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Fish and Game Commission



Wildlife Heritage and Conservation
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WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Committee Co-Chairs: Commissioner Burns and President Sklar

May 16, 2019 Meeting Summary

Following is a summary of the Wildlife Resources Committee (WRC) meeting as prepared by staff. An audio recording of the meeting may be accessed online at www.fgc.ca.gov/meetings/2019.

Call to order

The meeting was called to order at 1:00 p.m. by Commissioner Burns at the Natural Resources Building, Redwood Room, 1416 Ninth Street, 14th Floor, Sacramento, CA 95814. Commissioner Burns gave welcoming remarks.

Wildlife Advisor Ari Cornman introduced California Fish and Game Commission (Commission) staff and California Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) staff. The following individuals were in attendance:

Committee Co-Chairs

Russell Burns	Present
Eric Sklar	Present

Commission Staff

Melissa Miller-Henson	Acting Executive Director
Ari Cornman	Wildlife Advisor
Sergey Kinchak	Staff Services Analyst
Maggie McCann	Sea Grant State Fellow

Department Staff

David Bess	Deputy Director and Chief, Law Enforcement Division
Stafford Lehr	Deputy Director, Wildlife and Fisheries Division
Kari Lewis	Chief, Wildlife Branch
Erin Chappell	Environmental Program Manager, Wildlife Branch
Patrick Foy	Captain, Law Enforcement Division
Roger Bloom	Environmental Program Manager, Fisheries Branch
Brad Burkholder	Environmental Program Manager, Wildlife Branch

Farhat Bajjaliya	Statewide Inland Trout Coordinator
Rob Titus	Senior Environmental Scientist, Fisheries Branch
Johnathan Nelson	Environmental Program Manager, Fisheries Branch
Joel Trumbo	Environmental Program Manager, Wildlife Branch
Julie Horenstein	Ecological Reserve & Land Acquisition Coordinator
Kristin Goree	Associate Governmental Program Analyst

1. Approve agenda and order of items

The Committee approved the agenda and order of items.

2. Public comment for items not on the agenda

No comments received.

3. Department updates

(A) *Wildlife Branch*

- I. Connectivity and Wildlife Corridors:** Stafford Lehr elucidated DFW's efforts in connectivity and wildlife corridors, highlighting:
- a recent U.S. Department of Interior Secretarial Order and other federal planning initiatives concerning big game connectivity;
 - California's request to add bighorn sheep as a focal species to those initiatives;
 - efforts to construct overpasses and underpasses at key roadway crossings including areas on Highway 395, Interstate 80, Highway 101, and near the San Luis Reservoir;
 - that connectivity for larger wildlife has benefits to all wildlife, including genetic connectivity, habitat linkage, and decreased incidents of vehicular accidents; and
 - that the concept of connectivity includes fish and aquatic organisms as well.

President Sklar asked the Department to bring a map of the connectivity areas of concern to a future WRC meeting. He also pointed out that connectivity could include marine mammal passage as well.

Public Discussion

A commenter noted that Florida has constructed some overpasses and suggested that the Department contact them for information. He also mentioned steelhead connectivity. Commissioner Burns mentioned that Nevada has constructed at least two crossings. Stafford elaborated on different types of crossings.

Gray Wolf Update: Kari Lewis presented an update on gray wolf in California including general information, a brief history of wolves and wolf conservation, and current and planned management efforts. Stafford pointed out that the

interaction with US Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services is limited to the investigation of wildlife depredations, and there is no program to remove wolves from California or specific geographies. He highlighted the contributions of non-governmental organizations in promoting non-lethal alternatives for wolf conflict management, such as fladry. He also stated the Department's hope to work closely with local entities on wolf issues and underscored California's extensive wolf genetic library.

Public Discussion

A stakeholder inquired on the wolf stakeholder working group, and the Department indicated that meeting notifications would be sent soon. Another commenter praised the work of Wildlife Services in helping livestock owners and encouraged a "payment for presence" system and encouraged more collaring of wolves.

Stafford noted that the comment period for the federal proposed rule to delist the gray wolf had been extended, with a new deadline of July 19. President Sklar indicated the hope that a draft of the Commission's wolf delisting comment letter might be on the agenda for the June Commission meeting.

(B) Fisheries Branch

Roger Bloom stated that the Fisheries Branch is engaged in various CESA listing reviews, including status assessments for both new and currently listed fish. The Branch is also finalizing sport fishing regulations for Central Valley and Klamath systems. He mentioned the sportfish regulations revision process, of which a presentation was scheduled for later in the meeting. He highlighted the Department's efforts to reintroduce Paiute Cutthroat Trout to their restored habitat and the use of the fish genetics laboratory to confirm success.

