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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

September 10, 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.

Call to order

The meeting was called to order at 8:46 a.m. by Commissioner Burns at the Justice Joseph A. Rattigan Building, Conference Room 410, 50 D Street, Santa Rosa, CA 95404. Commissioner Burns gave welcoming remarks.

Wildlife Advisor Ari Cornman gave welcoming remarks and outlined meeting procedures and guidelines for participating in Committee discussions, noting that the Committee is a non-decision-making body that provides recommendations to the California Fish and Game Commission (Commission) on wildlife and inland fisheries items. He introduced Commission and California Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) staff. The following Committee member(s), and Commission and Department staff, attended:

Committee Co-Chairs

Russell Burns	Present
Eric Sklar	Present

Commission Staff

Melissa Miller-Henson	Executive Director
Ari Cornman	Wildlife Advisor
Craig Castleton	Associate Government Program Analyst

Department Staff

Kari Lewis	Chief, Wildlife Branch
Kevin Shaffer	Chief, Fisheries Branch
Patrick Foy	Captain, Law Enforcement Division
Brad Burkholder	Environmental Program Manager, Wildlife Branch
Nathan Graveline	Senior Environmental Scientist (Supervisor), Wildlife Branch
Kristin Denryter	Senior Environmental Scientist (Specialist), Wildlife Branch
Karen Mitchell	Senior Environmental Scientist (Specialist), Fisheries Branch

1. Approve agenda and order of items

The Committee approved the agenda but stated that the order of items may be altered to accommodate the arrival time of certain Department personnel and stakeholders. For purposes of the meeting summary, items are listed in the order of the published agenda.

2. Public comment for items not on the agenda

An individual provided comment about a lack of trust in public agencies.

A representative of the Nor-Cal Guides and Sportsmen's Association (NCGASA) spoke about tribal enforcement of a half-mile ban on fishing along the Klamath River at the confluence with Blue Creek, and asked the Department and Commission to look into the situation. The representative also communicated concern about inland river salmon fishing for the year not being as successful as had been hoped.

3. Department updates

(A) Fisheries Branch

Kevin Shaffer emphasized that the only online location to safely buy hunting and fishing licenses is at the Department's website. He also stated that California Natural Resource Agency and Department priorities include climate change and biodiversity; along those lines, the Department will bring a presentation on connectivity to a future WRC meeting.

Kevin indicated that the Department's Service Based Budgeting Project continues at a rapid pace. Recommendations from the Department's Hunting and Fishing Recruitment, Retention and Reactivation Program (R3) work groups will be released soon; California is being viewed as a leader in R3 efforts.

(B) Law Enforcement Division

Patrick Foy explained that this year was the first dove season opener under the new lead-free ammunition laws. Hunters that had the most success were the ones who prepared and tested their non-lead ammunition well in advance, and hunter success appeared to be relatively average. Wildlife officers did issue some citations on opening day. Co-chair Sklar asked whether there were provisions for turning in old lead ammunition, and Patrick answered that lead ammunition could still be used at shooting ranges.

Patrick also reviewed dispositions of certain abalone cases to demonstrate why wildlife cases can often take a great deal of time.

Discussion

A commenter asked about the rate of poacher apprehension and moving wardens from the coast; Patrick explained that resources are often shifted to where they are most needed at different times. Co-chair Sklar suggested the commenter speak to the state legislature about providing more money for wildlife officers and explained that the officers work for the Department rather than the Commission.

(C) Wildlife Branch

Brad Burkholder introduced Nathan Graveline and Kristin Denryter, new employees in the Department's Big Game Program. He also stated that the summer field season was coming to a close.

4. Initial recommendations for 2020-21 regulations

Upland game bird hunting: Brad Burkholder presented on the status of upland game birds, including declines in sage grouse and pheasant, research on mourning dove and sage grouse, and upland game bird planning efforts. The Department is not proposing any changes to upland game bird regulations for the 2020-21 season.

Discussion

Co-chair Sklar asked Brad if climate change had been taken into account when deciding how and what species of native grasses to plant in the Department's habitat restoration efforts. Brad said the Department starts with the native historical composition, but also takes into account resilience for future environmental changes.

A stakeholder stated that the issue of turkey shooting times is not a current focus, but that stakeholders may ask the Department to reassess the topic at some point. Another stakeholder asked about upland game bird funding, and Brad recounted different funding sources available for upland game bird research and management, noting that some modern land use changes have resulted in losses of bird food and habitat.

No action was taken.

5. Committee recommendations for 2020-21 regulations

(A) Mammal hunting

Brad Burkholder presented on deer population studies, bighorn sheep tag quotas and disease considerations, and elk tag quotas and zones. The Department is recommending some changes to mammal regulations this year, though specific numbers are dependent on data and survey results and were not yet available at the time of the meeting.

Discussion

A stakeholder asked about camera trapping by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and Brad responded that the data from that study is still being processed and considered.

