

Minutes
144th Meeting of the South Carolina Aquatic Plant Management Council
Santee State Park
251 State Park Rd., Santee, SC 29142
Wednesday, March 6th, 2024, 2:00pm

Attendance:

Council Members: (in person) Julie Holling, Willie Simmons, Chad Altman, Bill Marshall, Casey Moorer, Stacy Scherman; (WebEx) Chris Stout, Adam Leaphart, Tammy Lognion

Guests: (in person) Brian Lynch, Jay Tenney, JP Hodges, Chad Holbrook, Craig Epling, Lee Hendren; (WebEx) Billy Dukes, Brett Hartis, Erica Fritz, Ken Tuck, Brandon Jones, Carl Bussells, Rachel Rosenstein, John Kinsey, Jane Ford, David Anderson, Michelle Stress, Donna Dell, Manny Faria, Brent Carey, Debi Lafayette, Judson Riser, Allan Stack, Sam Chapplelear, Bob Perry

1. Call to Order of the 144th Meeting

Chairman Holling called the 144th meeting of the South Carolina (SC) Aquatic Plant Management Council (Council) to order at 2:06 pm. Notice of the meeting was posted and distributed as required by law. After a few reminders about how the meeting would be run and that it was being recorded, she welcomed everyone and thanked them for attending. She had everyone introduce themselves.

2. Review and Approval of the Minutes of the January 23, 2024 (143rd) Council Meeting

Ms. Holling asked if anyone had any changes or corrections to the minutes from the last meeting. No corrections or changes were noted. She asked for a motion to approve the minutes. Ms. Moorer made a motion to approve the minutes. Mr. Marshall seconded the motion. Ms. Holling called the motion to a vote, and it passed unanimously.

3. Public Comment Period

Ms. Holling asked if there were any comments from the public. Mr. Perry asked to speak, and she gave him the floor.

Mr. Perry thanked her and the Council. He retired from the SC Department of Natural Resources (DNR) as the director of Environmental Programs, dealing with environmental policy, primarily in the regulatory area. He was a representative for the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division on the Council from 2006 - 2017. He made recommendations to the Council prior to his appointment. He is currently the chair of the SC Waterfowl Advisory Committee (Committee). At their February meeting, Santee Cooper (S-C) made a presentation. The Committee accepted the recommendations of S-C and the preliminary recommendations of the Council as information only. He spoke to the Council as a private citizen who has worked in aquatic biology and plant ecology and is an avid waterfowl hunter on the S-C system and across the USA. He stated the public reports of waterfowl hunting success and numbers of ducks seen on the S-C system this last year are probably the highest reported in the past 15 years. He

believes that is due, at least in part, to *Hydrilla* growth on the S-C system, which is excellent forage for ducks. He believes that stocking 16,580 grass carp in the spring of 2024 is higher than the maintenance stocking and a reaction to increases in *Hydrilla* in the system. He stated this increase is not necessary and believes it will have an adverse effect on the natural, native and desired aquatic resources as well as *Hydrilla*. He asked the Council to consider reducing the grass carp stocking to the maintenance stocking level plus an additional 1,000 fish.

Ms. Holling thanked Mr. Perry for his comments and asked if anyone else on WebEx wished to comment on the plan. Nobody on Webex wished to comment so she asked if anybody in the room wished to make a comment. Mr. Lynch, from S-C, asked to speak, and she gave him the floor.

Mr. Lynch appreciated Mr. Perry's comments, as well as the public comments submitted. He shared that S-C is under a federal mandate to control invasive species. The Council cannot relieve S-C of that responsibility but can control the tools we have to control those species. We try to have a balanced approach and our team has done an amazing job. We have received a lot of comments about how well the lake system is currently looking. We have found a very scientific approach to the control. He agreed with Mr. Perry on how conservative approaches are the best way to go and they are approaching the management in a very conservative way. The ultimate result of understocking grass carp has ended in a complete overstocking of grass carp and that is not a situation they want to be in. They want to make sure to properly maintain the appropriate population to manage the *Hydrilla* and continue to monitor the vegetation. They are analyzing this annually and will continue to have a balanced approach to carry out the mission that is federally mandated for the S-C Lake system. He concluded his comments and Ms. Holling thanked him. She asked if anyone else in the room had any more comments that they would like to make, there were none.

