

NATURAL RESOURCES COMMISSION
Meeting Minutes, January 21, 2025

MEMBERS PRESENT

Bryan Poynter, Chair
Jane Ann Stautz, Vice Chair
Alan Morrison, Secretary
Carl Wodrich
Laura Hilden
Noelle Szydlyk
Marc Milne
Phil French
Bart Herriman
John Wright

NATURAL RESOURCES COMMISSION STAFF PRESENT

Elizabeth Gamboa	Scott Allen
Aaron Bonar	Chloe Perkins

DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES STAFF PRESENT

Chris Smith	Executive Office	Trevor Laureys	Fish and Wildlife
Mike Smith	Executive Office	Angie Haywood	Fish and Wildlife
Ryan Mueller	Executive Office	Joe Caudell	Fish and Wildlife
Madalynn Conner	Executive Office	Janetta Kelly	Fish and Wildlife
Steve Hunter	Law Enforcement	Dan Bortner	State Parks
Terry Hyndman	Law Enforcement	Terry Coleman	State Parks
Amanda Wuestefeld	Fish and Wildlife	Brandt Baughman	State Parks
Brad Feaster	Fish and Wildlife	Ron Hellmich	Nature Preserves
Linnea Petercheff	Fish and Wildlife		

GUESTS PRESENT

Zane Libke	Susan Libke
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Bryan Poynter, Chair, called to order the regular meeting of the Natural Resources Commission at 10:02 a.m., ET, on January 21, 2025 at Fort Harrison State Park, The Garrison, 6002 North Post Road, Blue Heron Ballroom, Indianapolis. With the presence of ten members, the Chair observed a quorum.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The Chair asked for a motion to approve the Commission's November 19, 2024, meeting minutes.

Jane Ann Stautz moved to approve the minutes as submitted. Laura Hilden seconded the motion. Upon a voice vote, the motion carried.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS

Bart Herriman made a motion to slate the Commission's current officers for the 2025 term: Bryan Poynter as Chair, Jane Ann Stautz as Vice Chair, and Daniel Bortner as Secretary. Phil French seconded the motion. Upon a voice vote, the motion carried.

REPORTS OF THE DNR DIRECTOR, DEPUTY DIRECTORS, AND THE CHAIR OF THE ADVISORY COUNCIL

Alan Morrison, Director of the Department of Natural Resources (Department), thanked Dan Bortner for his service to the Department and his assistance during the transition to new Department leadership. Morrison announced that Bortner will continue his service as the Director of State Parks. Morrison introduced the Chief of Staff for the Department, Madalynn Conner. Conner's previous experience includes serving as a State Senate Legislative Assistant and working in Public Affairs at Bose, [McKinney, & Evans, LLP.]

Morrison added that it is an honor to be at an agency where the people clearly love working and have dedicated years of service to it. It is a blessing to be part of the Department and he is looking forward to working with the people.

Morrison reported that the legislative session has begun and there are several bills that directly impact the Department, including the Division of Law Enforcement. The Department will be a part of the Governor's discussions on budgetary, regulatory, and permitting reforms and will follow the Governor's lead in those areas. The Department will continue moving forward to make the Department one of the best in the state and country.

Chris Smith, Deputy Director of the Land Management Bureau, provided his report as follows:

Over 3,500 people joined in the 2025 First Day Hikes offered at Department properties. The Indiana Dunes State Park hike was the most attended with over 500 hikers.

In early December 2024, the Department closed on the acquisition of Busseron Creek Fish and Wildlife Area (FWA), which includes almost 4,000 acres of forest and

marshland in Sullivan County. The property was a part of the former Minnehaha FWA and was purchased through a collaboration with the Southern Indiana Sentinel Landscaper initiative, the Conservation Law Center, the Conservation Fund, and the Nature Conservancy. The Department will have a formal ribbon cutting in the spring of 2025.

On December 11, 2024, the Division of Fish and Wildlife, in partnership with Brandt Information Systems, launched the new license system. The license system is called Activity Hub and replaces the previous system. It serves as the license sales platform, including game check-in, HIP registration, donations, and gift certificates. The Activity Hub includes an option for a hard card for those who still like to carry their license in their wallet. Phase two begins shortly and will include management of draw hunts and volunteer tracking system.

In mid-December 2024, the Department celebrated the opening of the first portion of the Monon South Trail in Orleans. The project included paving more than a mile of trail inside the Town of Orleans with a trailhead at Franklin Street. The segment is the first of five to open in Phase 1 of the Monon South project. In total, Phase 1 will build 20 miles of trail, including segments in Borden, New Pekin, Salem, Campbellsburg, Saltillo, and Mitchell. A ribbon cutting for the Mitchell section is scheduled for Friday, January 24, 2025. The Monon South Trail will be 62.3 miles of trail from New Albany to north of Mitchell.

