

Western Upper Peninsula Citizens' Advisory Council (WUPCAC)
Meeting Minutes – APPROVED 1/15/25
Thursday, December 12, 2024
5:00-7:30pm Central / 6:00-8:30pm Eastern
Virtual via Zoom

Council Members Present

Erik Bessonon	George Lindquist	Skip Schulz
Floyd Dropps	Carol Mason Sherrill	Jeff Sierpien
Barb Gajewski	Chauncey Moran	Tom Solka, Chair
Mike Holmes	Suzanne Petschke	Dwaine Starr
Dave Johnson	Horst Schmidt	

Council Members Absent/Excused

Dave Hall	Kelly Bennett Simon	Lucas Vold
Kirk Schott, Vice Chair	Warren Suchovsky	Faye Williams

Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Staff & Guests

Lt. Ryan Aho, Law Enforcement Division, District 2
Kristi Dahlstrom, Executive Division, Marquette
Stacy Haughey, UP Field Deputy-Executive Division, Marquette
Darren Kramer, Fisheries Division, Escanaba
Dave Lemmien, Wildlife Division, UP District
Tom Seablom, Forest Resources Division, Marquette
Ron Yesney, Parks & Recreation Division-UP Trails Section, Marquette

Call to Order/Pledge of Allegiance

At 6:03pm Eastern/5:03pm Central, **Chair Solka** called the meeting to order and led the Pledge of Allegiance. He welcomed members of the public as well as DNR staff and fellow Council members.

Introductions of Council Members/DNR Staff/Public Attendees

At **Chair Solka's** request, **Ms. Dahlstrom** conducted a roll call of attendees from the Zoom participant list. A list of council members was also shown on screen. **Chair Solka** then provided a brief overview of the Council's advisory role as chartered by the DNR. **Ms. Haughey** reviewed virtual meeting etiquette and welcomed members of the public who registered to attend: Emma Woelkers from Senator Peter's office, Jan VanAmberg of Manistique, Joe Dolan, Henry Londo, Patrick Thomson of Negaunee, and Jerry Tudor and Caden Meines from WLUC-TV6.

Adoption of Agenda

Chair Solka asked the Council if there were any additions or revisions to the agenda. **Mr. Lindquist motioned to accept the agenda as presented; Mr. Schultz supported the motion. After no discussion, Chair Solka called for a vote. The motion passed unanimously.**

Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes

Chair Solka asked if there were any changes to the WUPCAC July 25, 2024 draft meeting minutes, which were distributed to the Council via email previously for review. **Mr. Dropps motioned to approve the minutes as submitted; Mr. Schulz supported the motion. After no discussion, Chair Solka called for a vote. The motion passed unanimously.**

Chair Solka then asked the Council if there were any changes to the Joint UPCAC October 9, 2024 draft meeting minutes, which were also distributed to the Council via email previously for review. **Mr. Lindquist motioned to**

approve the minutes as submitted; Mr. Dropps supported the motion. After no discussion, Chair Solka called for a vote. The motion passed unanimously.

DNR Reports from Division Staff

Written staff reports were provided to Council members on December 5, 2024. The following brief updates were added.

1. *Stacy Haughey, UP Field Deputy*

- Mr. James LaPorte was recently named a new commissioner for the Natural Resources Commission (NRC) by Governor Whitmer. He attended the December 12 NRC Meeting. Mr. LaPorte fills the position previously held by Robin Michigiizhigookwe Clark, of Sault Ste. Marie, who resigned earlier this fall.
- NRC Chair Tom Baird attended his last meeting of the NRC on December 12. His term ends on December 31. He was thanked for his service. **Ms. Haughey** noted the NRC intends to maintain a relationship with the Deer Management Initiative that was implemented as part of this year's deer regulation cycle.
- The popular snowmobile trail (Trail 422) to Miner's Castle in Alger County on H-58 was closed Dec. 1. As mentioned at previous meetings, the Alger County Road Commission has decided not to renew an agreement with the DNR to allow usage of 0.8 miles of H-58 near a bridge crossing that has been successfully in existence for nearly 30 years. Alternate re-routes of the trail in this area was explored thoroughly but found not possible due to complex private land ownership. A copy of a letter from Congressman Jack Bergman to the road commission addressing the tragic economic impacts to the area as a result of their decision was shown on screen. **Mr. Yesney** indicated he will be attending the road commission board meeting on Dec. 16.

