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Fish and Game Commission



*Celebrating 150 Years of
Wildlife Heritage and Conservation!*

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WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Committee Chair: President Sklar

January 12, 2021 Meeting Summary

Following is a summary of the California Fish and Game Commission (Commission) Wildlife Resources Committee (WRC) meeting as prepared by staff. An audio recording of the meeting is available upon request.

Call to order

The meeting was called to order at 11:00 a.m. by Chair Eric Sklar, who gave welcoming remarks.

Wildlife Advisor Ari Cornman outlined instructions for participating in Committee discussions and gave introductory remarks. The following commissioners, Commission staff, and California Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) staff, attended:

Committee Chair

Eric Sklar Present

Commission Members

Jacque Hostler-Carmesin Present

Commission Staff

Melissa Miller-Henson Executive Director
Ari Cornman Wildlife Advisor
Sherrie Fonbuena Program Analyst
Cynthia McKeith Staff Services Analyst

Department Staff

David Bess Deputy Director and Chief, Law Enforcement Division
Stafford Lehr Deputy Director, Wildlife and Fisheries Branch
Kevin Shaffer Branch Chief, Fisheries Branch
Scott Gardner Branch Chief, Wildlife Branch
Chris Stoots Captain, Law Enforcement Division

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

The Northern California Guides and Sportsman's Association (NCGASA) asked for dialogue with Department and Commission staff about the Nimbus Basin closure, requesting allowance of fishing for non-salmon species such as trout, striper, and shad between April and August each year. Chair Sklar asked that the Department follow up with NCGASA on the topic.

A commenter expressed concerns regarding urban coyote populations and their effects on pets and feral cat colonies, the tools that the public lacks to deal with coyotes, and public education campaigns. The commenter suggested that the upcoming coyote workshops include people who live in city environments, and advocated for "coyote population control."

A commenter asked the Commission and Department to revisit the recently-adopted regulations for recreational crab fishing, stating that the regulations are unenforceable, and that the Commission should listen to party boat captains who feel that their voices were not heard. The commenter remarked, specifically, that the nine-day soak, the \$2.25 fee, and the opportunity for party boats to start two weeks earlier were all concerns. Chair Sklar observed that the regulation does not go into effect until November, so there is time to make adjustments if warranted.

An academic commended the Commission and Department for planning to hold the coyote workshops, stressed the importance for the role of science in evaluating policy and management interventions, and encouraged decision-makers to embrace both social values and public trust duties.

3. Department updates

Stafford Lehr thanked members of the public for taking responsible measures regarding COVID-19 while recreating and utilizing Department lands. He spoke about the Department's budget outlook for 2021, particularly a one-time infusion of funds to be used for addressing human-wildlife conflict, law enforcement vehicles, biodiversity and climate adaptation work, vegetation mapping, and modernization of various license platforms. The Department will also receive funds for wildfire preparedness.

Some funds will be available to address pollinators. The Department has hired a pollinator coordinator and is developing an emergency action plan to try to stem declines in monarch butterfly populations; the plan will largely revolve around building partnerships.

(A) Fisheries Branch

Kevin Shaffer announced progress on the statewide trout management plan and statewide trout hatchery management plan. The branch is also ahead of schedule on its draft plan for inland salmon management (inland Chinook and Kokanee salmon), which will be ready for tribal and public comment soon.

Some hatchery facilities that suffered bacterial outbreaks have been disinfected and will be in the process soon of restocking. The long-term health of the facilities will be based on

groundwater and infrastructure improvements to bring fish inside, though progress is slowed by COVID-19 considerations.

Department hatcheries are starting to pioneer new techniques, including photoperiod manipulation to affect fish spawning times, allowing flexibility in producing fish for other hatcheries and stocking. The hatcheries are also using frozen fish sperm in a technique called “prior preservation” to conserve gene pools for both species protection and spawning.

