

## **Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council DECEMBER 17, 2024 MEETING MINUTES**

The Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council convened for its Fourth meeting at 1:00 P.M. eastern time on December 17, 2024. The meeting was held virtually via Microsoft Teams. In accordance with the provisions of Public Law 92-463, the meeting was open to the public.

### **Council members present:**

#### *Chair:*

John Devney

#### *Vice Chair:*

Collin O'Mara

#### *Primary members:*

Colin Beck

Jeff Crane

Michael Crowder

George Dunklin

Dan Forster

Lucas Martinez

Jason Sumners

Wayne Hubbard\* (served as primary member in the absence of Lydia Parker)

Joel Pedersen

Andrew Schmidt

Land Tawney

Lauren Ward

Joel Webster

#### *\*Alternate member*

#### *Alternate members:*

Ed Arnett

Kathleen Falk

Mark Hennelly

Blake Henning

Wayne Hubbard

Simon Roosevelt

#### *Ex Officio*

Ron Regan, Executive Director – Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies

## **Welcome, roll call, and meeting overview**

HWCC Chair John Devney provide some brief opening remarks and a meeting overview.

Doug Hobbs, HWCC Designated Federal Officer, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, completed the roll call of members.

HWCC Vice Chair Collin O'Mara provided opening remarks. He indicated that the wildlife conservation community would likely put a focus on the National Wildlife Refuge System in the coming year

## **FWS opening comments**

Siva Sundaresan, Deputy Director – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, made opening remarks on behalf of the Service. Sundaresan thanked the Council for its work and recommendations on behalf of wildlife conservation. He also thanked the Council for its collaborative work with the FWS during his tenure as Deputy Director. Sundaresan also announced that the Service would be issuing an announcement withdrawing its proposed rule on the National Wildlife Refuge System biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health policy. He also announced that the FWS had entered into a settlement agreement with plaintiffs regarding a lawsuit filed regarding the management of Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge in West Virginia. See full remarks in the meeting transcript posted to the December 17 meeting section of the HWCC website.

## **Public comment session**

There were no public comment requests made by members of the public.

## **Subcommittee Reports**

There were no subcommittee reports.

## **Open discussion**

Chair Devney highlighted the HWCC recommendations tracking spreadsheet that was distributed to members. The tracker lists all recommendation made by the HWCC, and the status of each recommendation. See the recommendation tracker posted to the December 17 meeting section of the HWCC website.

New HWCC member, Jason Sumners, introduced himself.

Collin O'Mara commented that the status of the National Wildlife Refuge System would be a key issue for the wildlife conservation community in 2025.

Michael Crowder inquired about the possible status of the HWCC and FACA committees with an incoming new Administration. HWCC DFO Doug Hobbs explained the process by which new Administrations consider FACA committee for continuation or termination.

Jeff Crane added that he has had previous experience with the process and indicated that the HWCC would likely be dissolved. Crane indicated that it could take up to 1 year to establish a new committee.

## **Update of FWS lead-free ammunition pilot program**

Christian Myers, Policy Advisor – National Wildlife Refuge System, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, presented a briefing to Council members on the status of implementation of the lead-free ammunition pilot project on select units of the National Wildlife Refuge System during the Fall 2024 hunting season. The pilot project was developed and implemented, in part, to address Council recommendations made in December 2023 regarding the future management of the use of lead and lead-free ammunition on lands of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The full presentation, including Powerpoint slides, can be found on the December 17 meeting section of the HWCC website.

- Kathleen Falk asked if there was any indication as part of the pilot project as to what makes similar lead-free efforts successful, including at the individual state level; Ron Regan stated that there was some apprehensiveness about the early HWCC discussions on the lead/lead-free ammunition issue, but that AFWA and the states were pleased with the HWCC recommendations. He also added that states were working with the FWS to determine what makes a successful initiative; Simon Roosevelt complimented the FWS and HWCC on the effort; Joel Webster also complimented the effort; John Devney closed by saying the effort was a good one.

## **Update on the operational status of the National Wildlife Refuge System**

Cynthia Martinez, Chief - National Wildlife Refuge System, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, presented a briefing to Council members on the operational status of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The full transcript of the presentation and the full deck of Powerpoint slides is available on the December 17 meeting section of the HWCC website.

- Mark Hennelly asked Chief Martinez if it was best to contact Refuge Managers regarding hunting closures. Martinez indicated it was best to contact the Regional hunt/fish chiefs; George Dunklin asked Chief Martinez what the HWCC could do to help. Martinez indicated that the HWCC and other interested stakeholders should focus attention on the entire Refuge System, and not individual Refuges since it is a vast System; Collin O'Mara indicated that there was a need to focus on and address the maintenance backlog for the Refuge System and that the FWS should calculate more realistic estimates to include inflation; Land Tawney stated that the FWS needed more dedicated funding and that an expansion of Duck Stamp funding for the Refuge System could help; John Devney stated that a focus on wintering waterfowl habitat is needed. He indicated that Refuges are playing a bigger role in supporting wintering waterfowl, especially in Louisiana, California, and Arkansas. He stated that the problem is on a large scale and that the Refuge System should not be forgotten as part of the discussion. Finally, he stated that he hopes the new Administration will

make incremental but steady progress, and that the wildlife/waterfowl community needs to better educate Congress on the issue.

## **ADJOURN**

Motion to adjourn: George Dunklin

Second: Joel Webster

The motion was approved by unanimous Council vote.

Meeting adjourned

\*\*Meeting minutes certified by HWCC Chair John Devney on Monday, March 17, 2025