

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

Tuesday, September 26, 2023
9:00 a.m.

Board Members

Dwight Davis, Chair
Joe Hatfield, Vice Chair
Gary Vowell, Secretary
Nancy Addison
Randy Dellinger
Patrick Denney
Charles DePriest
Mark Hennessy
Penn Hodge
Kevin Jackson
Duncan Johnson
Ray Lambert
Tim Lowe
Lesley Reynolds
Paul Shailendra
Bodine Sinyard
Harley Yancey

Guests

Trevor Santos, National Shooting Sports Foundation
Debbie Phillips, GA Industry Environmental Coalition
Mark Woodall, Sierra Club
Alex Muir, GSU Law Student
Drew Kann, Atlanta Journal-Constitution
Rena Peck, Georgia River Network
Beth Findlay, GA DNR Human Resources
Cassandra Jones, GA DNR Accounting
Michelle Egan, State Parks and Historic Sites Division
Matt Elliott, Wildlife Resources Division
Anna Edmondson, Robbins Governmental Relations

Staff Members

Walter Rabon, Commissioner
Thomas Barnard
Kyle Pearson
Kate Iannuzzi
Cathy Barnette
Artica Gaston
Steve Friedman
Doug Haymans
Angie Johnson
Ted Will
Carolyn Belcher
Amy Knight
Brent Vendola

Jeff Cown, Director
John Eunice
James Boylan
Chuck Mueller
Anna Truszczynski

The September 26, 2023 Board of Natural Resources meeting was called to order by Chairman Dwight Davis.

Chairman Davis introduced the Employee Spotlight speaker, Brent Vendola, Chief Engineer in the Office of Engineering and Construction Services.

Chairman Davis thanked Mr. Vendola.

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

Chairman Davis called the meeting of the Board of Natural Resources to order.

Chairman Davis called for a motion to approve the minutes of the Board of Natural Resources meeting on August 22, 2023.

A motion was made by Mr. Sinyard, seconded by Mr. Johnson, to approve the minutes of the Board of Natural Resources meeting on August 22, 2023.

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

Director Cown updated the Board on a RiversAlive clean up event and guidance documents on land disturbing projects and solar facility development sites.

Director Cown stated this concluded his report.

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

Commissioner Rabon began his report by welcoming Ms. Lesley Reynolds to her first in-person meeting of the Board of Natural Resources.

Commissioner Rabon announced the appointment of two new deputy commissioners: Thomas Barnard, Deputy Commissioner of Operations and Trevor Santos, Deputy Commissioner of Public and Governmental Affairs, Communications, and Grants. He stated that Thomas Barnard has been with the Law Enforcement Division for 30 years and was appointed as Director of the Division in 2018. He further stated that he has the upmost confidence that Thomas will do an excellent job managing the operations of the department's four divisions and he looks forward to working with him.

Commissioner Rabon stated that Trevor Santos is new to the agency, but he's had over a decade of experience advocating for sportsmen, gun owners, members of the firearms industry, and conservationists. He further stated that Trevor most recently served as the Director of Government Relations and State Affairs for the National Shooting Sports Foundation. He added that Trevor will head up the department's government and public relations, marketing, communications, and the grants unit. He further added that Trevor and Thomas are going to be valuable assets to the Commissioner's office and to the Board of Natural Resources and congratulated them on their well-deserved new positions.

Commissioner Rabon stated that on August 29, he named Angie Johnson as the new Director of the State Parks and Historic Sites Division. He further stated that Angie is no stranger to the Board, as she has over 30 years of experience with the DNR and an unmatched knowledge of the state parks and historic sites. He added that after starting in the Game Management Section in 1989, Angie transferred to the Parks Division where she worked at Amicalola Falls, Moccasin Creek, Unicoi, and the Dahlonega Gold Museum. He further added that Angie has been with our Parks headquarters office since 2018, where she has served as the division's Training Manager, Chief of Operations, and Assistant Parks Director.

Commissioner Rabon stated that this appointment does require a vote from the Board, and he recommends the Board approve the appointment of Angie Johnson to Director of the State Parks and Historic Sites Division.

Chairman Davis asked for a motion to approve.

A motion was made by Mr. Dellinger, seconded by Mr. Hatfield, as carried unanimously to approve the appointment of Angie Johnson to Director of the State Parks and Historic Sites Division.

Commissioner Rabon announced the appointment of Ray Smith to Assistant Director of the State Parks and Historic Sites Division. He stated that Ray has served as the Manager of Region 3 for the last three years, and congratulated Ray on his new position.

