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*Wildlife Heritage and Conservation
Since 1870*

Melissa Miller-Henson
Executive Director
P.O. Box 944209
Sacramento, CA 94244-2090
(916) 653-4899
fgc@fgc.ca.gov

www.fgc.ca.gov

WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Committee Co-Chairs: President Silva and Commissioner Zavaleta

January 13, 2022 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 1:30 p.m. by Co-Chair Peter Silva, 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, participated:

Committee Co-Chairs

Peter Silva	Present
Erika Zavaleta	Present

Commission Staff

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

Department Staff

Scott Gardner	Branch Chief, Wildlife Branch
Jay Rowan	Branch Chief, Fisheries Branch
Chris Stoots	Assistant Chief, Law Enforcement Division and Acting Tribal Advisor
Brad Burkholder	Environmental Program Manager, Wildlife Branch
Jonathan Nelson	Environmental Program Manager, Fisheries Branch
Karen Mitchell	Senior Environmental Scientist Specialist, Fisheries Branch
Max Fish	Environmental Scientist, Fisheries Branch

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**

President Silva announced that his last day on the Commission will be Friday, February 18, 2022. He thanked staff and stakeholders who have helped make his six years of participating in the work of the Commission so enjoyable and interesting.

A commenter who works in the wildlife control industry spoke about violations of the regulation prohibiting trapping within 150 yards of an occupied dwelling without written consent. She stated that she had worked with the Department's law enforcement personnel and together they had agreed on an interpretation of the regulation.

The petitioner for a previously denied regulation change petition regarding *Xenopus* frogs stated that the frog is not invasive, that there are no good alternatives, and using invasive species in the classroom would result in their environmental effects becoming worse.

A representative of California Waterfowl Association spoke about a regulation change petition to restrict waterfowl hunting near the town of Benicia, stating that similar earlier petitions had been rejected by the Commission and that there are regulations in place to keep hunting safe. A representative for the Tulare Basin Wetlands Association and the Black Brant Group echoed the sentiments.

3. **Department updates**

(A) ***Wildlife Branch***

Scott Gardner gave updates on the Department's wildfire resiliency initiative; the Department has implemented 81 projects over 21,000 acres, cleared 50 structures at risk, and is currently implementing the initiative's second phase. He reviewed potential positive consequences of the proposed budget for wildfire-related projects and programs. He also reviewed some of the projects the Wildlife Branch has been undertaking to address drought effects, including stressor monitoring for a host of species, wetland enhancements, and heavy equipment purchases in service of repairing infrastructure to address drought resiliency. Wildlife Branch is also in the process of improving facilities, accessibility, and educational programs at properties near disadvantaged communities. The branch will be focusing on human-wildlife conflict, including best practices, seeking non-lethal solutions, and preventing wolf-human conflicts. He elaborated on a pilot wolf compensation program.

(B) ***Fisheries Branch***

Jonathan Nelson gave updates on fisheries initiatives, including hatchery modernization, aquatic stressor monitoring, drought monitoring, and additional staff positions. Fisheries Branch was able to monitor over 66 water bodies across 13 counties, with approximately 30 Department staff devoting over 1800 hours to the effort. Staff has learned a great deal from previous droughts. Fisheries Branch created a voluntary drought initiative, collaborating with landowners, water users, and communities in watershed conservation and management actions that can help reduce the effects of drought on salmon and steelhead populations. The actions improve streamflow, provide instream flows for fish, monitor and evaluate the

success of these measures, allow access for fish rescue and relocation efforts, and enhance floodplain inundation and groundwater recharge. The collaborative efforts can take the form of agreements with the Department and/or the National Marine Fisheries Service; the Department is currently reaching out to landowners and others who have high water use, but is open to all partners. Finally, Jonathan provided some updates on various salmonid returns, recent spawn production, potential indications of thiamine deficiencies in river fish, hatchery production, a striped bass slot limit, and inland boat limits.

Co-chair Zavaleta remarked that it was good to hear that more staff were out on the landscape, and asked about thiamine deficiency. Jonathan provided a quick overview of current understandings of thiamine deficiency.