The Fisheries Branch has temporarily lost four employees to contact tracing, which will have a negative impact on the Department’s capacity to handle new fisheries regulations. Finally, Kevin encouraged the commissioners to be part of anticipated discussions regarding wildfire, which will include organizations such as the Western Governors’ Association and the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies; California will be a key participant in those efforts.

(B) Law Enforcement Division

Chris Stoots gave an overview of the past year. Law enforcement personnel have found ways to stay safe, protect the public, and continue protecting the state’s resources. In recent months, law enforcement has noticed increased requests for backup from allied enforcement agencies to assist with noncompliant subjects. A highlight of the year was the public safety assistance the Law Enforcement Division provided during the wildfires.

Chris also highlighted the increased use of technology in searches, wildlife trafficking cases, inspections, and other enforcement functions. The Department observed a significant increase in human-wildlife conflicts; of note were several coyote, bear, and mountain lion attacks (7, 6, and 3, respectively). Officers can collect physical evidence from the scene and then work with the Department’s wildlife forensic lab to confirm the attack, obtain details on the animal, and confirm that a dispatched animal was the offender.

The Law Enforcement Division has noted a record number of recreationists, calls to the CalTIP line, and violators in general. Chris thanked members of the public for their help and cooperation. Chair Sklar thanked wildlife officers for all they do.

(C) Wildlife Branch

Scott Gardner reviewed some of the challenges of the past year. The Department’s wildlife veterinarians have played a leading role in the study and management of wildlife diseases and in wildfire burn response. Erin Chappell has been establishing a new bobcat program, which is poised to initiate an unprecedented survey of the state’s bobcat populations, culminating in a bobcat management plan.

Commissioner Hostler-Carmesin asked about outreach to tribes regarding wildfire solutions. Stafford stated that the 2021-22 Department budget includes one-time funding to engage Native American tribes and tribal communities on the management of Department lands and incorporate traditional ecological knowledge into management. As the Department moves forward with wildfire-related activities, it will engage with local tribes on historical management activities and specific properties or geographies. Other state agencies likely have specific grant programs of which tribes can avail themselves. Stafford offered to connect Commissioner Hostler-Carmesin with specific agency personnel for more information. Scott offered that the Department lands program has been working on

co-management, accessibility, inclusivity, and cultural resources on Department-managed lands.

4. Inland Sportfishing

WRC received a presentation from NCGASA outlining its general proposal and rationale for requesting inland boat limits similar to angling in the marine environment. Kevin Shaffer presented on the ongoing discussions regarding inland boat limits, including some concerns raised by the Department and Commission staff. Ari Cornman emphasized that other interested parties are welcome to join the dialogue.

Discussion

NCGASA representatives acknowledged that discussions would need to take place on a species-by-species basis for individual watersheds, made the point that fall-run Chinook salmon stocks are 70 to 90 percent hatchery fish, and stressed that the proposal is not intended to reallocate angler opportunity from the marine environment to inland. They stressed that inland salmon fishing has declined precipitously in the last few years; guide boats are generally not limiting out, and angler opportunity should be commensurate with the state of the fishery.

Kevin explained that the Department does take a broad view of the issue, and that the proposal could have ramifications that would need to be addressed, including potential marine impacts. Data gathering that is comparable to the Klamath-Trinity system, though difficult, would help with the analysis of the proposal and salmon management in general. Chair Sklar encouraged further discussions and another update at a future meeting.

5. Striped Bass

(A) Disease Informational Items

NCGASA representatives presented their perspective on limits for striped bass, discussing an historical perspective, conservation needs, fishery goals, fecundity protections, data gathering, and angler support. They clarified that the proposal of a 20-to-30-inch slot limit is only intended to be a starting point, and that the science may suggest different limits may be appropriate, when balancing fishery protection and angler opportunity.

