

Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council SUMMARY OF MAY 17, 2024, MEETING

The Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council convened for its Fourth meeting at 11:00 A.M. eastern time on May 17, 2024. The meeting was held virtually via Microsoft Teams. In accordance with the provisions of Public Law 92-463, the meeting was open to the public.

Council members present:

Chair/ Vice Chair:

Collin O'Mara
John Devney

Primary members:

Colin Beck
Jeff Crane
Michael Crowder
George Dunklin
Dan Forester
Lucas Martinez
Brian Nesvik
Joel Pederson
Andrew Schmidt
Land Tawney
Lauren Ward
Joel Webster
Wayne Hubbard* (served as primary member in the absence of Lydia Parker)

**Alternate member*

Alternate members:

Ed Arnett
Kathleen Falk
Blake Henning
Simon Roosevelt

Ex Officio

Ron Regan, Executive Director – Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies

Welcome and Roll call

Collin O'Mara, HWCC Chair and John Devney, HWCC Vice Chair

Doug Hobbs, HWCC Designated Federal Officer, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Comments of Robert Bonnie, Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Under Secretary Bonnie made comments about the importance of funding made available through the Inflation Reduction Act and the on-going implementation of the IRA, highlighted the importance of easement programs, and conservation programs authorized and funded through the Farm Bill, including the Conservation Reserve Program. See full remarks in the meeting transcript.

Comments of Christine Dawe, Senior Advisor to Under Secretary Homer Wilkes, Natural Resources and Environment, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Ms. Dawe highlighted the important conservation investments made through both the Inflation Reduction Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. See full remarks in the meeting transcript.

Comments of Martha Williams, Director – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of the Interior

Director Williams made comments highlighting the Service's appreciation for the work of the Council, issues related to the Service's budget and program funding, and highlighted a desire to collaborate more in the future with nongovernmental stakeholders and partners to fulfill conservation goals. See full remarks in the meeting transcript.

Public comment session

While there were no requests from the public to make comments to the Council, Vice Chairman Devney opened the floor to any attending members of the public that wanted to make comments. There was no public comment.

Other business

Approval of meeting minutes from the December 4, 2023, meeting

Motion: Jeff Crane

Second: Andrew Schmidt

Approved by unanimous vote.

Nomination of John Devney to serve as Council Chair

Current Chair Collin O'Mara requested and made a motion to elevate John Devney, current Vice Chair, to serve as the Council Chair. O'Mara would serve as Vice Chair. O'Mara requested to change to acknowledge Devney's frequent role acting as Chair for Council meetings.

Motion: George Dunklin

Second: Andrew Schmidt

Approved by unanimous vote.

Subcommittee reports

Wildlife Health

Subcommittee Chairman Land Tawney provided a report on subcommittee activities. Tawney reported out on the continued work of the Subcommittee and its working group to continue work to implement Council recommendations related to the management of future use of lead and lead-free ammunition on Federal lands. The recommendations were made at the December 2023 Council meeting. Tawney provided background and an update on the work of the working group and subcommittee pertaining to their collaboration with the FWS in developing lead-free ammunition pilot projects to be implemented on select units of the National Wildlife Refuge System during the Fall 2024 hunting season.

The session provided an opportunity for Siva Sundaresan, Deputy Director, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to lead off a discussion and consideration of FWS lead-free ammunition pilot projects on National Wildlife Refuges. Sundaresan spoke about the collaboration the FWS had undertaken along with the Wildlife Health working group to assist with the creation of the lead-free ammunition pilot projects at select units of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Christian Myers, Policy Advisor – National Wildlife Refuge System, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, presented a briefing to Council members on the pilot project concept.

After discussion among Council members, Tawney indicated that the Subcommittee would continue to collaborate with the Service on the creation of pilot projects and that it would bring forward additional issues for formal Council consideration at a future meeting. No further action was taken on the matter.

Public Lands

Subcommittee Chairman Joel Webster provided a report on subcommittee activities. Webster reported out an issue for Council consideration as a possible recommendation:

Webster highlighted that the Bureau of Land Management process for opening access to land-locked lands has been slowed, in part, because it has continued to work through General Land Offices. The BLM has a disproportionate amount of landlocked public lands versus other agencies. Webster reported out a potential Council recommendation letter that requests that the BLM make it a priority to unlock these lands more quickly through the establishment of land tenure teams.

Motion to approve: Land Tawney

Second: Jeff Crane

The motion was approved by Council vote.

Webster highlighted the BLM process to complete a Solar energy programmatic environmental impact statement for 11 Western states in the contiguous United

States. BLM is working to amend their land use plans to identify areas that would be available for utility scale, solar energy development, identifying areas where the values are incompatible with that development, and where areas should be excluded from being available for utility scale solar projects. There is a concern that migration corridors and winter range habitat might not be proposed for exclusion in the preferred alternative. Solar projects would be required to have 7 foot perimeter fences. The fences are impenetrable for humans, but also for larger wildlife. Webster proposed a recommendation for Council discussion and consideration which would ask the BLM to look at excluding those habitats, while still giving projects sufficient acreage to fully meet their deployment goals.

