for the purpose of discussing land acquisitions that could be compromised by discussion in open session, and then adjourn without coming back into open session. Mr. Foster seconded; the vote in favor was unanimous and the meeting was adjourned at 12:05 p.m.

Executive Session

There was one parcel presented to the Board for consideration. Motion: Durand; second: Foster.

Mr. Sisk: yes

Ms. Dyer: yes

Mr. Foster: yes

Mr. Sears: yes

Ms. Ellsworth: yes

Mr. Durand: yes

Dr. Organ: yes

The parcel was accepted in a roll call vote of the Board members. The meeting ended at 12:20.

Respectfully submitted,

Ernie Foster
Secretary

List of documents presented to the Board in its October business meeting packets:

October agenda

October personnel report

Documentation for the executive session