

**Minutes
Board of Natural Resources
Lanier Islands
7000 Lanier Islands Parkway
Buford, GA 30518**

**Tuesday, August 27, 2024
9:00 a.m.**

Board Members

Joe Hatfield, Chair
Gary Vowell, Vice 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

Staff Members

Walter Rabon, Commissioner
Thomas Barnard
Trevor Santos
Taylor Brown Fisher
Cathy Barnette
Kyle Pearson
Artica Gaston
Mike England
Doug Haymans
Angie Johnson
Ted Will
Brent Womack
Royce Johnson

John Eunice, Deputy Director

Guests

Scott Hendricks, Georgia Power Company
Cindy Nix, GA DNR / EPD
Anna Edmondson, Robbins Government Relations
Dominic Weatherhill, Georgia Power Company

The August 27, 2024 Board of Natural Resources meeting was called to order by Chairman Joe Hatfield.

Chairman Hatfield thanked Mr. Virgi Williams, Mr. Matthew Bowling, Mr. Charles Burton, and the Legacy Lodge staff for a warm welcome to beautiful Lake Lanier islands.

Chairman Hatfield called on Mr. Royce Johnson, Park Manager at Jack Hill State Park, for a moment of inspiration.

Chairman Hatfield thanked Mr. Johnson for his inspirational message, his commitment to his family, and his service to the Department of Natural Resources.

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

The Board of Natural Resources meeting was called to order by Chairman Joe Hatfield.

Chairman Hatfield called for a motion to approve the minutes of the June 25, 2024 board meeting.

A motion was made by Ms. Addison, seconded by Mr. Shailendra, and carried unanimously to approve the minutes of the June 25, 2024 board meeting.

Chairman Hatfield called on Mr. John Eunice, Deputy Director of the Environmental Protection Division, in the absence of Director Jeff Cown, for a division report.

Deputy Director Eunice updated the Board on the annual Georgia Environmental Conference held last week, the 2024 Environmental Council of the States Fall Meeting occurring next week, a status update on the water wells in Bryan and Bulloch counties for the Hyundai Mega-Site, and he recognized Cindy Nix for 35 years of service to the Environment Protection Division.

Deputy Director Eunice stated this concluded his report.

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

Commissioner Rabon began his report by announcing the passing of Dr. David Allen, the inaugural chairman of the Georgia Natural Resources Foundation. He stated that Dr. Allen was committed to supporting the Department of Natural Resources and he will be greatly missed.

Commissioner Rabon stated there is more tragic news with the passing of the wife of Rocky Mountain PFA Fisheries Technician Richard Childers. He further stated that Mrs. Childers passed away unexpectedly and asked everyone to remember the Childers family in their thoughts and prayers.

Commissioner Rabon stated that June was a busy month for the department. He further stated that Governor Brian Kemp called a State of Emergency due to the potential negative impacts of Tropical Storm Debby. He added that as the storm made its way closer to Florida, the DNR teams were poised and ready to be the tip of the spear for response. He further added that during this time, communication continued to be top priority as leadership across each of the divisions met several times a day to discuss plans and provide updates. He stated that he is thankful for a team that is constantly ready to take on new challenges and a Governor who is a great supporter of the department.

Commissioner Rabon stated the department is continuing to make progress with the Outdoors Beyond Barriers (OBB) program and that registration just recently closed for the 7 public land OBB hunts. He further stated that many of the hunts are at, near, or over capacity. He added that the first hunt will take place at the end of September at Richmond Hill WMA and the others are either early season or during the rut – providing participants with prime hunting opportunities.

Commissioner Rabon stated that in mid-July, he had a chance to visit the Yamaha Marine Innovation Center in Kennesaw. He further stated it was a great opportunity to learn about their new technologies and talk about priorities of the department and Yamaha and ways to partner. He added that the meeting ended with Yamaha donating three G3 boats with 25 horsepower Yamaha motors. He further added that the boats will be donated to the Foundation and transferred to the department and will go a long way in helping the department serve customers and fulfill the department's mission.