(C) Law Enforcement Division

Chris Stoots related the story of “Shop with a Cop,” where disadvantaged children can go on a sponsored shopping trip with a member of law enforcement. Participants have had to adjust to COVID, but this year’s event was successful nevertheless. He provided information on the Department 2022 Warden Stamp, the current academy class, and a field story of orphaned bear cubs that were captured by officers and successfully transported to a rehabilitation facility.

Discussion

A representative of the Northern California Guides and Sportsman’s Association expressed hope that some progress could be made on inland boat limits. Another commenter remarked that in addition to livestock, wolves kill bear, deer, and other hunted animals, and urged the Department to adopt a wolf management plan. Scott clarified that the Department has a wolf management plan that was developed with input from a broad coalition of stakeholders. A commenter asked if the public could contribute ideas for habitat improvement projects or fire resilience projects, and whether compensation might be available for other depredations besides those caused by wolves. Scott responded that funds for wildfire resilience are largely allocated to Department lands, and that the compensation program was designated as a wolf pilot program by the state legislature. The need for a wolf compensation program is driven by the fact that, as a state-listed species that cannot be taken, there is no recourse for depredation, unlike other species such as mountain lions or bears.

4. Inland sport fishing

(A) Game Fish Contests

Max Fish presented the Department’s stakeholder outreach efforts as well as the overarching goals and a general proposal for a rulemaking to implement changes to regulations governing Department permitting for game fish tournaments and contests.

Discussion

A stakeholder asked about future opportunities to comment on the rulemaking. Another commenter described the permitting process as having been “hijacked” the previous year, stressed the importance of public comment, and urged the Commission to adopt a fair and equitable process. Melissa Miller-Henson stated that

the Wildlife Resource Committee was created as a direct result of the recognition of the need for a venue to provide extended comment and dialogue on important topics of stakeholder interest.

(B) *Inland Sport Fishing Updates*

Karen Mitchell presented on a Department proposal to amend various sport fishing regulations, including:

- extensions of the low-flow closure restrictions in coastal streams north of San Francisco Bay and on portions of the Eel River;
- black bass (including changes at Eastman Lake, Hensley Lake, Isabella Lake, Kaweah Reservoir, and Success Reservoir);
- landlocked salmon (at the Upper Scotts Flat Reservoir);
- trout in the East Fork Walker River;
- catfish at Lafayette Lake;
- steelhead in the Carmel River;
- striped bass in Lake Elsinore;
- trout fishing in the Fall River Complex; and
- minor clarifications, changes, and updates to the sport fish simplification rulemaking adopted by FGC in Oct 2020.

Discussion

A representative of the City of Santa Cruz thanked the Department for putting forth the amendments to low-flow closure regulations and asked if there had been consideration of extending the fishing season further into the spring when flows are higher, to offset impacts to recreational fishing. Jonathan Nelson answered that there had not been any specific requests for that, though the Department will evaluate seasons over the coming year under the regular fishing evaluation cycle. Any changes will require evaluation of flows in the later season, potential impacts to spawning fish, and similar relevant issues.

Co-chair Zavaleta inquired about how native and non-native fisheries are treated differently, and about the Department and/or Commission potentially promoting exotic species at the expense of wildlife stewardship. Jay Rowan answered that many of the non-native populations are recreational fisheries that are important to stakeholders, and that the Department goes through an extensive evaluation process, including consideration of Commission fisheries policies, before stocking fish in any water body to account for impacts to native species. In the case of the regulatory changes at hand, most of the cases are reservoir systems that are already impacted, and generally do not support robust native species runs. Co-chair Zavaleta asked about the East Walker River and the ecological costs and benefits of sustaining a trophy fishery. Jay responded that it is an extremely popular and economically important fishery for which the Commission received multiple regulation change petitions. The East Walker River has some decent spawning habitat but is a select fishery with a unique, limited, fishing character, and the community and stakeholders want to sustain that special opportunity. As far as

restoration, the Department has been looking at the Walker Lahontan cutthroat trout for reintroduction, but is also trying to find the right balance with the current trophy fishery.

