

Minutes
Board of Natural Resources
2 Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, S. E.
Suite 1252 East Tower
Atlanta, GA 30334

Tuesday, October 22, 2024
9:00 a.m.

Board Members

Joe Hatfield, Chair
Lesley Reynolds, Secretary
Nancy Addison
Jeff Andrews
Randy Dellinger
Patrick Denney
Charles DePriest
Dan Garcia
Mark Hennessy
Steve Hufstetler
Duncan Johnson
Bill Jones
Ray Lambert
Brent Layton
Paul Shailendra
Bodine Sinyard
Harley Yancey

Guests

Bryan Tolar, GA Urban Ag Council
Mark Woodall, Sierra Club
Anna Edmondson, Robbins Government Relations
Susan Salter, GA EPD
Maggie Lee, The Current
Dave Williams, Capitol Beat News Service
Kathleen Bowen, Impact Public Affairs

Staff Members

Walter Rabon, Commissioner
Thomas Barnard
Trevor Santos
Taylor Brown Fisher
Cathy Barnette
Kyle Pearson
Kate Iannuzzi
Artica Gaston
Mike England
Karl Burgess
Angie Johnson
Ted Will
Brent Womack
Chris Harper

Jeff Cown, Director
James Boylan
Chuck Mueller
Anna Truszczynski

The October 22, 2024 Board of Natural Resources meeting was called to order by Chairman Joe Hatfield.

Chairman Hatfield called on Mr. Chris Harper, Assistant Chief of Fisheries Management, Wildlife Resources Division, for a moment of inspiration.

Chairman Hatfield thanked Mr. Harper for attending the meeting and providing words of inspiration to the board.

Chairman Hatfield adjourned the Board meeting to move into the Committee meetings.

Chairman Hatfield called the October 22, 2024 meeting of the Board of Natural Resources to order.

Chairman Hatfield called for a motion to approve the minutes of the Board of Natural Resources meeting on September 24, 2024.

A motion was made by Mr. Johnson, seconded by Mr. Shailendra, and carried unanimously to approve the minutes of the Board of Natural Resources meeting on September 24, 2024.

Chairman Hatfield called on Jeff Cown, Director of the Environmental Protection Division, for his report.

Director Cown updated the Board on EPD's response to Hurricane Helene, updates on the fire at BioLab facility in Rockdale County and issued a 30-year service award to Susan Salter.

Director Cown stated this concluded his report.

Chairman Hatfield called on Walter Rabon, Commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources, for his report.

Commissioner Rabon began his report by expressing his condolences to Bill Jones and his family on the loss of his nephew, Jay Gregg, who passed away on October 7, 2024.

Commissioner Rabon stated that the Department experienced a devastating tragedy on Sapelo Island over the weekend. He further stated that heartfelt condolences go out to the victims and their families, first responders, good Samaritans, and the entire Sapelo Island Community.

Commissioner Rabon stated that on Saturday, October 19, 2024, approximately 700 visitors descended on Sapelo Island to enjoy Cultural Day, an annual event hosted by the Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society, to celebrate and honor the Gullah-Geechee heritage and culture. He further stated that the celebrations ended in tragedy as visitors were in the process of loading a ferry at the end of the day and a gangway that led from the dock to the ferry collapsed. He added that between 20 and 40 people ended up in the water at the Marsh Landing Dock. He further added that 7 individuals perished in the tragic event, and 3 remained in the hospital.

Commissioner Rabon stated that the gangway was removed from Sapelo Island and transported to a secure facility where DNR's Critical Incident Reconstruction Team, along with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, will work tirelessly to conduct a thorough investigation and gather and preserve evidence and interview witnesses. He further stated that an inspection was conducted less than a year ago by Crescent Manufacturing Company. He added that subsequent visual inspections were conducted by DNR staff following Hurricanes Helene and Milton, prior to resuming ferry operations. He further added that initial findings show a catastrophic structural failure of the gangway causing it to collapse.

Commissioner Rabon stated that the heroic actions that took place on Sapelo Island are too numerous to recount, but there is no telling how many lives were saved that day. He asked that the victims and their families, along with DNR staff members who provided critical life-saving aid, be remembered in our thoughts and prayers.

Commissioner Rabon provided an overview of the DNR's effort during Hurricane Helene. He stated that under Governor Kemp's leadership, the department worked alongside the partners from Georgia Emergency Management Agency, Georgia Department of Transportation, Georgia Forestry Commission, and Department of Public Safety, as well as numerous other state and local partners. He further stated that on September 25, the department began staffing multiple employees at the State Operations Center in Atlanta to ensure coordination of the response by state, local, and federal agencies. He added that internally the department established an Incident Command Post at the Wildlife Resources Division headquarters in Social Circle.