Commissioner Rabon stated that at the end of July, the third iteration of the DNR Career Academy concluded. He further stated that the staff worked tirelessly to make sure the week was an educational experience, providing in-the-field training for those selected to participate, and he thanked them for their hard work and dedication. He thanked Chairman Joe Hatfield, Ray Lambert, Bill Jones, and Patrick Denney for attending the graduation.

Commissioner Rabon stated the goal of the Career Academy is to identify and create opportunities for the next generation of DNR employees to be stewards of Georgia's natural, historic, and cultural resources, and it is working. He further stated that currently there are four past Academy participants working for the department in some capacity. He added that additionally, several of this year's participants have already volunteered to assist with upcoming DNR events.

Commissioner Rabon stated that he, Deputy Commissioner Barnard and Deputy Commissioner Santos joined State Parks and Historic Sites Director Angie Johnson for a 3-day tour of state parks in northeast Georgia. He further stated that the road trip allowed them to see firsthand how the division carries the mission and to understand the daily challenges faced by the park managers and staff.

Commissioner Rabon stated the Annual Park Managers Conference Awards Ceremony was held on August 22 and was a great opportunity to recognize the outstanding job that the park managers do day-in and day-out.

Commissioner Rabon stated the department hosted a community meeting on Sapelo Island for an opportunity to hear from residents and property owners, as well as provide updates from the department and the Sapelo Island Heritage Authority.

Commissioner Rabon provided a brief update from the Law Enforcement Division and began with rescue training that was conducted by the Aviation Unit at Tallulah Gorge, including Parks personnel and Rabun County EMA. He stated that the training will help ensure that our personnel remain trained and ready to assist with rescues in the future.

Commissioner Rabon stated that Game Warden Boating Instructors provided a 2-day boat training class for the State Parks and Historic Sites Division personnel from eight different state parks. He further stated that the training provided an opportunity for Parks staff to become familiar with launching and loading vessels, trailering, water safety, and close quarter maneuvering.

Commissioner Rabon stated that the Law Enforcement Division held their annual awards banquet at Indian Springs State Park and offered congratulations to all of the award recipients on their well-deserved recognition. He thanked Chairman Joe Hatfield, Jeff Andrews, Randy Dellinger, and Patrick Denney for attending the event.

Commissioner Rabon stated the hiring process continues for the 39th Game Warden Academy, and the new cadets will begin Basic POST Training.

Commissioner Rabon provided a brief update from the Coastal Resources Division and began by mentioning the latest edition of Coastlines. He stated that it provides a more in-depth look at many of the items in the weekly update. He stated that additionally there is information on CoastFest 2025, photos of the Marta cars after being deployed for six months, a beachcomber's guide, the dock stakeholder committee's first meeting, and a photo of a 32 ½ inch trout known as "Troutzilla" that was caught and released by a family fishing in the Ski Rixen Pond on Jekyll Island.

Commissioner Rabon announced CoastFest 2024 will be held on Saturday, October 5, at Mary Ross Park, in Brunswick. He stated that the event is the CRD's premier outreach opportunity and also a Team DNR event, with all divisions supporting the effort. He further stated that each division is represented in booths and demonstrations. He recognized Friends of Georgia State Parks for once again providing lunch for all of Team DNR during CoastFest.

Commissioner Rabon stated the first meeting of the Dock Stakeholder Committee was held on July 30, and the 12-member committee was brought up to speed on recreational dock permitting procedures, as well as the proposed rule that was discussed back in January. He further stated that the committee will hold another meeting, and Dr. Clark Alexander will speak regarding the shading impacts of docks and begin deliberation of the rule.

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

Director Johnson began her report by thanking Royce Johnson for sharing his story and for inspiring everyone to focus on what is important. She stated that Royce is an outstanding leader in the division and was recently the Region 4 nominee for Manager of the Year.