In December 2024, the Spring Mill Inn at Spring Mill State Park reopened to guests. The Inn received a “studs out” renovation, updating the guest rooms, kitchen, dining room, and conference rooms and improved accessibility to the main lobby. The project also included resurfacing the parking garage and installing a whole-house generator to allow for uninterrupted service during power outages.

In the week prior to the Commission meeting, the Division of Forestry staff completed their first internal forest management project at Morgan Monroe State Forest. Early in 2024, Forestry acquired equipment to conduct harvests utilizing Division of Forestry staff, which allows the Department to fully control the process from start to finish.

With the last of the deer seasons wrapping up, the deer harvest numbers are strong. As of January 20, 2025, 125,936 deer had been checked in, a high for the last 10 years. In the last two years there were a little over 121,000 deer checked in.

In reviewing 2024, the one thing that stood out was that four state-record fish were caught, including a burbot in Lake Michigan, a smallmouth bass in Lake Monroe, a yellow perch in Lake Michigan, and a spotted gar at Chain O’ Lakes State Park.

Ryan Mueller, Deputy Director of the Regulatory Bureau, provided his report as follows:

The Division of Reclamation continues to provide funding and oversight to plug orphaned and abandoned oil and gas wells statewide. This is the initial phase of funding authorized by the Federal Infrastructure Act, which awarded participating states \$25 million each. As of January 1, 2025, 379 wells have been plugged at a cost of \$22.5 million. This exceeds the initial goal of the program to plug 350 wells and leaves funding to plug additional wells.

In late 2024, the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement awarded the Interior States Region Abandoned Mine Land (AML) Reclamation Award to the Department's Abandoned Mine Land Program for its exemplary work in Lynnville. This project removed more than 3,200 linear feet of highwall and replaced it with a water cascade and naturalized landform, a safe swim beach, and potential for new camping sites and mountain bike trails. Increased recreational opportunities, improved quality of life, and future economic development are just a few benefits of this award-winning AML project.

The annual Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology photo contest has started, and Friday, April 4, 2025 is the deadline for entering. Open to photographers of any age and skill level, the contest has been held since 2005 to promote Indiana's historic resources. All structures in photo entries must be at least 50 years old and in Indiana, but don't have to be fully restored. Photos of exclusively natural elements will not be accepted.

Mike Smith, Deputy Director of the Bureau of Administration, provided his report as follows:

The Governor's biennium budget was released and includes a five percent reduction applied to state agency general fund budgets, which equals approximately \$3.5 million annually for the Department. The budget does include a \$10 million capital appropriation to match an additional \$10 million of Lilly Endowment funds, \$27 million for the rebuilding of the McCormick's Creek State Park campground that was devastated by the 2023 tornado, \$10 million for the Fish and Wildlife hatchery modernization, and \$2 million for Yellowwood State Forest campground improvements. The introduction of the budget is the first of many steps the Department will monitor during the legislative session.

The Chair noted the Advisory Council has not met since the last Commission meeting.

CHAIR AND VICE CHAIR

Information: Consideration of 2025 meeting dates:

The remaining 2025 Commission meeting dates are March 18, May 20, July 15, September 16, and November 18. All meetings are scheduled to be held at Fort Harrison State Park, The Garrison, but the location is subject to change.

The Chair stated it has been a privilege and honor to work with Dan Bortner as the Director of State Parks for many years and as the Director of the Department. The Chair noted Bortner's vision, leadership, and energy, and thanked Bortner for his work and dedication to the Department.

The Chair recognized Madalynn Conner, Department Chief of Staff.

Conner said she worked for the State Senate and in the private sector. She is excited to work in the Department. The transition has been great and she looks forward to getting to know the people and working with the Department team.

The Chair noted the OSM-23 form that needs to be filled out and returned by the Commission members. The Chair asked the Commission members to introduce themselves for the benefit of new members.

Updates on Commission and AOPA Committee

Jane Ann Stautz, Vice Chair of the Commission and Chair of the AOPA Committee, was present. The AOPA Committee has not met since the last Commission meeting.

DNR, EXECUTIVE OFFICE

Consideration and identification of any topic appropriate for referral to the Advisory Council

None

NRC, DIVISION OF HEARINGS

Consideration of Hearing Officer Report on rule processing, public hearing, and hearing officer analysis with recommendation regarding final action to amend 312 IAC 4-4-6 to remove spot appointments. Amends 312 IAC 4-4-6 to remove the definition of a “spot appointment.” Amends 312 IAC 4-5-2 to modify hiring requirements. Amends 312 IAC 4-5-3 to require the selection of an individual to become a conservation officer based on individual’s life experiences and interest in and commitment to natural resources.