- During subsequent discussion, Brian Nesvick offered a motion to amend to include language in that the recommendation also state that the BLM should consider “sage grouse priority habitat management areas.”

Motion to amend: Joel Pedersen

Second: Land Tawney

- Both the motion to approve the recommendation and motion to amend were approved by Council vote.

Webster indicated that the Subcommittee was continuing to look at issues related to Dingell Act implementation, particularly matters associated with closures of Federal lands for hunting/recreational shooting access.

Hunting & Recreational Shooting

Subcommittee Chair Jeff Crane provided a report on subcommittee activities. Crane highlighted the following for Council consideration:

Crane highlighted Subcommittee discussions about the possible closure or areas to dispersed recreational shooting on BLM lands. In areas like the Sonoran Desert National Monument, BLM has substantially reduced the amount of area open to shooting. Crane indicated that it is encouraging that BLM is making sure that there are opportunities and formalized range, but that the Subcommittee and Council doesn't want formal areas to be established at the expense of losing opportunity for disperse recreational shooting. Crane also highlighted concern over loss of recreational shooting on lands with wilderness characteristics. He mentioned the Bears Ears National Monument as an example where the plan is to exclude recreational shooting over the entire 1.3 million acre monument. These areas had previously been open to the activity. The letter recommends that BLM avoid wholesale closures in these areas.

Motion to approve: Jeff Crane

Second: Brian Nesvik

The motion was approved by Council vote.

Conservation Funding

Subcommittee Chairman Joel Pedersen provided a report on subcommittee activities. Issues identified for Council consideration:

Pedersen highlighted Subcommittee discussions about possible recommendations for discussion and consideration that build on its previous work on the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL). The Council has written 2 previous letters on these laws. Pedersen indicated that the Subcommittee had identified additional needs, including: the need for enhanced coordination and collaboration among federal agencies to improve efficiencies and help organizations trying to utilize this funding; the continued to be a need to address federal agency workforce capacity to implement and administer projects and grants; the need for improvements in and possible streamlining of the environmental review process; and the importance of Federal communications, in collaboration with partners, to highlight successes.

Motion to approve: Joel Pedersen

Second: Joel Webster

The motion was approved by Council vote.

Private Lands

Subcommittee Chairman Michael Crowder provided an update on subcommittee activities. The Subcommittee did not have immediate business or issues for Council consideration.

Federal agency briefings

Briefing on name change of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Conservation Investment

Paul Rauch, Assistant Director – Office of Conservation Investment, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, presented a briefing to the Council on the recent change of the name of the Wildlife & Sport Fish Restoration Program to the Office of Conservation Investment. The full presentation can be found on the HWCC website.

Briefing of Fiscal Year 2025 budget request for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Hot topics: hunt/fish rule, electronic duck stamp, NAWCA

The Council requested a briefing on the FWS's Fiscal Year 2025 budget proposal. Steve Guertin, Deputy Director, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, provided the briefing. The full presentation can be found on the HWCC website.

Guertin also provided brief updates on the status of the FWS 2024 annual rulemaking on hunting & fishing opportunities on the National Wildlife Refuge System, the status of implementation of the Duck Stamp Modernization Act, and on funding issues related to the North American Wetlands Conservation Act.

Update on implementation of Department of the Interior Secretarial Order 3362, Improving Habitat Quality in Western Big-Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors

The Council requested an update briefing on the Secretarial Order. Anna Wearn, Policy Advisor - U.S. Department of the Interior & Connectivity Coordinator - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, provided an update of on the ongoing implementation. Wearn highlighted changes in the survey protocol and survey design. He highlighted participation rates and expenditure information for fishing, hunting, and wildlife watching. Leonard also highlighted new information about recreational shooting and archery participants. The full presentation can be found on the HWCC website.

Briefing on U.S. Forest Service regulations regarding mature and old growth forests

The Council requested an update briefing on the Secretarial Order. Jennifer McRae, Acting Assistant Director - Public Engagement & Planning, U.S. Forest Service, provided an update on the Forest Service's process to finalize regulations on mature and old growth forests. The full presentation can be found on the HWCC website.

Briefing on the Bureau of Land Management solar energy draft programmatic Environmental Impact Statement

The Council requested an update briefing on the Secretarial Order. Vicki Campbell, Natural Resources Specialist - California State Office and Jeremy Bluma, Senior Advisor - National Renewable Energy Coordination Office, Bureau of Land Management, provided an update on the status of the environmental impact assessment process. The full presentation can be found on the HWCC website.

OTHER COUNCIL BUSINESS

ADJOURNMENT

Motion to adjourn: Unclear who made the motion

Second: Unclear who made second

Meeting adjourned

**Meeting minutes certified by HWCC Chair John Devney on Monday, August 19, 2024