Commissioner Rabon stated that 12 Task Force Teams were staged around the state in preparation, and each of the teams consisted of 6 personnel – a skid steer operator, two chainsaw operators, two game wardens for traffic control, and a team supervisor. He further stated that 22 three-person strike teams equipped with ATVs, chainsaws, and rescue boats were scattered throughout the state. He added that the State Parks that were outside the path of the storm were open and available to displaced citizens, including pets and horses.

Commissioner Rabon stated that following Hurricane Helene’s devastating impact on our state, DNR crews immediately deployed to storm-affected areas. He further stated that at daybreak on Friday, September 27, teams began clearing roads, transporting critical supplies, and ensuring citizen safety, concentrating on the most affected areas between Valdosta and Augusta.

Commissioner Rabon stated that over a two-week period, more than 350 DNR personnel participated in the efforts, responding to requests for assistance in more than 20 counties, which equates to more than 18,400 hours – including 3,000 chainsaw hours and 7,500 hours on tractors, backhoes, and other equipment. He further stated that while the DNR team is resilient, there were many employees who were not immune to the damage seen and felt across the state. He added that many employees lost power and suffered damage to their personal property, however, many of them left their homes and families to assist with the recovery efforts and worked tirelessly to serve their communities and the state of Georgia.

Commissioner Rabon thanked those who contributed to help DNR employees in need of assistance and stated that their generosity went a long way to show them we truly are a family.

Commissioner Rabon announced that the application period for the 2024-2025 Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Program funding cycle closed, and a total of 36 applications were received. He further stated that the applicants have requested more than \$69 million dollars in funding for conservation efforts.

Commissioner Rabon stated the 2025 DNR Career Academy opened its application period on October 15. He further stated that the Career Academy is a week-long experience created to inspire students and allow them to explore the opportunities that the Georgia Department of Natural Resources has to offer. He added that the 2025 Career Academy will take place July 20-26, at the Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center in Mansfield and the Jekyll 4-H Center on Jekyll Island. He further added that the application period will close on November 15, 2024.

Commissioner Rabon provided an update on the first Outdoor Beyond Barriers hunt at Buck Shoals WMA in north Georgia and stated it was a great event with 7 participants and 5 deer being harvested. He further stated that all the participants enjoyed their time gathering around the bonfire and listening to the Georgia Bulldogs on the radio on Saturday night.

Commissioner Rabon provided an update from the Coastal Resources Division including the cancellation of CoastFest, due to Hurricane Helene. He stated the event is tentatively rescheduled for Saturday, March 22, 2025, at Brunswick's Mary Ross Park.

Commissioner Rabon stated that CRD was able to host the CoastFest Youth Art Contest at the Brunswick Library on October 4-9, 2024. He further stated that students from more than 30 elementary, middle, and high schools across Southeast Georgia submitted nearly 800 pieces of art. He added that the First, Second, and Third prizes were awarded by age groups, and the grand prize winner from McIntosh Academy will have her artwork featured on the next CoastFest t-shirt.

Commissioner Rabon provided an update on the Law Enforcement Division and stated that the cadets of the 39th Game Warden Academy just completed their 3rd week of Basic POST training. He further stated that the group will graduate from POST on December 20, 2024, and will begin the Game Warden Academy on January 12, 2025.

Commissioner Rabon stated the Fall firearms qualifications are finishing up, but two sessions were postponed due to the Hurricane Helene response. He further stated that all the qualifications should be completed by the end of October.

Commissioner Rabon stated on September 16, 2024, Game Warden Lucas Barnard was recognized at the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council in Charleston, South Carolina, as the Law Enforcement Officer of the Year. He further state that Barnard's efforts enforcing marine fisheries laws were outstanding for the past year. He added that Barnard was responsible for several federal cases involving fisheries violations that were referred to NOAA General Counsel for prosecution.

Commissioner Rabon called on Angie Johnson, Director of the State Parks and Historic Sites Division for her report.

Director Johnson provided an update on the damages from Hurricane Helene and the recovery efforts at Mistletoe, General Coffee, Elijah Clark, Magnolia Springs, George L. Smith, and Jack Hill State Parks.

Director Johnson stated the National Association of State Park Directors Conference was held in September, and Georgia State Parks and Historic Sites was nominated for the Innovation Award for the Outdoor Beyond Barriers Initiative. She further stated that Georgia has only been nominated once, and maybe one other time for an award. She added that Georgia has never won an award. She further added that the nomination is huge, not just to have the kudos of the award, but because it has and will provide national attention on our efforts to make the outdoors

accessible for people of all physical abilities. She stated that she received the award on behalf of all PHSD staff and what they do every day to serve our park visitors and especially those that have been limited in reaching some of our most significant natural and cultural resources.

