

Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council Fall Virtual Meeting: September 12, 2023

Meeting Minutes

The Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council was convened for its third meeting at 1:00 P.M. on September 12, 2023. The meeting was held virtually via the Microsoft Teams platform. In accordance with the provisions of Public Law 92-463, the meeting was open to the public.

Council members present:

Collin O'Mara, Chair
John Devney, Vice Chair

Primary members:

Colin Beck
Ryan Busse
Michael Crowder
George Dunklin
Bethany Erb
Dan Forester
Cole Mannix
Lucas Martinez
Lydia Parker
Joel Pederson
Land Tawney
Keith Tidball
Joel Webster
Jeff Crane
Lauren Ward
Roberta Salazar-Henry* (serving in absence of state fish & wildlife management agency primary member)

**Alternate member*

Alternate members:

Ed Arnett
Mark Hennelly
Wayne Hubbard
Theodore Sedgwick
Andrew Schmidt

Ex Officio:

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

Meeting overview - Collin O’Mara and John Devney, HWCC Chair & Vice Chair

- O’Mara and Devney welcomed Council members and attendees and provided an overview of the meeting.

- Council members considered and approved the minutes from the April 17, 2023, meeting.
 - Motion by Keith Tidball and Second by Michael Crowder

Comments of Martha Williams, Director – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

- Director Williams made comments opening remarks acknowledging the work of the Council.

Public comment session

- Renee Thornton, Wild Sheep Foundation, provided comments to the Council regarding the Women Hunt Program.

Council Subcommittee report-outs

Wildlife Health: Land Tawney, Chair

Tawney led a summary and discussion of subcommittee work regarding possible best practices for considering the future use of lead-based ammunition on lands of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The draft includes items related to

- Director Williams indicated that the FWS does not want to have to prove negative lead impact from place to place. The FWS wants to have the autonomy/ability to make decisions on lead restrictions. The FWS feels it needs to show it is making progress on the matter.
- Crowder indicated that there is more concern on the fishing tackle side of the issue.
- Martinez asked if the FWS has the capability to undertake national studies on the lead matter. Is it feasible?
- Tawney indicated that the possible recommendations don’t demand a national study, but there can be additional study where impacts are evident.

There was no action taken by the Council on the subcommittee work. The issue will be considered at the next Council meeting. Tawney asked the Council members to review the draft issue paper and provide feedback within 2 weeks.

Public Lands: Joel Webster, Chair

Webster provided a review and summary of the recent subcommittee work. His summary focused on issues related to the federal land appraisal process, water issues on Klamath Refuge, and funding for deferred maintenance projects on Refuge lands.

Webster highlighted ongoing issues with the land appraisal processes at both DOI and USDA. There has been an increasing problem with the length of time it is taking both

Departments to complete appraisals associated with a number of conservation programs. The Council discussed recommendations to DOI and USDA to improve the process and shorten times to complete the appraisal process.

DOI Appraisal recommendations letter

Motion to approve: Lucas Martinez

Second: Roberta Salazar-Henry

Motion approved

USDA Appraisal recommendations letter

Motion to approve: Lucas Martinez

Second: Michael Crowder

Motion approved

Webster asked Subcommittee member Mark Hennelly to highlight issues with water management and access issues at the Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuge. The inability to have consistent amount s of water on the water are negatively impacting both waterfowl populations and their habitat. Lack of water impacts hunting opportunities for the public. The Council discussed possible solutions related to the biological opinion for operation of water infrastructure in the area, as well as acquisition of water rights for the Refuge.

Klamath water management/acquisition recommendation letter

Motion to approve: Keith Tidball

Second: Michael Crowder

Motion approved

Webster asked Subcommittee member John Devney to discuss issues related to the implementation of the Restore Our Parks Act. Funds from the Act have been targeted towards infrastructure such as buildings, but not infrastructure that is supportive of infrastructure that supports waterfowl habitat. The Council discussed asking the FWS to target future project spending towards waterfowl-oriented projects.

ROPA/waterfowl-focused infrastructure recommendation letter

Motion to approve: Lydia Parker

Second: Roberta Salazar-Henry

Motion approved

Hunting & Recreational Shooting: Jeff Crane, Chair

Council member Dan Forster provided the Subcommittee report on behalf of Jeff Crane. Forster reported on opening new hunting opportunities for the public through expanded Sunday hunting on FWS and USFS lands. These increased opportunities could become available as states pass law to make Sunday hunting legal. Lucas Martinez mentioned that 23% of American workers do not have access to paid vacation, so Sunday hunting opportunities would be helpful for those within the group that hunt.