2. *Darren Kramer, Fisheries Division*

- No additional updates.

3. *Tom Seablom, Forest Resources Division*

- A few bid openings occurred since the report was initially prepared. The division is now seeing more no-bid sales.

4. *Lt. Ryan Aho, Law Enforcement Division*

- No additional updates.
- **Mr. Lindquist** thanked the Law Enforcement Division for their work, noting the busy fall season and high number of violations.
- **Mr. Moran** also thanked the Law Enforcement Division, praising their professionalism and etiquette.

5. *Ron Yesney, UP Trails Section of the Parks & Recreation Division*

- An update on the temporary closure of Snowmobile Trail UP12 (Ontonagon County) was provided, indicating the bridge over Dreis Creek has been deemed unusable and options for a temporary bridge are being explored. Trail UP12 has been rerouted onto Norwich Road south of the Village of Ontonagon. The DNR and North Country Snowmobile club are working to have the bridge replaced by next season.
- **Mr. Schulz** thanked **Mr. Yesney** for his 20+ years of work on UP trails and expressed appreciation for his efforts.

6. *Dave Lemmien, Wildlife Division*

- No additional updates.
- **Mr. Moran** asked for an overview of the duck migration in Marquette County, noting the Whitefish Point Bird Observatory showed average species counts compared to past years. **Mr. Lemmien** stated although

the migration pattern was late due to the mild weather in September, October and November, it did not significantly affect hunting opportunities as there was no early freeze.

- **Mr. Lindquist** asked for updates to be provided to the Council once the moose study commences. **Mr. Lemmien** agreed.

Public Comment on Agenda Items Only

Chair Solka opened the floor for public comments on agenda items only.

1. *Henry Londo of Janesville, WI:* Mr. Londo asked for clarification of the legality and permanence of deer blinds on CF (commercial forest) lands. **Lt. Aho** explained permanent blinds are not permitted on CF lands and could jeopardize the landowner's enrollment in the CF program who would then be subject to withdrawal penalties. **Mr. Seablom** added the Forest Resources Division administers the CF Act (CFA) and noted permanent blinds found on CF lands are a violation of the CF statute. DNR staff along with conservation officers conduct inspections on CF lands and investigate violations. **Chair Solka** thanked Mr. Londo for his comments and suggested he follow-up with the Forest Resources Division or Law Enforcement Division with further questions after the meeting.

Old Business

1. **DNR Response to January WUPCAC & EUPCAC Resolution: Allow Crossbow Hunting in Portion of UP (Mr. Lemmien)**
 - Recap: Both the WUPCAC and EUPCAC passed a resolution requesting the DNR recommend to the NRC that crossbow hunting be allowed in a portion of the UP that includes the boundary line south of US 2, between Escanaba and Iron Mountain, in December following the late archery deer season dates of Dec. 1 through Jan. 1.
 - DNR Response: DNR deer program staff and UP field staff from the DNR Wildlife Division reviewed the recommendation and provided input. Staff are not supportive of the resolution as currently written as it would split current deer management unit (DMU) boundaries. Staff feel this would create unnecessary confusion for hunters that are used to following regulations based on DMU boundaries. Staff would likely be supportive of this resolution if it were rewritten to follow current DMU boundaries.
 - **Chair Solka** asked for comments from the Wildlife Committee. **Mr. Lindquist**, committee lead, stated the Wildlife Committee can take another look at the resolution and possibly rewrite it based on current DMU boundaries.
 - **Mr. Starr** thanked **Mr. Lemmien** for the explanation, stating he is encouraged by the response. He asked for a wildlife committee meeting to be scheduled as soon as possible to discuss it further; **Mr. Lindquist** agreed.
 - **Mr. Schulz** asked if those who are physically challenged can use a crossbow during late archery deer season. **Lt. Aho** noted a person with a temporary or permanent disability may apply for a permit to use a crossbow or modified bow during the late archery season in the UP.
2. **DNR Response to July WUPCAC Resolutions (Ms. Haughey & Mr. Lemmien)**
 - *1) Recommend Changes to UP Deer Regulations & 2) Create Long-Range UP Deer & Habitat Management Plan*
 - **Mr. Lemmien** stated staff spent a great deal of time reviewing this resolution and submitted a lengthy explanation to each point as indicated in the written response that was forwarded to Council members on Dec. 5.
 - **Chair Solka** asked for additional Council comments.
 - **Mr. Starr**, who authored the resolutions, stated he is encouraged by the DNR's responses and feels the Council's wildlife committee needs a chance to review them in depth to perhaps make modifications or present additional ideas to the DNR.

