

Joint Habitat, Nongame and Endangered Species/Big Game Committee Meeting



Meeting Summary

August 26, 2015

HNGES Chairman Mark Craig called the meeting to order at 10:04 am. Craig called on Dr. David Cobb to present the topics.

Attendees

Committee Members

Mark Craig, HNGES Chair
Wes Seegars
John Coley
Ray Clifton
Brian White

David Hoyle, Jr., Big Game Chair
Tom Berry
Tommy Fonville
Garry Spence

Commissioners

Jim Cogdell
John Litton Clark

Joe Barker
Joe Budd

Staff

Mallory Martin
Gordon Myers
Bob Curry
Wes Barger
Margaret Martin
Kyle Briggs
Kate Pipkin
Joe Fuller
Steve Chase
Lisa Hocutt
Allen Boynton
Carolina Medina

Betsy Haywood
Colleen Olfenbuttel
Todd Kennedy
Shannon Deaton
Geoff Cantrell
Doug Howell
Jon Shaw
Susan Bunn
David Cobb
Erica Garner
Brad Howard

Visitors

Henri McClees – McClees Consultation
Joe McClees – McClees Consultation
Fred Harris – NC Wildlife Federation

Wilson Laney - USFWS
Sarah McRae – USFWS
Ned Jones – NC Trout Unlimited

Discussion of Alligator Status and Management in North Carolina

Dr. David Cobb provided an overview of the recent study of alligator abundance in NC that was conducted with NCSU. This was the first study in thirty years and was based on public rivers and streams only. Private areas and retention ponds were not included in the study. The study of public areas revealed some change in abundance of alligators in the extreme southern part of the state.

At the request of property owners and visitors to Lake Waccamaw, agency staff met with three property owners and State Parks to discuss concerns about the alligator population at Lake Waccamaw. Management of alligators there would involve public Game Lands on one side of the lake, waters owned by NC State Parks, and private property owners around the lake.

Cobb stated that there is a potential for regulatory proposals. Alligators are listed under the Endangered Species Act but could be managed by rulemaking. Preliminary recommendations could include a season at Lake Waccamaw from September 1 to October 1, by permit only. The permit would be for a bag limit of one alligator. To take an alligator by all legal methods would require that those methods be listed specifically in rule. Legal issues require evaluation by staff attorneys. Legal methods of take are delineated in statute and in rules. A statutory change would be required for some manners of take including snare, net, fire, feeding, explosion, poison, bang stick. Another legal question is to distinguish the difference between baiting and feeding and to revise rules accordingly.

Discussion of permits included the recommendation of fewer than ten allowed per season. Consideration to size of alligators must be given because of the reproductive capability at a certain size. It was noted that South Carolina allows one thousand permits a year with no data about size and reproduction. In the northern range of North Carolina the alligator grows and reproduces more slowly. It can take thirty years to become a large alligator.

Agency goals for gator permits must be considered. Are permits issued to reduce numbers of gators or to take trophy size gators? Consideration must be given to landowner goals and sportsmen goals. Depredation permits could be issued to deal with problem gators. A change in rules and statutes will be required for management of the alligators.

HNGES Chair Mark Craig stated that the objective is to maintain a sustainable population. It was agreed that the WRC must be proactive in establishing goals and education about management of the alligator population.

ACTION: The joint committees asked staff to do more research and suggest specific guidelines before adopting any rules proposals in October to send to January public hearings.

Discussion of Elk Management in North Carolina

Dr. David Cobb gave a brief overview of recent studies affecting elk management. Human Dimensions surveys have been conducted and habitat feasibility studies have been conducted for the elk population in western North Carolina. As the elk population continues to move outside Maggie Valley there are increasing interactions with humans. Three vehicle collisions have occurred. In early August a property owner in Macon County killed an elk in the act of depredation.

A handout was presented regarding considerations for establishing elk hunting in North Carolina. There are regulatory barriers in place for the lawful take of elk. It is recommended that the elk be delisted as a species of special concern and be designated as a big game species, which would require statutory changes.

Public lands will have to be developed for habitat and public hunting opportunities. Currently the majority of huntable elk is on private land and studies have shown that private landowners are not likely to allow the public to hunt on their lands. Staff believes that limited permits of five or fewer could be issued for bull elk hunting only. Many legal questions and policy decisions would have to be made to determine an equitable permit system for distributing elk permits. Staff is working with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and the state of Tennessee, continuing to monitor elk populations.

Questions arose regarding the future of elk. Adequate grass for an elk population is not available in the mountains. Without suitable habitat, do elk belong in North Carolina? How could the agency equitably manage elk hunting permits, especially considering the desire of private property owners to sell access to their property?

A suggestion was made to hold elk forums in the western part of the state. Gordon Myers recommends holding elk forums. He stated there needs to be better communication about elk in western North Carolina.

ACTION: The joint committees endorsed the agency proceeding to create pathways for establishing an elk season. Rulemaking and statutory changes will be necessary. In order to proceed the listing status of elk will need to be changed; parameters will have to be set for the WRC to issue permits; and eligibility requirements must be met by permit holders.

Adjourn

HNGES Chair Mark Craig adjourned the meeting at 11:20 am.