Another stakeholder asked about hunter opportunities associated with elk at Point Reyes National Seashore. Brad explained that the Department has tried to encourage hunting opportunities at Point Reyes but has been met with resistance. The Department has a long-standing policy of not allowing elk translocations off the property due to disease issues.

(B) Waterfowl hunting

Brad Burkholder discussed proposals associated with veteran and active military hunt days, a falconry-only season, the upcoming season days, other minor regulatory proposals, and an upcoming hunter survey.

Discussion

A stakeholder asked how the Department plans to distribute the hunter survey; Brad and Kari Lewis discussed plans to inform current waterfowl hunters and to direct them to an online survey. A representative for the California Waterfowl Association asked to review the questions in advance, and a stakeholder added that there may be other groups that would like to review the questions as well. Co-Chair Sklar asked that the Department release the survey as soon as possible.

A stakeholder reminded the Department and WRC that a commitment was made to consider falconry-only days. Co-Chair Sklar suggested the idea of apportioning different hunting groups (veterans, youth, falconry, etc.) into different areas. A stakeholder pointed out that falconers generally hunt in different habitat than typical firearm waterfowl hunters. Another stakeholder suggested that some youth may derive a benefit from being “teamed up” with veteran hunters.

(C) Central Valley sport fishing

Kevin Shaffer presented on the status of salmon in the Central Valley and stated that recommendations would be fairly typical this year. As has been done previously, the Department will propose options to allow flexibility based on forthcoming information and changing conditions, such as drought.

Discussion

Co-Chair Sklar stated that dam removal would allow for an interesting experiment for comparisons to non-removal areas.

An NCGASA representative asked that the Department consider an extension of the salmon season on the Sacramento River for two weeks, and a representative of Coastside Fishing Club supported the comment.

(D) Klamath River Basin sport fishing

Kevin Shaffer presented on the Pacific Fishery Management Council process and discussions with tribes regarding salmon. He noted that the upcoming rulemaking package will provide the data for, and an explanation of, how the Department calculates its size recommendations for salmon. The Department will recommend a doubling of brown trout bag and possession limits in the upper Klamath and Trinity rivers, based on a petition that was submitted to the Commission that has support from several tribes and federal agencies.

Discussion

A stakeholder asked when the Department would release the size calculations, and Kevin answered that the calculations could be made available as soon as they are completed.

WRC Recommendation

WRC recommends that the Commission support the proposed regulation changes for mammal hunting, waterfowl hunting, Central Valley sport fishing, and Klamath River Basin sport fishing for the 2020-21 seasons, as recommended by the Department, and ask the Department to consider a two-week extension to the Central Valley salmon fishing season on the Sacramento River.

6. Simplification of statewide inland fishing regulations

Karen Mitchell presented on the history of the trout sportfishing simplification initiative and gave an update on its current status. A proposal will be presented and vetted at the January 2020 WRC meeting. The Department requested that WRC consider holding a special meeting in March to discuss the recommended regulations for each area in detail, to inform a potential WRC recommendation to FGC.

Kevin Shaffer explained that the impetus for regulation simplification came from the angling community. The Department sees this as an important component of its R3 initiatives. Many people seemed fine with simplification as a concept but did not want regulations changed that would affect them personally. Conversely, many public proposals and petitions would result in further complicating the regulations. It is the Department's task to "merge those two worlds," which is the main reason for the timeline delays experienced so far.

Discussion

A representative for NCGASA asked about the timing of the disposition of a regulation change petition (Petition #2018-014), regarding inland boat limits for finfish. Ari Cornman explained that the petition was denied by FGC but that, at the time of its denial, the Department committed to considering boat limits during the next regular sportfishing rulemaking package. Kevin observed that the simplification rulemaking was initially proposed to be completed in one year, but the longer timeline is also postponing the regular sportfishing package. Kevin stated that the Department's Fisheries Branch is devoting most of its resources to the simplification rulemaking, but he would speak with NCGASA to see if a solution could be identified.

WRC Recommendation

WRC recommends that the Commission schedule a special WRC meeting in March 2020, with a date to be determined, focused on the simplification of statewide inland fishing regulations proposal.

7. Bullfrogs and non-native turtles

Ari Cornman provided an update on the bullfrog and non-native turtle stakeholder engagement process. Staff is scheduling the next meeting of the agency team. The environmental/animal welfare team has met three times and made substantial progress. The industry team is still being formed. Legislative committees and caucuses will be engaged once all three teams have met.

No action was taken.

8. Future agenda items

(A) Review work plan agenda topics and timeline

Work plan topics identified for the next WRC meeting include:

- Initial vetting and discussion of the simplification of statewide inland fishing regulations
- Update on the bullfrog and non-native turtle stakeholder engagement project

(B) Potential new agenda topics for Commission consideration

No new topics were identified to add to the current work plan.

Adjourn

The Committee adjourned at 10:42 a.m.