

Minutes
Wildlife Resources Committee
Fort McAllister State Park
Group Shelter
3894 Fort McAllister Road
Richmond Hill, GA 31324

Tuesday, October 25, 2022
9:00 a.m.

Committee Members

Patrick Denney, Chair
William Bagwell
Dwight Evans
Joe Hatfield
Duncan Johnson
Ray Lambert
Rob Leebern
Billy New
Bodine Sinyard
Miki Thomaston
Bill Jones, Board Chair, Ex-officio

Board Members

Nancy Addison
Dwight Davis
Randy Dellinger
Tim Lowe

Guests

Staff Members

Mark Williams, Commissioner
Walter Rabon
Kyle Pearson
Donald Kirkland
Cathy Barnette
Steve Friedman
Doug Haymans
Lt. Brian Adams
Brett Albanese
Jon Ambrose
Brad Ballard
Tim Barrett
Jason Carter
Ellen Graham
Major Bob Holley
Thom Litts
Londa Moates
Clint Peacock

Richard Dunn, Director
John Eunice
Karen Hays

The October 25, 2022 meeting of the Wildlife Resources Committee was called to order by Chairman Bill Jones.

Chairman Jones called on Patrick Denney, Chairman of the Wildlife Resources Committee. Mr. Denney called on Clint Peacock, Assistant Chief of Fisheries to provide a briefing on the proposed amendments to Fishing Regulations, Rule 391-4-3.

Mr. Peacock stated that Blueback Herring (BLH) is a native species to Georgia waters and was introduced into nonnative inland waterways as forage. He further stated the species is now prolific in many reservoirs outside of its native range and is noteworthy for its impacts to sportfish populations.

Mr. Peacock stated that the possession and use of the species by anglers on Lake Allatoona is currently prohibited. He further stated the BLH were first documented in Allatoona Reservoir in 2020, though the initial introduction likely occurred earlier. He added that since the introduction, anglers and guides fishing on Lake Allatoona have expressed concern that they could be cited for illegal possession of a baitfish that was legally captured in Allatoona with intent to use as bait there and cannot be reliably distinguished from legally caught baitfish by most anglers. He further added that WRD's biological surveys of Lake Allatoona's BLH population indicate the species has become established in Allatoona. Mr. Peacock stated that, as such, it is recommended to add Lake Allatoona to the list of waterbodies that allow the use and possession of BLH. He further stated that this proposed change is reflective of BLH biological status on Lake Allatoona and responsive to customer desires.

Mr. Peacock stated the proposal will be given widespread distribution to the public. He further stated that WRD plans to present the proposed amendment to the Board of Natural Resources for consideration and adoption on December 7, 2022.

Mr. Denney called on Brett Albanese, Wildlife Conservation Section, to present the proposed rules pertaining to Wild Animals, Subject 391-4-8.

Mr. Albanese stated the Board was briefed on the proposal in August, and the proposed rules reflect the need to amend the statutory list of wild animals for which a license or permit is required (O.C.G.A. Sec. 27-5-5). He further stated the Board is specifically authorized to amend such lists through its rulemaking procedures. He added the proposed rules also prohibit certain wild animals that pose unnecessary risk to Georgia's wildlife that cannot be minimized through the licensing or permitting process.

Mr. Albanese stated the proposal will add a proposed groups of species that will be prohibited in this state, species that are classified as inherently dangerous which require a wild animal license and liability insurance, and other species that will require a wild animal license.

Mr. Albanese stated the proposed rules were publicly announced on August 28, 2022, and a virtual public meeting was held on September 13. He further stated the comments were received through September 30, and a summary of public comments are provided in the board package.

Mr. Albanese stated that since the August meeting over 4,800 people have accessed the video during or since the meeting, and they received 123 comments by the end of the public comment period on September 30: 67 in support and 56 opposed.

Mr. Albanese stated the vast majority of opposition is from reptile keepers and breeders, the Georgia Reptile Society, and the U. S. Association of Reptile Keepers, which were specifically opposed to the listing of Burmese and Indian Rock pythons and Argentine Black-and-White Tegu. He further stated there was additional opposition to other reptile species, snails and crayfish. He added there were three letters of general opposition to the entire package.