- **Mr. Lindquist** will include these items for additional discussion at the next wildlife committee meeting.

3. DNR Response to Joint UPCAC Resolution: *Do More to Manage Wildlife in the UP in the State Forest Management Plan* (Ms. Haughey)

- This was a joint resolution and the DNR's response was shared also at the EUPCAC meeting on Dec. 2.
- The overlapping of forestry and wildlife concerns has been discussed extensively, not only at the October NRC meeting but also at the UP Wildlife Habitat Workgroup meeting on Dec. 4 and the Council was thanked for their comments. As the DNR response indicated, the resolution will be recorded in the public input for the state forest management plan. The DNR has been prioritizing and working very hard on these concerns.
- Also noted in the response were additional opportunities to provide feedback on the plan at two webinars Dec. 11 and Dec. 18. Feedback by email can be provided at forestplancomments@michigan.gov by Dec. 31.
- **Ms. Haughey** explained wildlife management is a key focus of the DNR, with timber sales and forest management plans incorporating specific wildlife habitat and management goals. Both the Forest Resources and Wildlife Divisions are jointly responsible for managing the state forest. The discussions between both divisions are very passionate and staff are actively involved. Wildlife habitat is a top priority.
- **Chair Solka** asked for additional Council comments.
- **Mr. Lindquist**, who authored the resolution, stated he is felt the response could've had more detail since the resolution came from both the EUPCAC and WUPCAC. He stated he appreciates the topic being addressed in multiple conversations at several meetings and hopes it seeps into the plan in a more comprehensive way.
- **Mr. Johnson** noted it is a waiting game at this point to see if the final plan will be impacted by feedback.
- **Mr. Moran** recalls the Forest Resources Division staff working very closely with Wildlife Division decades ago. **Mr. Lemmien** concurred that those relationships still exist and further explained how the timber sale process, conservation easements and forest legacy projects are intertwined with the Wildlife Division in creating and maintaining wildlife habitat on state land. **Mr. Moran** thanked Mr. Lemmien for the explanation and encouraged this messaging be included in any interviews and outdoor programming to let the public know more is going on behind the scenes than most realize.
- **Chair Solka** summarized the comments provided, noting he feels the Councils' voice in these resolutions are being heard.

New Business

1. Preliminary Overview of 2024 Deer Season (Mr. Lemmien)

- To date, deer harvest numbers in the UP increased from last year by 12.5% for early archery and 18% for firearm seasons (through Dec. 10), with a 16% overall increase in the UP from the deer harvest reporting figures year-to-date. Statewide, deer harvest is down 3-4%, mainly due to an EHD outbreak in the southern lower peninsula. The bridge count was up by 8% (through Nov. 26). Improved antler development and higher birth rates were observed, with many 1.5 to 3-year-old bucks brought in.
- It is well known winter severity has an impact on deer health. Last year's mild winter had a favorable impact allowing food availability to play a significant role in antler development with soft and hard mass being average to above average. A higher birth rate and weight of fawns earlier this year have set deer up well for the upcoming winter.
- **Mr. Horst** asked if a hunter satisfaction survey was being conducted. **Mr. Lemmien** stated the annual deer camp survey is in progress. Results will be shared with the Council in March or April 2025.
- **Mr. Johnson** agreed that winter severity plays a role in deer health; however, numbers are still below 2022 and although there were increases this season, the deer herd has not totally recovered yet. He asked if the deer harvest reporting numbers were compared to those when the DMAP and crop damage permits weren't included, and he asked if the permit numbers can be separated in this year's figures in order to

compare with 2022 by county. **Mr. Lemmien** stated the permits are now included as a result of a resolution passed by the Council; however, he will work on an equivalent comparison and report back to the Council. **Mr. Lindquist** stated the deer harvest report allows the ability to filter out crop damage permits, per season, by county for a quick snapshot.