Director Johnson stated the Parks division had a very busy summer. She further stated that on July 8, a memorial service was held for Mr. Abit Massey, who, among many other accomplishments, served on the Little White House Advisory Committee for more than 35 years. She added that a Celebration of Life was held at Gainesville High School and guest speakers included Governor Brian Kemp. She further added that Abit Massey was appointed to the advisory committee in April 1988 and served as chairman from 2001-2024, which was quite a legacy, as well as his many other accomplishments. She stated that Abit was known for his energy and keen advocacy for issues and causes important to Georgia, and attendees were encouraged to "live like Abit."

Director Johnson stated that Tropical Storm Debby moved into Georgia on August 7 and the DNR was ready. She further stated that it was a very slow-moving system and although there were many impacts, they were grateful that it was not any worse. She added that the DNR

divisions worked extremely cohesively preparing for and responding to the storm. She further added that the Parks division was very appreciative of the support provided by the other divisions in assisting to reopen the facilities on state parks. She stated that at Wormsloe State Park, the iconic Oak Avenue experienced a complete wash-out during the tropical storm and was impassible. She further stated that Wildlife Resources staff assisted Region Manager Brian Gray and the Senior Park Ranger at Crooked River and worked over six days to spread 80 tons of gravel to get the site back open. She thanked Director Ted Will for their support and assistance.

Director Johnson stated that Succession Training is crucial and especially in leadership and management, and this month 10 parks employees completed interaction management training. She further stated that the Law Enforcement Division provided inland boat operations training to eight of the parks staff and she was appreciative of the opportunity to ensure the park rangers are competent boat operators.

Director Johnson stated that Luke Daniels, Cloudland Canyon Park Manager, Mike Brown, Senior Ranger at Laura Walker, and Suzanne Passmore, Region 4 Parks Region Manager, completed Chaplain Training. She further stated that the Chaplain program is in place to serve everyone in the State Parks family in times of need.

Director Johnson stated that on Tuesday, July 16, budget analysts from the Governor's Office of Planning Budget, including those from both the House and Senate budget offices, visited Fort Yargo State Park to familiarize themselves with the Parks division. She further stated that an update was provided on the work completed in state parks from bond funding, and information was shared about the facilities, visitors, challenges, and particularly the aging infrastructure.

Director Johnson stated that on August 12-14, Commissioner Rabon, Deputy Commissioner Thomas Barnard, and Deputy Commissioner Trevor Santos visited 10 state parks across northeast Georgia, which brings the total of 19 parks they have visited this year.

Director Johnson stated that on June 24, the Parks division added 9 more locations with the action trackchairs, expanding the free program for visitors with mobility impairments and bolstering the Outdoors Beyond Barriers program. She further stated that these additional chairs bring the total number to 19 trackchairs throughout the State Parks division. She added there will be adaptive hunts this fall, including at Richard B. Russell State Park on November 5. She further added that other states around the country have been impressed with their efforts and as a result the State Parks division has been nominated for the Innovation Award at the National Association of State Park Directors Conference in September. She stated this is significant because Georgia has rarely been nominated in the history of this organization, and Georgia has never won an award at the conference.

Director Johnson stated the Junior Ranger program was a great success this summer, after hosting 82 camps statewide with 585 children from ages 5-17 participating in the camps. She further stated that the focus was on their annual theme Tales of Scales, with reptiles of Georgia being the focus and theme at many of the camps.

Director Johnson stated that it was a great year of interpretive and recreational programming. She further stated that 15,000 programs were offered to over 260,000 visitors.

Director Johnson recognized Damon Kirkpatrick, CEO of Friends of Georgia's State Parks, in attendance. She further stated that Friends of Georgia State Parks hosted and sponsored the 2024 Park Manager's Conference at the Omni Hotel on August 22-24. She thanked Commissioner Walter Rabon, Chairman Joe Hatfield, and board members Jeff Andrews, Patrick Denney, and Mark Hennessy, for attending the awards banquet. She added that the Park Manager-of-the-Year Award was presented to Jason Carter at Fort McAllister State Park in Richmond Hill, the Park Ranger Bravery Award was presented to Lieren Merz at Tallulah Gorge State Park in Tallulah Falls, the Most Outstanding Site Operation Award was presented to James H. Floyd State Park in Summerville, and the Best Year-Round Programming Award was presented to Skidaway Island State Park in Savannah. She further added that training sessions included Retell through Retail, as well as Volunteer Management, and a National Parks Service tour of the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Park property in Atlanta.

