

FINAL MINUTES

Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Advisory Committee (NHESAC)

January 11, 2018

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

MEMBERS:

Present: Kathleen Anderson, Joseph Larson, Thomas Rawinski, Wayne Petersen, Mark Mello

Absent: Gwilym Jones, Jennifer Ryan

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS:

Present: Dave Small, Kevin Powers, Timothy Flanagan

Absent: Mark Pokras, Andy Finton, William Brumback, Bryan Windmiller

AGENCY STAFF:

Present: Tom French, Marion Larson, Marianne Piché

– The meeting was called to order at 1:42 p.m. –

1. Approval of December Minutes

Kevin Powers motioned that the December minutes be accepted, Joe Larson seconded, and members voted unanimously to approve.

2. Chair's and Vice Chair's Comments – Kathleen Anderson & Mark Mello

Kathleen reflected on her years in Middleborough. Over time, she has seen her 93-acre property develop a wilderness character. Years ago, no one would have imagined bear and moose residing in the area. “May you live in interesting times,” she said.

Mark shared an issue of the *Chesapeake Journal*, which highlighted increased wildlife watching. Also shared was the *Warbler Guide*, authored by Tom Stephenson and Scott Whittle, an excellent book. Mark mentioned that DCR will assume Piping Plover monitoring responsibilities on its beaches. Wayne Petersen mentioned that a new bird documented from Massachusetts is the Common Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*), an Old World shorebird species. See:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_greenshank

3. Board Member's Comments – Joseph Larson

The December 19 meeting:

- Director Buckley mentioned that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will be creating positions in each of its regional offices to focus on hunting and fishing issues.
- The Board is looking for ways to influence stronger protection of state-listed species on federal lands, especially USFWS Wildlife Refuges.
- The Board voted to approve minor changes in wildlife management zone boundaries.

The January 10 meeting:

- Director Buckley reported on the recent meeting of Massachusetts bird clubs held at the Field Headquarters. He encouraged the bird clubs to become a larger part of the MassWildlife family.
- Joe shared a copy of The Trustees of Reservation's recent newsletter which featured habitat management activities.
- The Commissioner reported that an additional \$500k will be available in next year's budget for habitat management grants.
- Jesse Leddick has been approved by the Board for promotion to the position of Chief of Regulatory Review.
- Director Buckley reviewed the mechanisms that fund the Division, highlighting the Fish and Game Fund and the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Fund.
- A Petersham resident gave a presentation to the Board advocating for the use of blood-trailing dogs to aid in the recovery of wounded deer.
- The Division has developed improved relations with trail groups in advance of the February 6 public hearing on the proposed dog leash and waste disposal regulation.

Dovetailing on Dr. Larson's Board report, Marion Larson provided Committee members with the posting advertising the proposed dog leash and waste disposal rules, and asked that members share it widely. She gave a brief presentation to the Committee about it.

4. NHESP / Assistant Director's Report – Tom French

- Jesse Leddick's promotion has left two vacancies in regulatory review. While a strong candidate emerged for the NRCS Review Biologist position, and was approved by the Board, permission to fill the vacancy has not yet been granted.
- Tax check-off donations to the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Fund in 2016 were very encouraging, nearly \$100k above the 2015 total.
- A January 3 press release from the Baker-Polito Administration showcased the \$506,856 of wildlife habitat grants awarded in 2017.
- The Blue Water Fishermen's Association petitioned the Secretary of Interior to designate the northwest Atlantic leatherback subpopulation of sea turtles as a discrete population segment (DPS), and then list that DPS as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.
- Bald Eagle pairs reached a modern-day high in Massachusetts, with 68 pairs documented in 2017.

- An article, quoting Marion Larson, discussed how wildlife species are coping with the prolonged cold snap.

5. *Mass Wildlife-Natural Resources Conservation Service habitat management partnership* - Marianne Piché, Mass Wildlife Habitat Biologist

Marianne has been with the Division since 2008. Initially, she helped run the Landowner Incentives Program. Presently, Marianne is in the Habitat Section and spends much of her time assisting the Natural Resources Conservation Service on habitat projects funded through NRCS's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Wetland Reserve Easement Program (WRE). From the web:

“The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers to plan and implement conservation practices that improve soil, water, plant, animal, air and related natural resources on agricultural land and non-industrial private forestland.

Wetland Reserve Easements provide habitat for fish and wildlife, including threatened and endangered species, improve water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals, reduce flooding, recharge groundwater, protect biological diversity and provide opportunities for educational, scientific and limited recreational activities.”

As a federal agency, NRCS was born from the dust bowl years, when it was the Soil Conservation Service.

Funded through the 2014 Farm Bill, EQIP has, among other things, wildlife habitat as a program purpose. A State Technical Committee conducts an annual review of practices. The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies has recommended prescribed fire and priority habitats as themes for the 2018 Farm Bill re-authorization.

Marianne provides habitat management recommendations, helps implement management, represents the Division as a liaison to the New England Cottontail Technical Committee, and promotes the use of prescribed fire. She relies on Biomap2 and the State Wildlife Action Plan to prioritize sites in need of management attention.

A project in Mashpee represents a shining example of a public-private partnership. There, approximately 124 acres of overgrown pitch pine forest on three land ownerships were selectively cut and burned to achieve early successional conditions. Establishing and maintaining strong relationships with landowners is vital. Landowners receive up to 75% reimbursement of the project cost. Other projects include turtle nest site creation, delayed grassland mowing, and creation of pollinator habitat.

Priorities of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and Young Forest Initiative include Woodcock, Golden-winged Warbler, and New England Cottontail. Monitoring is guided by the Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP).

To benefit the New England Cottontail, 18 projects were funded in the southern Berkshires, treating a total of 308 acres. In southeastern Massachusetts, four funded projects treated 174 acres.

The newest NRCS initiative is the Northeast Turtle Project to benefit Blanding's, Wood, and Spotted turtles. It includes all six New England states and New York and will primarily involve wetland restoration and protection on private land through the Wetland Reserve Easement Program.

Marianne concluded by expressing delight that partnerships can accomplish so much! Having watched Marianne's impressive presentation, members were in full agreement.

6. Member's and Associate Member's Comments

Tom Rawinski – Tom suggested an away meeting for the committee in the coming year, possibly at Quabbin.

Kevin Powers – Kevin mentioned the impressive roosting colony of crows near Lawrence – up to 11,000 birds! Tom French mentioned that the birds are feeding heavily on the fruits of Asiatic Bittersweet.

Dave Small – Dave mentioned that Dan Clark recently became the regional director of the Quabbin and Ware River watersheds.

– The meeting adjourned at 4:45 P.M. –

Drafted & Submitted by: Thomas J. Rawinski, Secretary