2. 2024 Fire Season Update (Mr. Seablom)

- The 2024 fire season has concluded now that winter has arrived. It was unusually active fall, with 86 fires in October alone, compared to 67 total from May through August. The fall season was the busiest since 2006. The drought code typically peaks towards the end of August or early September and measures the overall lack of moisture in fuels and the soil. In the western UP district, the drought code peaked towards the middle to end of October. New maximum recordings for build-up index reached record levels. Typically, the month of April is the busiest month for fires because of all the fine fuels, especially in the lower peninsula. However, October was not far off with 86 this year compared to 125 in April.
- There were several challenges this fall with staff deployed for out-of-state fires as part of the federal cooperative program and dealing with reburns due to leaf drop. This is the second fall in a row in which there has been a fire in the McCormick Tract. It's been decades since there has been a fire in this remote wilderness area. The DNR doesn't participate in suppression in this area as the Forest Service handles it, but they do get involved when it approaches the protection boundary.
- **Mr. Moran** commended the fire team for their performance this season and expressed his appreciation for their efforts.
- **Mr. Schulz** asked if the DNR conducts prescribed burns. **Mr. Seablom** stated most of the prescribed burns are in the lower peninsula with a few maintenance and cultivation burns conducted in the UP.

3. Free Snowmobiling Weekend Date Change (Mr. Yesney)

- The free snowmobiling weekend has historically been held the second week of February, coinciding with the winter free fishing weekend.
- The Snowmobile Advisory Workgroup, along with the Ride Right Committee, voted to suggest moving the free weekend to Jan. 17-19, 2025. It was approved by Parks and Recreation Division chief Ron Olson.
- The change aims to attract more participants early in the season, allowing more opportunities to ride when there is ample snow.

4. Council Member Term Expirations/Renewals/Selection Process for New Applicants (Ms. Haughey)

- Every two years, terms for half of the council members expire. Those whose terms are expiring Dec. 31, 2024, were shown on screen. All have been contacted and are reapplying for another term.
- Coinciding with staggered term renewals is an application process to fill open seats. There are currently two open seats on the Council and applications have been solicited through a press release. 11 applications were received by the end date. The CAC selection team consisting of 3-4 staff and 3-4 public representatives will review applications in early January and select new members to fill the two open seats. Selection is based on a variety of demographics, including experience, counties underrepresented, and interests to name a few.
- **Mr. Schulz** recommended appreciation letters be sent to outgoing members for their long-term service. **Ms. Dahlstrom** noted this is a standard practice and letters have already been sent.
- After a suggestion was made, **Mr. Moran motioned to increase the membership by one, as an exclusive one-time occurrence, to accommodate valued member, Dr. Kirk Schott, to finish out his term when he is able to return after experiencing a recent health event; Mr. Schulz supported the motion. After no discussion, Chair Solka called for a vote. The motion passed unanimously.**

5. Reminder of Officer Election & Committee Makeup/Chairs at January 2025 Meeting (Ms. Haughey & Chair Solka)

- Officer selection (Chair & Vice Chair) will be conducted at the January meeting. The current chair is Tom Solka, and the vice-chair position is open, having been previously held by Dr. Kirk Schott.
- Those interested in committee work can express their interest without a formal invitation. Any vacancies for committee leads will also be filled.