Recommendation

The Wildlife Resources Committee recommends that the Commission consider the proposed regulation changes for game fish contests and inland sport fishing, as recommended by the Department and discussed today.

5. Preference points and tag refunds

Ari Cornman gave a brief introduction to the topic. Scott Gardner emphasized that Department and Commission staff have had extensive discussion on the topic in core teams, which will continue. He acknowledged that stakeholders had expressed concerns with both preference point returns and fee refunds and stated that the Department tries to balance those concerns with the “once in a lifetime” nature of the hunts, in the face of extraordinary wildfire events. He discussed opportunities to move hunting seasons to schedules that could reduce their overlap with the greatest exposure to wildfire.

Discussion

A representative of the Public Interest Coalition condoned the restoration of preference points but opposed fee refunds, stating that hunters accept the risk of not harvesting an animal when they purchase the tag. Representatives of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Wild Sheep Foundation, California Bowman Hunters Archery Association, and California Deer Association thanked the Department, the Commission, and Commission staff for putting forth the rulemakings on preference point returns and fee refunds. The organizations support both preference point returns and tag fee refunds, support the effort to move seasons, and look forward to working with the agencies on these issues. Other commenters supported similar rulemakings the Commission adopted and noted that any changes can be reverted if things do not work out as planned. Co-chair Silva asked about the definition of a premium hunt, and Scott explained that they are hunts that require preference points to secure. Co-chair Zavaleta noted there is a consensus on preference point returns but mixed opinions on fee refunds.

6. Bullfrogs and non-native turtles

Ari Cornman gave a short encapsulation of the bullfrog and non-native turtles stakeholder process, and noted that the engagement of legislative staffers would begin once the stakeholder engagement process was complete. He provided some explanations and clarifications of the *Preliminary Results from the Conservation Standards Work in the Bullfrog and Non-Native Turtle Stakeholder Engagement Process*, which was provided as an exhibit in the meeting materials:

- The terms “environmental” and “animal welfare” in the group names are intended to connote broad types of certain stakeholder organizations, not attitudes or philosophies inherent to any organization.
- Inclusion of a particular strategy in a group’s analysis is not intended to indicate that the group favors or recommends it.
- Some strategies may be more or less likely to succeed, and the actual efficacy of a particular strategy may be low or unclear.

- The diagrams are not intended to depict every single factor at play, nor every relationship between those factors; rather, they are intended to highlight the most significant and meaningful associations that are relevant to understanding and achieving the vision enumerated by each group.

Ari provided observations on points of agreement among the three situation analyses, including research, education, and providing more resources for the Department. He noted that strategies generally had two different goals: either actively reducing the number of bullfrogs from the environment or preventing further bullfrogs from entering the environment. He noted that the groups identified large information gaps as well.

Finally, Ari noted that the information provided was still a work in progress. The groups still have at least one more meeting planned where changes could be made. He stated that Commission staff would undergo a process of detailed analysis and evaluation of the materials and provide the updated materials along with that analysis at the May WRC meeting.

Discussion

A representative of Save the Frogs praised the stakeholder meetings but urged swift action. He suggested that the price of importation permits be raised to help address related problems.

7. Regulation change petition 2021-017

Ari provided background on the subject petition related to big game hunting regulations. The petitioner spoke about the overall intent of the petition, the goals and objectives for the various proposals, and potential ways forward to address the many suggestions.

Ari took a poll on the number of speakers for each of the five proposal categories. It was recognized that there was not enough time remaining to engage in meaningful discussion of the petition, so WRC directed Commission staff to hold a workshop to vet and discuss the various proposals in the petition.

Discussion

There was no discussion.

8. Future agenda items

Ari stated that potential topics for the May 2022 WRC meeting include: (1) vetting periodic regulatory proposals, including upland game birds, mammal hunting, waterfowl hunting, Central Valley sport fishing, and Klamath River Basin sport fishing; (2) a long-term solution to preference points and refunds for hunting tags; (3) potential restricted species regulation changes (4) the bullfrogs and non-native turtles project; and (5) regulation change petition 2021-017 related to big game mammal hunting.

Discussion

There was no discussion.

Adjourn

WRC adjourned at 5:00 p.m.