Roger spoke about the hatchery academy for Department staff, based on a national program. He said that the Department is working through plans for increases in fishing opportunities for Kokanee and inland Chinook salmon. Stafford Lehr offered to bring some SONAR video of sturgeon accessing a new passage at Fremont Weir to a future meeting.

Public Discussion

No comments received.

(C) Law Enforcement Division

Patrick Foy gave details of the investigation and prosecution of a poacher in Lassen County who had taken at least 150 raptors and nongame birds, as well as mammals. The Law Enforcement Division worked with a federal wildlife laboratory to analyze the evidence.

Next, he recounted the story of an individual in Lassen County that had taken 44 trout over the limit and received a citation. He also mentioned other cases where

take limits were exceeded to extreme degrees, one involving crappie and another involving 335 waterfowl. He stressed that such cases are rare but still do happen.

Patrick gave an update on the current cadre of law enforcement cadets and plans to increase the warden canine units to sixteen.

Stafford Lehr reminded the public that full implementation of non-lead rules for hunting take effect starting July 1, 2019. He mentioned that distributors were stocking up on non-lead ammunition, urged hunters to acquire and practice with the ammunition prior to hunting seasons, and underscored the Department's hunter recruitment, retention, and reactivation initiative (R3).

Public Discussion

A stakeholder asked about progress on a currently open elk poaching case. Patrick said that the Department appreciates organizations that have contributed to the reward for information, and that a notice regarding the reward would be released soon.

4. Initial recommendations for 2020-21 regulations

(A) Mammal Hunting

Brad Burkholder stated that the Department is looking at additional elk tags in the Northwest. They are gathering information to support other changes in elk regulations. They are looking at some reductions in deer quotas in certain areas due to drought and heavy snows. Population assessments for the B zones are underway but data may not be available this regulatory cycle.

Public Discussion

A stakeholder expressed confidence that liberation of elk quotas was supportable and inquired about bighorn sheep. Brad noted that the Commission added ten tags in its last meeting and that the Department will be looking for extra opportunities, although there is a concern about respiratory disease. Stafford Lehr emphasized the robustness of the Department's data collection and analysis tools and their importance in informing management decisions. A stakeholder expressed appreciation to the Department for the Elk Management Plan and the desire to increase the Northwest to 60 tags to help deal with conflicts. Brad said that the Department is working with landowners, tribes, and other groups to explore options and ideas to increase opportunity.

(B) Waterfowl Hunting

Brad stated that the Department is starting an analysis of pintail ducks. They will also be looking at overlap of the late-season hunts with the youth waterfowl weekend, to allow for a delay between the two. Special management boundary definitions may be evaluated. Stafford added that veteran hunts will be examined,

and the Department's waterfowler survey is being developed. Commissioner Burns asked about the configuration of the veteran hunts, and Stafford answered that it was identified as two days set aside for veteran hunters.

Public Discussion

A stakeholder said that because the maximum number of waterfowl hunting days were allocated, hunters would have to give up days (due to the veterans hunt) but stressed that veterans should have a special hunt. Another stakeholder requested that the days not conflict with the youth hunt. A representative of the California Waterfowlers Association recounted their meeting with the Department concerning regulations. A stakeholder wanted to be sure that a falconry-only season remained as a topic in discussions.

(C) Central Valley Sport Fishing

Johnathan Nelson stated that they would have to wait for the Pacific Fisheries Management Council recommendations for specifics, but they planned to keep the three options as in this year's proposal, depending on what the salmon returns look like.

Public Discussion

A stakeholder thanked the Department for its collaboration and stated concerns about impacts of the recent drought on 2020 salmon stocks.

(D) Klamath River Sport Fishing

Johnathan related the decisions made at the Commission teleconference earlier that day, and stated that the Department would evaluate when the quota gets filled and whether it results in a season extension. He stated the Department's intention to keep the options open.

Public Discussion

A stakeholder related excitement at the prospect of a longer season and stated that lower salmon numbers could be expected this year. He expressed the desire for parity in fish measurement between the Central Valley and Klamath systems. Stafford explained the relevance of four-year old salmon and said that the Department is committed to working through the issues with stakeholders.

5. Committee recommendations for Department lands regulations

Joel Trumbo gave a presentation on the Department's proposal to designate nine new ecological reserves and three wildlife areas, remove some others, and make other limited site-specific changes. Stafford Lehr asked for the rulemaking to be kept focused on designations, removals, and a few small changes, because past efforts with

packages of a larger scope had run into difficulties. Designating the properties allows public use. Melissa Miller-Henson asked for details on the removals; Joel answered that the reasons were different for each property, but that in each case the Department no longer owns the land or does not have an agreement with the landowner to manage the property.