Commissioner Rabon announced the departure of Donald Kirkland, Director of Public and Governmental Affairs and stated that Donald has taken a new position with Georgia Institute of Technology. He further stated that Donald was an asset to the Commissioner's Office over the past three years and wished him all the best in his new role.

Commissioner Rabon updated the Board on Hurricane Idalia, DNR Leadership Academy and reunion workshop for all past Academy graduates, the groundbreaking for the first site on

the Chattahoochee Camp and Paddle Trail in Chattahoochee Hills, and the House Study Committee on Fishing Access to Freshwater Resources.

Commissioner Rabon called on Game Warden Amy Knight to give an update on Operations Digging Up Bones.

Game Warden Amy Knight provided an update on Georgia DNR's Investigative Unit and the Oddities and Curiosities Expo in Atlanta and the violations that were observed and documented. She stated that investigators estimate there were violations at 75% of the vendor booths at the expo, including the sale or purchase of game animals, alligator hides and other products, to buy, sell, barter or exchange bear or bear parts, possession and/or transportation of nongame species, illegal sale of freshwater turtle or parts thereof, and buying and selling or offering to buy or sell the human body or parts. She further stated that investigators documented all the violations but focused in on vendors from Georgia. She added that Odd Savannah's booth was the only Georgia resident vendor with documented violations, and there were over 2,500 items seized from Old Sav's residence.

Game Warden Knight stated this concluded her report.

Commissioner Rabon called on Doug Haymans, Director of the Coastal Resources Division, for his report.

Director Haymans provided an update on Shellfish & Water Quality, Shrimp Imports Affecting Domestic Shrimp Market, and Fishery Disaster Declarations.

Director Haymans stated this concluded his report.

Commissioner Rabon called on Thom Litts, Assistant Director of the Wildlife Resources Division, for his report.

Assistant Director Litts provided an update on the opening of Dove season on September 2, Archery season on September 9, and stated that Rifle season is set to kick-off on October 21. He stated that Director Ted Will and Wildlife Conservation staff attended the official signing ceremony of the Quail Country Candidate Conservation Agreement at Tall Timbers. He further stated that this agreement between Georgia DNR, Florida FWC, Tall Timbers, and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is a voluntary partnership wherein private landowners partner with states to enhance habitat for at-risk species in Southwest Georgia and North Florida.

Assistant Director Litts updated the Board on Perry Chamber of Commerce's annual Legislative Appreciation Reception at the Go Fish Education Center on August 24. He also updated the Board on this year's trout stocking season and stated that more than 860,000 trout have been

stocked into north Georgia waters. He added that participation in the Trout Slam, the Department's new angler recognition program, has surpassed expectations with 224 anglers receiving their certificate through mid-September.

Assistant Director Litts provided an update on the 2023 National Hunting and Fishing Day on September 23 and the numerous events held across the state to encourage Georgians to take part in a license-free fishing day.

Assistant Director Litts stated this concluded his report.

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 2023 Junior Ranger Programs with 109 Junior Ranger Programs and 699 Jr. Rangers. She updated the Board on the damages from Hurricane Idalia, 2023 Girl Scouts Love State Parks Day with 31 programs offered and 315 program attendees, the Hofwyl-Broadfield Plantation Article in Georgia Backroads Magazine, the National Association of State Park Directors (NASPD) Conference in Nevada, and a recent "Voices of Inspiration" podcast featuring the State Parks and Historic Sites Division.

Director Johnson stated this concluded her report.

Commissioner Rabon stated his thoughts and prayers are with Board Secretary Gary Vowell and his wife Beth as he continues his recovery from surgery. He further stated that Gary is a long-time supporter of the department and a valued friend, and we look forward to having Gary back with us soon.

Commissioner Rabon stated his thoughts and prayers are with the family, friends, and co-workers of Mr. James Smith. He further stated that Mr. Smith was a Senior Ranger at Laura S. Walker State Park and sadly he passed away on Saturday afternoon. He added that Mr. Smith began working for the DNR in 2004, took a short time off, returned in 2011 as a part-time employee, and began a full-time role in 2013. He added that Mr. Smith will be deeply missed by many.

Commissioner Rabon stated this concluded his report.

Chairman Davis called on Charles DePriest, Vice Chairman of the Land Committee, for his report.

A motion was made by Mr. DePriest, seconded by Mr. Shailendra, and carried unanimously that the Committee recommends the Board adopt the Resolution to authorize the

Commissioner to seek State Properties Commission approval to purchase from the McConnell family 180± acres as an addition to Smithgall Woods WMA, White County.