Director Johnson stated that PHSD staff members attended the Governor's Conference on Tourism in Atlanta on September 17, 2024. She further stated that serving on a panel during the House and Senate Committee session, she discussed the significant role of Georgia State Parks and Historic Sites in the state's economy, highlighting an impressive \$1.9 billion impact. She added that also discussed were the Outdoor Beyond Barriers initiative and the new extended reservation booking window available exclusively for Georgia residents. She further added that the conference highlighted that Georgia has experienced one of its strongest tourism years ever, proudly marking its 11th consecutive year as #1 in Business.

Director Johnson provided an update on the 100th Anniversary Celebration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's first Warm Springs swim, where 300 guests were welcomed on Friday, October 4, 2024. She further stated the Centennial Celebration was held in front of The Little White House, including speakers Director Angie Johnson, State Representative Debbie Buckner, FDR's grandson Haven Roosevelt Luke, and many more. She added that FDR's famous Little White House as well as the museum were open to guests for tours. She further added that in continuation of the "Spirit of Warm Springs" FDR spoke so fondly of, the historic pools are currently being restored, exactly 100 years after his infamous first swim. She stated that Site Manager Jason Grantham and his team did a superb job hosting this anniversary event.

Director Johnson stated that Leaf Watch 2024 has officially begun, and their iconic leaf emblem has turned from green to a golden hue on the Parks Facebook page. She further stated that peak color usually begins in mid-to late-October in north Georgia's highest elevations, lasting into mid-November in middle and southern Georgia. She added that the most sought-after cottages, yurts and campsites often book up more than a year in advance. She further added that Park visitors document the changing color of the leaves using hashtag #GaLeafWatch in their social media posts.

Director Johnson stated the Parks & Historic Sites Division exhibited at the 35th Annual Georgia National Fair in Perry October 3-13, 2024. She further stated that despite the effects of Hurricane Helene, the fair reported 545,382 attendees, the second highest in the history of the fair. She added that several employees from PHSD Headquarters as well as High Falls, Jarrell Plantation, Plains Visitor Center, and SAM Shortline staffed the booth. She further added that approximately 10,000 people interacted with the booth staff and 116 Annual ParkPasses were sold, generating over \$3,600 in revenue.

Director Johnson stated The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to advance parks, recreation and environmental conservation efforts that enhance the quality of life for all people. She further stated that NRPA has a network of more than 60,000 park and recreation professionals and advocates represent public spaces in urban communities, rural settings, and everything in between. She added the National conference was held at the Atlanta World Congress center on October 8-10, 2024, and PHSD had 2 representatives attending, Region 1 Manager Brad Gibson and Chief of Resource Management Ellen Graham. She stated that the sessions included topics on workforce development, inclusion, alternative recreation, sustainability, mobility devices and adaptive hiking, growing the next generation of park professionals, hosting accessible events, alternative hiring practices and more. She further stated that it is estimated that over 8,500 professionals from across the U.S. attended with other State Park systems including Arkansas, Delaware, Texas and Michigan. She added that of those attending, 450 were from Georgia.

Director Johnson stated that the PHSD also hosted an offsite pre-conference field trip at Red Top on Monday before the NRPA conference with 16 park professionals in attendance. She further stated that on Monday, October 7, Red Top Mountain and Friends of Georgia State Parks co-hosted a pre-conference field trip for the National Parks and Recreation Association national conference. She added that sixteen attendees enjoyed a hayride at Iron Hill, interpretive programs about fire building, pewter pours, and the military history of the region. She further added that Friends Board members provided information on how chapters support PHSD sites and provided a lunch to the group.

Director Johnson stated that each year the PHSD Programming Advisory Committee recommends an Annual Program Theme. She further stated the annual theme is intended to give all sites a focus for ranger-led interpretive efforts over the calendar year. She added that some previous year themes included 2024 Tales of Scales (reptiles), 2023 Take Flight (birds, bats, bees), and 2022 Turn Over a New Leaf (trees). She further added that in 2025, PHSD plans to focus on the Annual Program Theme in support of the 10-year review of the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP). She stated that the update to SWAP is a significant opportunity for PHSD to support and highlight the conservation efforts of native wildlife species of concern and the conservation efforts that will be put in place through the 2025 plan. She further stated that the title for the theme this year is Wild Georgia: A Plan for Tomorrow. She added that the programs this year will highlight the flora and fauna featured on SWAP, in hopes to build advocacy for species of concern that are identified in SWAP. She further added that examples of ranger-led programs may include programs on the importance of prescribed burns, fragile flowers, species spotlight programs, habitat restoration/pollinator gardens, citizen science efforts, or backyard bird counts. She stated that in the historic sites they will also showcase topics such as LWCF Properties, wildlife

population conservation efforts, history of extinct or near extinct species, history or impacts of blights, or even historic artwork that features extinct/rare species. She further stated that many of the recreation-based programs will also tie into the theme by hosting guided paddles/hikes focused on SWAP species, partner events with WRD/Burner Bob, or art events using images of SWAP species. She added that this effort was designed to support WRD, build advocacy and awareness for SWAP and the species of concern we are all charged with protecting and conserving through PHSD ranger-led programs in 2025. She further added that her team is in the process of working with WRD staff on ways to collaborate as they move forward.