Discussion

Individual anglers and organizations, including the California Striped Bass Association, supported the concept of striped bass slot limits, emphasizing angler opportunity amid fishery declines, direct and indirect revenue generation, the longtime lack of regulatory updates in striped bass fisheries, the damage caused by derbies which reward the largest bass, public education, and Nevada's success in implementing slot limits for trout, as well as supporting FLAME (Fishermen Led Assessment Monitoring Experiment, NCGASA's data gathering app). An academic gave a biological background and offered a biological rationale for instituting slot limits and supported FLAME.

Kevin Shaffer thanked NCGASA for its leadership role in the issue, and stated that the Department is also very interested in continuing exploration of the idea, including the potential of FLAME. He highlighted the opportunity to explore slot limits in a larger context, committing to ongoing communication with interested parties on any progress.

6. Restricted species

Scott Gardner and Stafford Lehr noted the complexity of permitting surrounding facilities that house restricted species, and stated that one goal of amending existing regulations would be to streamline permits. The Department is convening the Wildlife Rehabilitation Advisory Committee. Stafford highlighted the importance of financial surety of organizations housing restricted species, particularly in light of difficulties related to COVID-19. Among other issues, DFW's eventual proposal to amend regulations related to restricted species is expected to include:

- requiring appropriate surety bonds,
- regulating the number and type of animals a facility can house,
- requiring reasonably implementable evacuation plans, including temporary housing facilities where necessary,
- mandating appropriate veterinary care for resident animals, and
- updating the minimal infrastructure and animal accommodation standards.

Stafford stressed that zoos and research institutions were not intended to be the focus of regulation changes. The Department will work with other organizations on the proposal framework and will report back to WRC at a future meeting.

7. Human-wildlife conflicts

Ari Cornman detailed the plans for the upcoming series of urban coyote workshops and invited suggestions and comments. The first workshop is being planned for late February or early March, and will focus on urban coyote science (both biology and human dimensions) and the laws, regulations, and mandates that determine jurisdictions and facilitate particular activities. Scott Gardner introduced the Department's new, forthcoming statewide bear policy, which puts non-lethal methods (including translocations) in the forefront of nuisance bear management and sets a policy for dealing with orphaned bears. Stafford underscored the importance of making lethal methods the last resort, and that the new policy represents a pivotal shift for the Department. Chair Sklar asked that the discussion focus on logistics and suggestions for the workshop.

Discussion

A representative from Project Coyote thanked the Commission for holding the workshops, stated that human-wildlife conflicts are contextual in nature when developing coexistence plans and response protocols, stressed that coyote conflicts are often more about managing human behavior than coyote behavior, noted that perceptions often differ from real risks, and mentioned putting a primary focus on education and collaboration. A Project Coyote volunteer offered some insights on working with the city of Calabasas, California to design a coyote management plan and an education campaign to empower individual community members in effective actions that address potential conflict; the Calabasas City Council reallocated money previously used for trapping coyotes to support these initiatives and the volunteer suggested it should be used as a model, with many communities worldwide seeking guidance from Calabasas. A representative for Social Compassion in Legislation echoed the comments.

An academic praised the Department for focusing on non-lethal methods in its new bear policy, and offered to send a new global review to Commission staff and the Department for their information; the study found that the most effective and most reliable interventions when dealing with bear threats to property were non-lethal in nature.

A commenter noted that some urban coyote issues can be complicated and take some time to work out, and asked if the Commission had plans to add additional workshops if necessary. Ari answered that a third workshop may be a possibility depending on the results of post-workshop feedback from the participants.

8. Bullfrogs and non-native turtles

Ari provided an update on the progress of the three bullfrog teams, and presented on results chains, the last step in the Open Standards for Conservation Planning process that each team is using.

9. Future agenda items

Topics for the next meeting, scheduled for May 11, 2021, will include:

- Initial vetting for waterfowl hunting, mammal hunting, Klamath River basin sport fishing, and Central Valley sport fishing; and
- an update on the bullfrog and non-native turtle stakeholder engagement process.

Commission staff will propose other topics, such as wildlife-human conflicts, inland boat limits, or restricted species if there is progress to report to WRC.

Adjourn

WRC adjourned at 2:50 p.m.