Committee Activity

1. Fisheries (Mr. Dropps)

- All seven committee members were thanked for being actively involved.
- Regarding the Council's March resolution recommending the DNR oppose any expansion of underwater spearing under regulation FO 219.25, the DNR and NRC agreed and spared the UP from any further expansion. In addition, the current three-year evaluation of that regulation due to end in 2024 was pushed back to 2025. In preparation for the upcoming re-evaluation, Mr. Dropps and Mr. Lindquist volunteered to participate in a workgroup that will advise the DNR Fisheries Division, who in turn, will make recommendations to the NRC for consideration when this issues comes before them.
- In reference to the second of the Council's March resolutions which recommended any increase in DNR fisheries revenue be prioritized and provide deliverables, including staffing, the DNR announced additional manpower has been hired for the UP and more may be hired if a new license increase package is approved. Discussion ensued on the proposed increase to fishing licenses. **Mr. Dropps** stated the decision on these increases will be made by the legislature, and individuals can contact their local legislators to express their opinions. He feels the increase will help provide long-overdue funding for more rearing and additional staff.
- **Mr. Schulz** suggested a planting of fish in the Rockland Pond which is a youth fishing pond but has very few fish in it. **Mr. Dropps** noted he spoke with Dave Caroffino who indicated a prescription needs to be written and it will be on his agenda to look into for next year. **Ms. Haughey** mentioned she spoke with Kris Nault, new fisheries biologist from Baraga about it as well. She will circle back with him for an update.
- **Mr. Schmidt** questioned the license fee package status and subcontracting work. **Ms. Haughey** stated the status of the license package in legislature is unknown at this time. As for subcontracting work, the work performed by the National Guard is not a subcontract, but rather a partnership with the DNR to train guardsmen in tasks the DNR would otherwise have to pay triple for an outside source to provide, not for tasks current staff would do. She also noted the Fisheries Division has not had an increase in funding since 1997 and with the sharp rise in costs (fish food for example), they cannot operate in the same fashion as they had been 27 years ago.

2. Wildlife (Mr. Lindquist)

- The committee has not had a need to meet since the last Council meeting. He will schedule a meeting of the committee in the next month to discuss new items.
- He stated wildlife management is a part of the license package as well, along with law enforcement. He has been making phone calls to help in whatever way he can.
- Moose studies and potential hunts were discussed, noting the DNRs plans to collar 30 moose for better population data.

3. Trails/Recreation/Law (Ms. Gajewski)

- The committee has not had a need to meet since the last Council meeting.
- Committee members are working on setting up a meeting schedule and topics for the next year.
- **Mr. Schulz** emphasized the need for snow rollers for better trail maintenance with the current weather conditions and asked for the topic to be discussed by the committee at a future meeting.

4. Other Committee Activity: None.

Next Meeting

1. Approval of 2025 Meeting Dates & Locations

- Members reviewed the proposed 2025 meeting dates and locations that were distributed prior to the meeting.
- **Mr. Schulz motioned to approve the meeting dates and locations as presented; Mr. Moran supported the motion. After no discussion, Chair Solka called for a vote. The motion passed unanimously.**

2. Next WUPCAC Meeting

- **Chair Solka** noted the next Council meeting will be held on Wednesday, January 15 in a virtual format, beginning at 6:00pm Eastern/5:00pm Central.

3. Topic Suggestions for Next Meeting

- **Chair Solka** asked Council members to forward any suggestions for upcoming agendas to him, Ms. Haughey or Ms. Dahlstrom. **Mr. Schulz** suggested the wolf/moose study on Isle Royale would be interesting, although it is not DNR-related.

Public Comments (On Any Topic)

Chair Solka opened the floor for public comments on any topic; none were brought forth.

Closing Comments from the Council

Chair Solka open the floor for closing comments from the Council.

1. **Ms. Gajewski** asked if the date the waterfowl digest was made available to the public could be confirmed, as well as when the .pdf copy was made available on the app. She stated sports men and women are responsible for knowing the regulations before the season starts so it is important to have that information available and it was not this year. Also, in reference to the public comment earlier on CFA lands, she indicated there is a reference in the deer digest, but there is no reference in the waterfowl digest and there should be. **Ms. Haughey** agreed with the importance of timely availability of regulation guides, noting all digests were late to be printed and distributed this year. An electronic copy should have been made available before season start. She will investigate the specific release dates.
2. **Mr. Schulz** suggested a press release be issued to clarify snowmobiling regulations on CFA lands. He stated people think they can ride anywhere they want and it's hurting the trail system. **Mr. Yesney** confirmed he is working on a press release about off-trail riding. **Mr. Schulz** also proposed working with the forest service to establish a snowmobile trail on state forest land to alleviate rerouted traffic on Norwich Road (Ontonagon County).
3. **Mr. Starr** thanked Chair Solka for his expertise in chairing the council meetings. **Chair Solka** appreciated the comments.

Adjournment

Chair Solka thanked everyone for attending the meeting. The meeting adjourned at 8:14pm Eastern/7:14pm Central.