Director Johnson stated this concluded her report.

Commissioner Rabon called on Ted Will, Director of the Wildlife Resources Division for his report.

Director Will provided an update on storm damages, recovery efforts, and the short and long-term outlook.

Director Will provided an update on the Game Management Section and stated that this year, out of almost 38,000 applicants, 886 hunters obtained their harvest permit. He further stated that hunters took 411 alligators this year, with a success rate of 46%. He added that staff issued a survey to alligator hunters post season to get feedback. He further added that the information will be used by the Department to assess hunter satisfaction, hunting effort, and access.

Director Will stated that GA DNR Quail biologists worked with UGA Martin GAME lab research technicians to replace a telemetry collar with a failing battery on a nesting quail hen. He further stated that the collar allows researchers to track her movements over the next few months as she is with her brood. He added that this will help gain valuable knowledge on late season brood movements.

Director Will stated the eastern hellbender, North America's largest salamander, lives in clear, cold streams in the north Georgia mountains. He further stated that in the summer of 2024, 22 stretches within 18 different streams were surveyed and data collected from 117 hellbenders. He added that the fifth week of hellbender surveys revealed an amazing discovery - the observation of common mudpuppies (*Necturus maculosus*) in Georgia. He further added that although "common" mudpuppies are wide ranging and abundant in portions of their range, they're not so common in Georgia. He stated that in fact, this is only the 3rd time they have been documented in the state.

Director Will provided an update from the Communications, Education and Outreach Section. He stated that Charlie Elliot Wildlife Center hosted WRD's Mastering Management class last month, a four-day course, split into two sessions. He added that the class is aimed for newer supervisors to build skills in managing employees and help them develop their leadership style. He further added that this is the fifth year of this training.

Director Will stated this concluded his report.

Commissioner Rabon stated this concluded his report.

Chairman Hatfield called on Nancy Addison, Chair of the Coastal Committee, for her report.

A motion was made by Ms. Addison, seconded by Mr. Shailendra, and carried unanimously that the Board adopt the resolution to approve the proposed amendment to the Rules of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Saltwater Fishing Regulations, Chapter 391-2-4.

Ms. Addison stated this concluded her report.

Chairman Hatfield called on Mr. Lambert, Chair of the Environmental Protection Committee, for his report.

A motion was made by Mr. Lambert, seconded by Mr. Shailendra, and carried unanimously to approve the Proposed Grant Criteria for Georgia Diesel Emissions Reduction Program, Chapter 391-3-21-.15.

Mr. Lambert stated this concluded his report.

Chairman Hatfield called on Paul Shailendra, Chair of the Land Committee, for his report.

A motion was made by Mr. Shailendra, seconded by Mr. Johnson, and carried unanimously that the Board adopt the resolution to authorize the Commissioner to seek State Properties Commission approval to purchase the Paulk Trice PIJ, LLC. tract, 1800± acres as an addition to Treat Mountain VPA in the Dugdown Mountain Corridor, Polk County.

A motion was made by Mr. Shailendra, seconded by Mr. Johnson, and carried unanimously that the Board adopt the resolution to authorize the Commissioner to seek State Properties Commission approval to purchase the Timber South, LLC. tract, 373± acres as an addition to Treat Mountain VPA in the Dugdown Mountain Corridor, Polk County.

A motion was made by Mr. Shailendra, seconded by Mr. Johnson, and carried unanimously that the Board adopt the resolution to authorize the Commissioner to seek State Properties Commission approval of the Granting of a Revocable License Agreement and Permanent Easement of up to 0.075± acres by the State Properties Commission and General Assembly to Amicalola Electric Membership Corporation at Amicalola Falls State Park, Dawson County.

Mr. Shailendra stated this concluded his report.

Chairman Hatfield stated the final item under Other Business is the appointment of the Nominating Committee for the 2025 Officers of the Board of Natural Resources. He stated that the following members are appointed to serve on the committee: Ray Lambert, Chairman, Nancy Addison, Duncan Johnson, and Bodine Sinyard. He added that the committee will report to the full Board at the December board meeting.

Chairman Hatfield stated the next Board of Natural Resources meeting will be held at 9:00 a.m., on Tuesday, December 3, 2024, at Amicalola Falls State Park, 418 Amicalola Falls State Park Road, Dawsonville, GA 30534.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.

Joe Hatfield, Chairman

ATTEST:

Lesley Reynolds, Secretary