A motion was made by Mr. DePriest, seconded by Mr. Shailendra, and carried unanimously that the Committee recommends the Board adopt the Resolution to authorize the Commissioner to seek State Properties Commission approval to purchase from J.F. Alexander Lumber Company 234± acres as an addition to Sprewell Bluff WMA, Meriwether County.

A motion was made by Mr. DePriest, seconded by Mr. Shailendra, and carried unanimously that the Committee recommends the Board adopt the Resolution to authorize the Commissioner to seek State Properties Commission approval to purchase from Timberlands II, LLC, 758± acres as an addition to Sprewell Bluff WMA, Meriwether and Talbot Counties.

A motion was made by Mr. DePriest, seconded by Mr. Shailendra, and carried unanimously that the Committee recommends the Board adopt the Resolution to authorize the Commissioner to seek State Properties Commission approval to purchase from Christopher Edward Nabors 372+ acres as an addition to Crockford Pigeon Mountain WMA, Walker County.

A motion was made by Mr. DePriest, seconded by Mr. Shailendra, and carried unanimously that the Committee recommends the Board adopt the Resolution to authorize the Commissioner to seek State Properties Commission approval to purchase from The Nature Conservancy 687± acres as an addition to Crockford Pigeon Mountain WMA, Walker County.

Chairman Davis stated that under Tab E, there are two resolutions for consideration. He further stated that Item A is a resolution honoring Mr. Delos H. Yancey, III, and asked for a motion to approve.

A motion was made by Mr. Sinyard, seconded by Mr. Johnson, as carried unanimously to approve the resolution honoring Mr. Delos H. Yancey, III for his faithful service as a member of the Board of Natural Resources.

Chairman Davis stated that Item B is a resolution honoring Ms. Anna “Miki” Thomaston and asked for a motion to approve.

A motion was made by Mr. Shailendra, seconded by Mr. Johnson, as carried unanimously to approve the resolution honoring Ms. Anna “Miki” Thomaston for her faithful service as a member of the Board of Natural Resources.

Chairman Davis announced the appointment of the Nominating Committee for the 2023 Rock Howard Conservation Achievement Award: Tim Lowe, Chairman, Nancy Addison, Joe Hatfield, and Ray Lambert.

Chairman Davis stated that the Board has received a petition for rule change regarding Burmese Python under Rule 391-1-1-.05. He further stated that three individuals had signed up to speak and called on Emily C. Ward, Continuum Legal Group, to speak on behalf of the United States Association of Reptile Keepers (USARK). Ms. Ward spoke in favor of the rule change.

Chairman Davis called on Phil Goss, President of USARK. Mr. Goss spoke in favor of the rule change.

Chairman Davis called on Alex Muir, Law Student at Georgia State University, who spoke against the rule change.

Chairman Davis called on Brett Albanese, Biologist and Assistant Chief of Wildlife Conservation.

Mr. Albanese stated that there is significant uncertainty on when and where Burmese pythons can become established in Georgia. He further stated that natural resource managers often have to make decisions in the face of uncertainty. He added that if Burmese pythons ever became established in any part of Georgia, or even if individuals survived for long enough periods between hard freezes, we are confident they would harm wildlife through predation, competition, and transmission of disease. He further added that the risk of spreading disease that can be harmful to native Georgia snakes, like the threatened indigo snake, ranks high on his list of concerns. He stated that disease can be spread by loose snakes or by a pet owner throwing out the snake's waste.

Chairman Davis thanked the speakers for their time and comments and called for a motion.

A motion was made by Mr. Denney, seconded by Mr. Lambert, and carried unanimously to deny the petition of the United States Association of Reptile Keepers because the Board's adoption of the Wild Animals Rules, Subject 391-4-8, is supported by evidence. The presentation by Department staff has satisfied the board that these rules were adopted in the public interest to ensure the public health, safety, and welfare because the wild animals regulated pose a possibility of: 1) Harmful competition for wildlife; 2) The introduction of a disease or pest harmful to wildlife; 3) Problems enforcing laws and regulations relative to wildlife; 4) Threatening wildlife or other natural resources.

Chairman Davis stated that the Board understood the genuine affection that some people have for these and other animals that were being affected. He further stated that their decision was not taken lightly, but they had to listen to the recommendations of staff and what they were saying, and the risk was there.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.

Dwight J. Davis, Chairman

ATTEST:

Gary Vowell, Secretary