Sunday hunting recommendation letter

Motion to approve: Lucas Martinez

Second: Dan Forster

Motion approved

Forster asked Subcommittee member Mark Hennelly to highlight a way to improve Refuge hunting programs through annual public input sessions for hunters. Hennelly highlighted successful programs in the State of California. The Council discussed the possibility of similar programs throughout the Refuge system.

Annual public input into Refuge hunt programs recommendation letter

Motion to approve: Dan Forster

Second: Joel Webster

Motion approved

Future issues that the subcommittee will consider on behalf of the HWCC include the National Wildlife Refuge System strategic growth policy and issues related to hunt and recreational shooting access on public lands where monument designations are being considered.

Conservation Funding: Joel Pedersen, Chair

Pedersen provide a report of the Subcommittee's work and areas for future consideration on behalf of the Council.

Private Lands: Michael Crowder, Chair

Crowder provided a report on the Subcommittee's work and areas for future consideration on behalf of the Council.

Public Engagement/R3: Keith Tidball, Chair

Tidball provided a report on the Subcommittee's work and areas for future consideration on behalf of the Council.

Federal agency briefings

Updates on implement/use of funds of the Inflation Reduction Act & Bipartisan Infrastructure Law

The Council requested an update on the spend down of IRA and BIL funding from the USFS and NRCS. Greg Smith, Associate Deputy Chief – U.S. Forest Service, Ralph Smith, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Sarah Trichel, Natural Resources Conservation Service, briefed the Council on the status of implementation.

Briefing on the National Wildlife Refuge System Biological Integrity, Diversity and Ecological Health analysis

HWCC has requested a briefing on the Biological Integrity, Diversity and Ecological Health (BIDEH) process that is currently underway. Members have asked that the briefing focus on the status of the process and how it will impact Refuge managers ability to utilize linkages to agricultural production on Refuges, prohibition on GMO seeds and pesticides, grazing, silviculture and trapping and predator management. Mark Chase, Chief – Natural Resource Program Center, National Wildlife Refuge System, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provided the briefing. Chase highlighted that the process underway to update an existing policy.

- Ron Regan indicated that states are concerned about possible changes to the predator control section of the policy.
- Devney asked about the impacts of the possible farming or crops on Refuge lands, especially GMO crops.

ACTION: The Council asked that the FWS provide the Federal Register notice of public comment when it is available.

Updates on MAPLand Act implementation

The HWCC heard updates from the FWS, BLM and USFS on implementation of MAPLand Act; specifically Dingell Act Sec. 4105 (access priority lists) and how the agencies are leveraging the use of Land and Water Conservation Fund dollars directed towards opening recreational access through the Act.

Kelsey David, U.S. Forest Service provided a briefing on Section 4103 implementation on behalf of a federal interagency team working on this portion of the Act. Ms. David highlighted efforts by all agencies to standardize location data and to provide if common format for public usage.

The Council heard reports on the implementation of Section 4105 of the Dingell Act. Jeff Cartwright, Bureau of Land Management, Eric Alvarez, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Shayna Carney, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service updated the Council.

USDA nutrition database

Pamela R. Pehrsson, Agriculture Research Service – U.S. Department of Agriculture, provided a briefing to the Council on the USDA nutrition database, specifically, the process for & challenges associated with adding wild game data to the nutrition database maintained by USDA. She indicated that a major problem in adding wild game information is the lack of samples for analysis.

BLM use of Mule deer / Sage grouse categorical exclusion

Renee Chi, Wildlife Biologist with the Bureau of Land Management, provided an update briefing to the Council on the extent of use of the sage-grouse and mule deer CAT EX passed through the Farm Bill.

- Pedersen asked if there was anything that could be changed that would make the CAT EX more useful?

Motion to Adjourn meeting

Motion: Dan Forster

Second: Lucas Martinez

Motion Approved

ADJOURN

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the foregoing minutes are accurate and complete.

Douglas Hobbs
Designated Federal Officer
Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council

Collin O'Mara and John Devney
Chair/Vice Chair
Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council