She moved on to the public comments received during the official comment period. She gave an overview of the comments. There were a couple of comments concerning increasing treatment of the Cooper River, both East and West Branches. There were comments and concerns over the contractors' doing surveys and misreporting results for financial gain. There were several comments concerning the grass carp stocking in the S-C lakes, Lake Murray and in general. Many of the comments noted there needed to be at least 10 percent vegetation on the S-C lakes. There were other comments against eliminating aquatic plants and others stating their appreciation for hydrilla. There was a request for phragmites treatment at the ACE Basin as well as comments to stop spraying all together. There were a few comments about the Savannah River lakes, including Thurmond (aka Clarks Hill), Hartwell and Russell. There were also some comments and concerns about Lake Greenwood. There were also concerns about cut grass on the Santee National Wildlife Refuge (SNWR), water hyacinth on the Combahee River, giant salvinia in upper Lake Marion and *Lyngbya* in Lake Wateree.

She noted that there were 4 positive comments, 64 negative comments, and 17 comments which were neither positive or negative regarding the plan. She noted the official response after the public comments provided to the Council. Responses were made to everyone

who commented on the plan. At a minimum, she let them know their comments were received and would be forwarded to the Council. Additional information was provided in some instances.

She spoke about the grass carp in the S-C system and expected that Ms. Moorer would probably want to add information to this. Prior to the stocking of over 100,000 grass carp in 2012, the *Hydrilla* acreage on the system was almost 3,700 acres. There were only three young age classes in system from stockings the previous three years of 8,300, 12,000 and 17,000. With those stockings and annual mortality, the population of grass carp in the system was about 31,000 fish. Almost 7,200 acres of *Hydrilla* was seen in 2012.

Currently, S-C has the advantage of having seven age classes of grass carp, with a total of close to 34,500 fish in the system. Increasing the total population back to the 1:4 ratio of 40,000 fish will add more hungry fish to the S-C system. This total is fewer fish than what was in the system in 2019, just five years ago. She thinks that adding 16,580 fish in 2024 is a very conservative approach that will allow for *Hydrilla* control without impacting the native species. She said she put a more detail response in the information provided to the Council before the meeting and that will be included in the final plan.

She said she would go over the Lake Murray concerns later in the meeting due to some adjustments for what was requested for Lake Murray.

She addressed the comments regarding stopping spraying and not eliminating aquatic plants. The intent is not to eliminate all the aquatic vegetation in our lakes and waterways. The goal is to control the invasive aquatic plants and try to promote the natives, so they are not outcompeted by invasives. Natives provide a more diverse habitat and food source for fish and wildlife instead of the monoculture provided by many invasive species. Biological controls are used when possible. When herbicides are used, the application rate targets the species to be controlled and the herbicides are EPA approved for aquatic environments. The applications are made according to labels and water quality testing is done by both the SC Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) and S-C. There are some aquatic herbicides that have the potential to cause fish kills if applied improperly. If a fish kill occurs, both DNR and DHEC do an investigation to determine the cause, the value of the fish, who is responsible and impose any fines.

She discussed the Cooper and Combahee Rivers. We work to control vegetation on both of those rivers, but there are some funding limitations for them.

Regarding the Lake Wateree *Lyngbya* issues, Duke Power is responsible for vegetation control, but it is limited to the prohibited plant list according to their FERC license. *Lyngbya* is not on that list. Treatments can be done but provide only short-term relief and requires multiple retreatments. There are some potential resolutions that would require cooperation of different user groups around Lake Wateree and would need to be led by Duke Power.

Lake Greenwood vegetation management is under the control of Greenwood County Lake Management. Our program assists them as needed and *Vallisneria* has been treated in problematic areas around residences.