Mr. Albanese stated these reptile species will only be licensed for scientific, education or public exhibition purposes. He further stated that existing owners may keep their pets by tagging and registering them with the Law Enforcement Division within 12 months from the effective date of the rule. He added this is a process that has been carried out in other states and very similar to tagging your dog or cat at the veterinarian office. He further added that registration is a very simple online process, does not require you to bring your animal to the Law Enforcement Division, and the registration is free.

Mr. Albanese stated that during the 12-month period, the animals may continue to be sold, transferred, and transported, as long as the animals are tagged and registered before the end of the 12-month period. He further stated that the importation or breeding of animals will not be allowed after the effective date of the rule. He added the Georgia Reptile Society and many common breeders prefer an alternative registration system that would prevent the continued breeding, sale, and possession of the Burmese Pythons and Tegus for the pet trade. He further added that we are allies with this group, in the sense that they are advocates for responsible pet keeping, which is really important to us and can help spread that educational message. He added that the Georgia Reptile Society would like to continue allowing this species to be kept as pets, but that is not something that we have the authority to do under the wild animal law because pet ownership is not an authorized purpose to obtain a wild animal license.

Mr. Albanese stated regarding the Burmese Python, there is scientific uncertainty on whether they would be able to establish a population in Georgia given our current and future climate and it is difficult to predict. He further stated the more imminent threat is associated with the invasive lung worm which is endemic to Burmese Pythons in Asia and was introduced with the pythons in South Florida. He added that the parasite is not super harmful to the Burmese Pythons, but it is very harmful to our native snakes. He further added that it has been documented in over 12 species of native snakes and is spreading in that part of Florida. He stated that one species that is susceptible to the parasite is the Eastern Indigo snake, which is a federally protected species and a huge conservation priority for the DNR.

Mr. Albanese stated these proposed rules for the large constrictors compare with other surrounding states, but Alabama and Florida are much more aggressive in their regulations and have eliminated many more species than Georgia. He further stated that Georgia is only proposing to list the Burmese and Indian Rock Pythons, which means that breeders can still sell these other species and have a one-year period to transition to these other species, because at this time we do not think they are a risk to Georgia's ecosystems.

Mr. Albanese stated that 15 letters were received in support of the proposed listing of the Burmese and Indian Rock Pythons, including the Center for Invasive Species and Ecosystem Health at the University of Georgia, concerned citizens, conservation professionals including many respected herpetologists from Georgia and South Carolina, Georgia Wildlife Federation, and the Humane Society, and a few reptile keepers and breeders were in support of these rules for python and tegu.

Mr. Albanese stated that similarly for the aquatic species there were letters in support specifically for listing these species which have well known impacts on the ecosystems, including many well-respected crayfish biologists from the southeast.

Mr. Albanese stated that finally there were 35 letters in overall support for the regulation from concerned citizens, many well-respected conservation organizations, a wild animal license holder and a wildlife exhibition license holder.

Mr. Albanese stated that the objective is to prevent impacts from introduced species because over time once something gets introduced it becomes much more difficult to eradicate those species, and at some point you can only manage them. He further stated there are a lot of associated costs.

Bodine Sinyard asked what percentage of these species are associated with the black market. Mr. Albanese stated that a percentage is difficult to estimate but they are aware of it and offered to discuss it with the Law Enforcement Division to get a more specific answer.

William Bagwell asked if the restrictions in Alabama and Florida are for prevention or are the species already invasive in those states. Mr. Albanese called on Daniel Sollenberger, Wildlife Biologist at the Wildlife Resources Division, to answer the question. Mr. Sollenberger stated that pythons and tegus are established in Florida. He further stated that Alabama has reported tegus around the state, as well as other southeastern states.

Four members of the public signed up to speak on the proposal:

Mr. Denney called on Justyne Lobello, Georgia Reptile Society, who spoke against the proposal.

Mr. Denney called on Mike Worley, Georgia Wildlife Federation, who spoke in favor of the proposal.

Mr. Denney called on John McHugh, Egg Tooth Reptiles, who spoke against the proposal.

Mr. Denney called on Michelle Watts, Egg Tooth Reptiles, who spoke against the proposal.

Mr. Denney thanked the speakers for attending and their comments.

A motion was made by Mr. Hatfield, seconded by Mr. Johnson, and carried unanimously, that the Committee recommends the Board approve the Proposed Rules Pertaining to Wild Animals, Subject 391-4-8.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.