Public Discussion

A stakeholder asked if the Department would be considering hunting opportunities on the newly designated properties, and the Department answered that they would. The stakeholder asked for clarification on the curtailing of pheasant hunting in some areas. Joel explained that the reasons were limited opportunities due to number of birds and operational concerns. Kari Lewis added that most are currently being curtailed, and that the Department would look at the issue comprehensively. The stakeholder expressed the desire to keep some areas open earlier.

Francis Coats gave a presentation on Fremont Weir Wildlife Area. Kari stated that the Department would investigate Mr. Coats' concerns.

A stakeholder asked about the timing for the rulemaking notice, and Kari said the Department would be asking for an October notice hearing.

Committee Recommendation

The Committee recommended that the Commission advance a rulemaking with changes to Department lands regulations as discussed during the meeting.

6. Simplification of statewide inland fishing regulations

Farhat Bajjaliya gave an update on the Department's progress on the sport fishing simplification efforts to date, including its public meetings and internal analysis of public comment received. Stafford Lehr stated that Mono and Inyo counties have raised numerous concerns, and that additional conversations with the public and local entities is warranted. This means that the timing of the regulatory package is uncertain currently. President Sklar thanked the Department for its hard work, affirmed that most people want simplification of some kind, and assured the Department that the Commission would work through any problems that could not be resolved by the Department in a reasonable amount of time. Stafford said that the Department would like to try to resolve whatever issues it could and "agree to disagree" on the remainder. Melissa Miller-Henson acknowledged the Department's hard work and communication, and that the Department and Commission staff would likely be requesting that the rulemaking be moved to the TBD section of the rulemaking timetable.

7. Bullfrogs and non-native turtles

Ari gave an update on the bullfrog and non-native turtle stakeholder engagement process, including the agency team, environmental/animal welfare team, industry team,

and legislative coordination strategy. President Sklar suggested that Commission staff coordinate with Fiona Ma, as she has been interested in the topic.

8. Sport fishing licenses (AB 1387)

Stafford indicated that the Department does not have an approved position on AB 1387, a bill to implement 365-day sport fishing licenses. The Department is engaged in phase two of its R3 program, with eight subcommittees meeting regularly. They have made significant progress on implementing the Department's R3 action plan. Kristin Goree stated that the bill was amended and passed out of the Appropriations Committee. President Sklar asked that the amendments be sent to the Committee when available.

Public Discussion

A stakeholder affirmed the bill's status and the widespread support for it, and urged the Committee to support the concept of 365-day licenses. The California Rifle and Pistol Association also supported the bill and the Department's R3 efforts. President Sklar expressed support for the idea of 365-day licenses and that working out associated fiscal issues was an important consideration.

Committee Recommendation

The Committee recommended that the Commission communicate to the California State Legislature its conceptual support for 365-day licenses, with support depending on upon minimizing fiscal impacts to DFW, establishing achievable timelines, providing greater flexibility in license and tag pricing, and funding a public communications and outreach effort.

9. Delta Fisheries Management Policy

Public Discussion

A stakeholder suggested that the policy incorporate climate change. The Coalition for a Sustainable Delta recommended that the Delta Fisheries Management Policy (Delta policy) be referred to the Commission, elaborated on the benefits of policies, supported the concept of using the "best available science", reinforced revisiting the Striped Bass Policy, expressed support for the Delta policy's general direction, urged that the Delta policy tackle species prioritization, and requested that the Delta policy add the word "sustainable" before "angling opportunities" in section V. President Sklar agreed with the statements on the importance of policies, the addition of the word "sustainable", and the Delta policy's referral. He asked the Department about the results of ongoing Delta scientific research; Rob Titus provided updates on collaborative studies and management at the Clifton Court Forebay. A stakeholder offered support for Delta

research and the Delta policy's section VII. Another stakeholder expressed support for the process and the Delta policy's progress.

A NorCal Guides and Sportsman's Association representative said that striped bass have provided important recreational opportunities. He noted prior stocking of striped bass, expressed an opinion that striped bass are "naturalized", said that other species besides striped bass predate on salmonids, and that the striped bass was important to fishing communities. The California Sports Fishing League echoed the comments.

Committee Recommendation

The Committee recommended that the word "sustainable" be added to the Delta Fisheries Management Policy as discussed, and that it be referred to the Commission for discussion.

10. Future agenda items

It was noted that the next WRC meeting in Santa Rosa will be moved to September 10, 2019.

(A) Topics identified for the next WRC meeting included:

- Agency updates
- Review and potential recommendations for mammal hunting, waterfowl hunting, Central Valley sport fishing, and Klamath sport fishing
- Initial vetting for upland game bird hunting
- Updates on the statewide inland sport fishing revision and simplification for 2020
- Bullfrogs and non-native turtles

(B) Potential new agenda topics for FGC consideration

No new topics were recommended.

Adjourn

The Committee adjourned at 3:35 p.m.