There were concerns about the Savannah River lakes. Those are under the control of the US Army Corps of Engineers. We would be happy to work with them if they wished to partner with us.

Regarding phragmites in the ACE Basin, treatments were done many years ago using grant funding. No grant funding has been received in quite a while and a lot of the property lines along the coast, including the ACE Basin, extend all the way to the river channels. Our program funds cannot legally be used on private properties. We can provide guidance on treatment but cannot treat it.

We are aware of the issues of cut grass on the Santee National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge has a small staff and S-C assists with some control as they can.

We are also aware of the giant salvinia in the backwaters of upper Lake Marion. S-C staff and contractors do treat the areas that are accessible by airboat. S-C is raising giant salvinia weevils that they hope to put out in the areas that are not easily accessible.

After a brief audio issue on WebEx that was resolved quickly, she moved to the concerns about the contractor doing surveys and misrepresenting their results for profit. In general, the surveys are done by our program staff or staff with various organizations who own the properties. S-C uses a satellite for their surveys which is a paid contract. S-C staff does ground truthing of those results. There is no financial incentive for the people doing the surveys to misrepresent the findings.

Ms. Holling asked if anybody else on the Council wished to make any comments. Before moving on, some issues with the WebEx audio had to be resolved.

Ms. Moorer introduced herself and stated that they genuinely appreciate all the comments they received from the lake users on the S-C system as well as Mr. Perry's comments. She wanted to explain the recommendations that came from S-C in 2024 with S-C and their thought process behind the recommendations. They based it off information from previous years. Something they wanted to avoid, which happened in the past, was large scale stockings on the S-C system. Those were a detriment to the system and submersed native species. The stocking number was reached by looking at the number of fish as a ratio to the number of surface acres on the system. They arrived at the 1:4 ratio as the base for the increase recommendation this year. In 2023, when they were at a maintenance stocking, the ratio was 1:4.64. The decision was data-driven based on what was done in the past. It was not deciding to go with 5,000 additional fish based on what might work. Historical data was looked at and past ratios that previously worked on the S-C system. *Hydrilla* was increasing on the system between 2022-2023. A 6,700% increase, in her experience as a lake manager, with her education and background in aquatic plant management, is a significant increase. Moving to a 1:4 ratio wasn't her decision alone, but a team decision. We have some very experienced and educated people on the S-C team. That is how they arrived at the 1:4 ratio. We feel this is a conservative approach, but there are some concerns. The S-C system is impacted by environmental conditions. It is a flowing system. Increased rainfall decreases water clarity and decreased water clarity impacts submersed vegetation and how it grows on the S-C system. When large rain events occur in the watershed, which covers 15,000 square miles, lots of turbid water moves

into the system, causing a loss in submersed vegetation. She indicated that the S-C team has been working very hard at educating the lake users, trying to be conservative, and considering everybody's needs. The biggest fear is that we increase the ratio and next year have a large natural event with high turbidity and then lose vegetation from water clarity issues. These are the factors they think about. We are being conservative while factoring in weather and natural events that might occur on the system and cannot be predicted. The team has realized and accepted that *Hydrilla* will be a part of the system, but they do not want to lose more native vegetation to it. Sterile grass carp are a good tool for the S-C team when used properly. She asked the Council to consider the recommendations that the team has presented.

She remarked on the SNWR cutgrass comments. S-C works closely with the manager and her staff, which have been good to work with. S-C tries to support them as much as possible. S-C staff have done several aerial cutgrass treatments. They provided herbicide recommendations for selective species control and helicopter support. The refuge staff identifies areas they would like to treat based on management goals and objectives.

She discussed the satellite surveys. They are a third party, which removes any bias from the S-C team. The satellite imagery is downloaded, and the third-party vendor analyzes the data. The S-C team goes out with the vendor and ground truths the satellite data to verify that the species are present. There is no financial gain for anyone, whether it is the vendor or S-C staff.