Administrative Cause No. 24-LE-009

Chloe Perkins, Hearing Officer, presented this item and reported as follows:

The proposed rule amending 312 IAC 4-4-6 removes the definition of “spot appointment” as well as the rule provision permitting a spot-appointed conservation officer to return to

the conservation officer's permanent grade following a spot appointment. The proposed amendment to 312 IAC 4-5-2 removes the degree requirement, time toward a degree, or time in military service and adds the requirement of a high school diploma or general education diploma. The proposed amendments to 312 IAC 4-5-3 add that a conservation officer may be selected based on indicators the individual will excel in a career in conservation law enforcement.

The Commission preliminary adopted the proposed rule amendments on September 17, 2024, a public hearing was held on November 8, 2024, and no comments were received during the public comment period. The Hearing Officer recommended final adoption of the proposed rule amendments.

John Wright moved to give final adoption to the proposed amendments as presented. Alan Morrison seconded the motion. Upon a voice vote, the motion carried.

Consideration of Hearing Officer Report on rule processing, public hearing, and hearing officer analysis with recommendation regarding final action to add 312 IAC 9-1-5.2 to define a “chronic wasting disease positive area.” Adds 312 IAC 9-1-11.2 to define “nonreleasable.” Adds 312 IAC 9-2-17 regarding when and where an individual surrenders a deer to a wild animal rehabilitator. Amends 312 IAC 9-10-9 regarding release of a deer by a wild animal rehabilitator if the deer has a confirmed case of chronic wasting disease. Amends 312 IAC 9-10-9 to make technical and conforming changes. Administrative Cause No. 24-FW-012

Perkins also presented this item and reported as follows:

The proposed rule amending 312 IAC 9-1-5.2 would define a “chronic wasting disease positive area” and adds 312 IAC 9-1-11.2 to define “nonreleasable.” The rule adds 312 IAC 9-2-17 regarding when an individual surrenders a deer to a wild animal rehabilitator located in the county in which the deer is found, or a county that is declared a chronic wasting disease positive area. The proposed amendments to 312 IAC 9-10-9 outline how to handle the release of a deer by a wild animal rehabilitator if the deer has a confirmed case of chronic wasting disease. The amendments also make technical and conforming changes.

The Commission preliminarily adopted the proposed rule amendments in September 2024. A public hearing was held on November 12, 2024, and no one attended. Two supporting comments were received during the public comment period. The Hearing Officer recommended final adoption of the proposed rule amendments.

Noelle Szydlyk moved to give final adoption to the proposed amendments as presented. Laura Hilden seconded the motion. Upon a voice vote, the motion carried.

Consideration of the Hearing Officer Report and for approval of amendments to the Master Plan of Fox Island Nature Preserve, Administrative Cause No. 24-NP-023

Elizabeth Gamboa, Hearing Officer, presented this item and reported as follows:

Fox Island Nature Preserve (Fox Island) was originally dedicated by the Commission in 1974, is in Allen County, and the fee title is held by the County Park and Recreation Board of Allen County.

The proposed amendments to the Articles of Dedication are requested to incorporate the master plan to allow for the removal of course woody debris left by catastrophic weather events that is interfering with natural growth and would allow for the management of exotic and native aggressive plant species. The master plan would allow for hunting and trapping with the approval by the Director of Nature Preserves when specific animals threaten to degrade the natural integrity of Fox Island. The amendments would allow controlled burns for natural community management, employing best practices in cooperation of the Division of Nature Preserves, and would allow for the maintenance and construction of trails, trail markers, and interpretive facilities on Fox Island.

Notice of public hearing was published in The Journal Gazette, a newspaper of general circulation in Allen County. The public hearing was held on December 9, 2024 at the Fox Island Nature Center Bird Building. The people who attended the public meeting were at the nature center to bird watch but participated in the public meeting and provided comments. There were no comments in favor of or against the changes to the master plan. No written comments were received.

The Commission may approve amendments to the Article of Dedication and Master Plan if the changes do not cause an impairment, a disturbance, a use, or a development of the area that is inconsistent with the purposes of the Nature Preserves Chapter found at Indiana Code 14-31-1. Amendments will allow Fox Island the ability to respond to catastrophic events and changing circumstances while maintaining the preserve as a refuge for wildlife and plant community.

As the fee holder, the County Park and Recreation Board of Allen County is required to submit a written agreement to the amendments. However, because of changes in board members the Hearing Officer could not get all the signatures in time for the Commission meeting. Those signatures will be attached by the time the amendment request is sent to the Attorney General's Office.

The Chair recognized Ron Hellmich with the Division of Nature Preserves and asked how the amendments to the articles of dedication for Fox Island started. Hellmich replied that the previous articles of dedication were old and restrictive and, because of the 2022 windstorm, it was decided the best way to protect the preserve would be to take off the downed trees to better control any invasive species. Hellmich added that while they were amending the master plan, other changes were requested to better manage the property such as the controlled burns.

Phil French moved to approve the Hearing Officer's Report with respect to approval of amendments to the Master Plan of Fox Island Nature Preserve. Marc Milne seconded the motion. Upon a voice vote, the motion carried.

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 10:38 a.m., ET.