Director Johnson stated the Friends of Georgia State Parks Volunteer Spirit Award was presented to Linda Fletcher from Friends of New Echota, an active volunteer for over fifteen years and contributing over 8,000 hours of volunteer service. She further stated that the Volunteer Spirit Award for Parks was presented to Jeff Roberts at Victoria Bryant State Park, as well as Cecil Greenwell, who has volunteered for more than 10 years doing reenactments at coastal sites and historic sites on the coast. She added that the Friends of Georgia State Parks Chapter of the Year Award was presented to the Friends Chapter at Vogel State Park. She further added that this chapter regularly volunteers more than 2,000 hours per year at Vogel State Park. Lastly, Director Johnson stated Friends honored Mr. Tom Johnson with the Parks Champion Award, which is not given annually and is reserved for those who make transformational changes at Georgia's state parks. She further stated that Mr. Johnson was an early founder in the organization and has been instrumental in the Friends of Georgia State Parks for nearly 30 years.

Director Johnson stated that the Parks and Historic Sites Division recently hosted a photography contest for the best sunrise and sunset photos taken at Georgia's state parks by park rangers. She further stated that twelve photos were selected and will be featured in a 2025 Park Ranger Calendar and will be sold in the visitor centers. She added that 150 employees participated and submitted entries.

Director Johnson stated this concluded her report.

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

Director Will provided an update from the Wildlife Conservation Section regarding the Groundcover Restoration Strategy, a bats survey under two bridges designated for demolition, the banding of almost 700 Royal Tern chicks on Bird Island, and the Georgia Hunting and Fishing Regulations and Season Guide for 2024-2025.

Director Will provided an update from the Fisheries Management Section regarding the family and kids fishing events.

Director Will provided an update from the Game Management Section regarding the duck banding with Board member Gary Vowell and his wife Beth, statewide dove hunting season beginning on September 7, and a Federal Duck E-stamp now serves as a legal seasonal license.

Director Will provided an Outdoors Beyond Barriers update and stated that a new trailer was generously donated by DNR Board Member Duncan Johnson and will be a tremendous asset to the program. He stated that six (6) new EcoRover Chairs are available for OBB participants or visitors to Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center.

Director Will stated the inaugural WRD Training Academy was held at Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center and all attendees had been with WRD for less than 2 years. He further stated that during the 3-day academy, 39 participants took part in 10 different training courses, including firearms and chainsaw safety. He stated the academy would not have been possible without an incredible group of 16 highly qualified instructors, a wonderful hosting facility, and a great pool of Academy attendees.

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 to adopt the resolution to approve the Proposed Amendments to the Rules of the Coastal Incentive Grant Program Description, Chapter 391-2-5. (Resolution attached hereto and made a part thereof)

Ms. Addison stated this concluded her 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 grant a Revocable License Agreement and Permanent Easement of up to 4.53± acres by the State Properties Commission and General Assembly to Georgia Power Company at McGraw Ford Wildlife Management Area, Cherokee County. (Resolution attached hereto and made a part thereof)

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 grant a Revocable License Agreement and Permanent Easement of up to 0.05± acres by the State Properties Commission and General Assembly to Jefferson Energy Cooperative at McDuffie Public Fishing Area, McDuffie County. (Resolution attached hereto and made a part thereof)

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 grant a a Revocable License Agreement and Permanent Easement of up to 0.2± acres by the State Properties Commission and General Assembly to North Georgia Electric Membership Corporation at Crockford Pigeon Mountain Wildlife Management Area, Walker County. (Resolution attached hereto and made a part thereof)

Mr. Shailendra stated this concluded his report.

Chairman Hatfield stated the next board meeting will be held at 9:00 a.m., on Tuesday, September 24 2024, in the DNR Boardroom, in Atlanta, GA.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.

Joe Hatfield, Chairman

ATTEST:

Lesley Reynolds, Secretary