Ms. Holling thanked Ms. Moorer. Since Ms. Holling had given the Council members in the room a chance to speak, she asked Ms. Lognion if she had anything to add.

Ms. Lognion commented that she had made comments at previous meetings, but she felt the stocking amount that Ms. Moorer had proposed was on target. She did not think they are being too zealous on the stocking request. There is a need to make up for an ageing grass carp population that is dying out and ensure they do not fall behind the curve of *Hydrilla* growth.

Ms. Holling asked if any other Council members had any comments. There were none.

4. Discussions and changes to the draft plan for final approval

Ms. Holling moved onto the discussions and changes to the draft plan for final approval. She noted when the recommendations for grass carp stocking were made, she made an error and neglected to talk to the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) staff regarding the carp stocking in Lake Murray. Some concerns were voiced about the proposed stocking. After discussions with the DNR and Dominion Energy staff, it was agreed to reduce 2024's stocking to 3,200 fish. That would place the estimated population in the lake at 10,000 fish. This would be a 1:5 ratio for the system. The Dominion staff in 2024 will do a vegetation survey while doing their shoreline survey. This information will be used to guide future stockings and those discussions will include Aquatic Nuisance Species, WFF, and Dominion staff to ensure there are limited impacts to native vegetation, fish and wildlife.

She made a motion to reduce the grass carp stocking on Lake Murray to 3,200 fish and to make a note in the problem areas table that a survey is needed for Lake Murray. Mr. Simmons

seconded the motion. Ms. Lognion asked to confirm that the ratio was grass carp to surface acres and not vegetation. Ms. Holling confirmed that was the correct ratio. She asked if there were any more questions or concerns regarding the change for Lake Murray. There were none and she called a roll call vote. The motion passed with six in favor, and Ms. Holling abstaining.

She asked if there were any other changes to the draft plan. There were none. She asked for a motion to accept the plan as adjusted for final approval. Ms. Moorer made a motion and Mr. Altman seconded the motion. She asked if there was any discussion. There was none. She called a roll call vote. The motion passed with six in favor, and Ms. Holling abstaining.

5. Future Council Meetings:

Ms. Holling asked if anyone was interested in a fall field trip at Lake Murray, S-C or any other location. Mr. Moorer said S-C would be open to host. Ms. Holling mentioned the future topics for Council meetings would include the usual of grass carp health, treatment updates, gamefish updates and potentially waterfowl updates. She asked for any other suggestions. Ms. Moorer stated she would like to see some waterfowl data from S-C lake system, if it's available. She noted Mr. Perry's comment of the public's perception of waterfowl numbers being up and she would like to see if there is data on that. Ms. Holling said she would ask if that is available from Ms. Kneece, the DNR waterfowl biologist.

Ms. Holling asked if it would be helpful to have the draft plan for next year available sooner for review, potentially at the fall meeting. She asked for feedback on that. Ms. Moorer remarked they would support having the draft plan earlier, but they do not have their survey results usually until December and that would not give them adequate time to review the grass carp stocking recommendations and data. Ms. Holling clarified that the plan would only be available for review by the Council and not for approving the draft for posting.

Ms. Holling asked if there were any more comments regarding future Council meetings. There were none.

6. New Business

Ms. Holling discussed proxy voting. Mr. Leaphart could not attend today's meeting due to a last-minute schedule change. He requested to vote ahead of the Council meeting since he did not have a proxy. She spoke to DNR's legal counsel concerning this matter and they informed her that you must be present to vote. We do not have any by-laws or written management policies and proxies are not allowed under Robert's Rules of Order. She expressed the need to work on getting a management policy in place similar to the DNR Board. She asked for approval to work on something before the next meeting and got it. She asked if there was any other new business. There was none.

7. Adjournment

Ms. Moorer made a motion to adjourn, which Mr. Simmons seconded. Ms. Holling called the motion to a vote, and it passed unanimously. She thanked everyone for attending. The meeting adjourned at 3:07 pm.