

**Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission Executive Director's Report
January 1, 2024, to March 31, 2024**

The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC) strategic plan contains strategic priorities involving workforce, access, engagement, non-game species and habitat, infrastructure, and sport fish and habitat. This quarterly report provides examples of the PFBC's progress toward those priorities from January 1, 2024, through March 31, 2024.

WORKFORCE

Waterways Conservation Officer Class

The PFBC's Bureau of Law Enforcement began accepting applications for the 26th class of Waterways Conservation Officer Trainees (WCOTs) on January 8, 2024. The job posting closed on February 6, 2024, with nearly 500 commonwealth residents submitting applications. On March 18, 2024, the PFBC received referrals for 196 individuals who completed the application process. All 196 of those referrals were invited to join PFBC representatives for the physical fitness assessment on April 26, 2024. WCOT applicants who successfully complete the assessment will move on to the oral interviews that will be held in Harrisburg later this spring. Selected candidates will be required to pass a thorough background investigation and medical screenings prior to the start of the 26th WCOT class on August 5, 2024.

ACCESS

Boating Facilities Grant Program (BFGP)

Staff evaluated applications for the 2023 round of the BFGP and recommended 13 projects for funding. Eight BFGP projects were submitted to the Executive Director for approval. These projects, spread across the Commonwealth, will combine applicants' matching funds with PFBC funds to create over \$770,000 worth of improved boating access for all Pennsylvanians. An additional five BFGP projects require Commissioners' consideration that, when combined with applicants' matching funds, could total \$2.5 million of boating access improvements for the Commonwealth.

The BFGP celebrated completion of the following projects funded through prior grant rounds:

- **Susquehanna River Water Trail** – Susquehanna Greenways Partnership completed Phase I of their Wayfinding Program. This effort, coordinated among all four Susquehanna River Water Trail Managers, seeks to unify the four sections of the Susquehanna River Water Trail under one cohesive wayfinding system.
- **Mauch Chunk Lake, Carbon County** – Carbon County finished the rehabilitation of existing Boat Launch B to provide an enhanced experience for users of the public access. The improvements will directly benefit non-powered and electric motor boaters.

Voluntary Public Access – Habitat Incentive Program (VPA – HIP)

On February 15, 2024, staff closed on an easement on the Wheeler property in Erie County through VPA – HIP. The easement will provide 1,120 linear feet of public fishing access along Conneaut Creek. Funding for VPA – HIP easements is made available through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service.

ENGAGEMENT

Calendar Year Boat Registrations

The PFBC began issuing calendar year boat registrations on October 1, 2023. As of March 31, 2024, staff processed 81,715 boat registration renewals, which represents 56.8% of the total number of boats that received the renewal notice. These renewals, and any registrations issued after October 1, 2023, are the first to transition to the calendar year cycle and receive registrations with a December 31, 2025, expiration date.

State and Regional Trade Show Outreach

Staff organized and conducted new hands-on activities and interacted with over 15,860 visitors at the Early Bird, Pennsylvania Farm, Great American Outdoor, Philadelphia Fishing, Lancaster Fly Fishing, Musky Max, and Erie Boat & Fishing Shows. Staff partnered with PA Council of Trout Unlimited's Women, Diversity, Inclusion Committee and implemented the first Women's NETWORKing Social at the Lancaster Fly Show, which reached 61 women from across the state.

Regarding legislative outreach, 11 General Assembly members conducted interviews at the Great American Outdoor Show with the Commission's Executive Director. In addition, four members recorded WCO recruitment videos for distribution in their districts and over 45 members have participated in trout stockings.

Boating Safety

Staff regularly provide training to water safety and water rescue personnel from partner organizations. Some of the recent training facilitated by staff includes:

- Instructor-level Ice Rescue and Emergency Response Course on February 2, 2024, through 4, 2024, at H.R. Stackhouse and Black Moshannon State Park. The course certified 18 new volunteer instructors (PA, MD, NJ Fire Depts and Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources State Park Managers and State Forest Rangers).
- Ice Rescue Training for the Pennsylvania Game Commission Cadet Class on January 25, 2024, at Black Moshannon State Park.
- Boating and Water Safety Awareness Training for 16 National Guard Medical Corps doctors, nurses, and paramedics on March 9, 2024.

Cooperative Nursery Program Seminars

From January 20, 2024, through March 16, 2024, the PFBC held five regional seminars for cooperative nurseries across Pennsylvania. The seminars were intended to inform and update Cooperative Nursery Program volunteers on a variety of pertinent topics, such as the Notice of Stocking, fish health, and the Cooperative Nursery Grant Program.

Act 1 of 2024

During the past quarter, staff advocated for passage of Senate Bill 146 in the General Assembly, and on March 28, 2024, Governor Shapiro signed the bill into law (Act 1 of 2024). The new law will allow participants in therapeutic recreation programs to be exempt from fishing license

requirements. The law was supported by service groups such as Project Healing Waters and Wounded Warriors. Act 1 goes into effect on May 27, 2024.

NON-GAME SPECIES AND HABITAT

Pennsylvania Wildlife Action Plan

The PFBC, in conjunction with the Pennsylvania Game Commission, initiated the process to update the Pennsylvania Wildlife Action Plan (WAP) with the 2024 Fish & Wildlife Diversity Forum on March 7-8, 2024, in State College. Attended by approximately 80 experts in wildlife conservation in Pennsylvania, the Forum was a first step toward identifying concerns, actions, and priorities to be addressed in the next WAP. The WAP is a non-regulatory, proactive conservation blueprint to prevent Species of Greatest Conservation Need from requiring protection under the federal Endangered Species Act. Maintaining an approved WAP retains Pennsylvania's eligibility for federal grant funding to prevent wildlife from becoming endangered.

Non-game Species Action Plans

Staff implemented non-game species action plans over the quarter by engaging in the following activities:

- Conducted Bog Turtle habitat management to create and maintain suitable habitat that is cleared of shrubs and small trees. Clearing early successional growth prevents suitable habitat from being shaded, helps maintain adequate hydrology, and provides warmer and sunny areas for nesting.
- Worked with the Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program (PNHP) to add Digger Crayfish records into the Pennsylvania Natural Diversity Inventory (PNDI) system and create environmental review polygons given its recent listing as a state endangered species.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Lower Woods Pond, Wayne County

PFBC staff prepared and submitted the Lower Woods Pond Refilling Plan to the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Dam Safety. Upon approval of the refilling plan, Lower Woods Pond will be re-filled gradually until the reservoir reaches its design depth. Refilling is expected to be completed by May 25, 2024.

Belmont Lake Dam Rehabilitation Project, Wayne County

Construction proposals were reviewed and scored for the selection of a contractor to complete improvements to the Belmont Lake Dam. The project will include upgrades to the existing spillway, flattening the slope of the dam embankment, and other site improvements. Construction is estimated to begin by early summer of 2024.

Shiloh Road Drainage Improvement Project, Centre County

Drainage improvements to Shiloh Road were completed in January 2024. Improvements included better shoulder drainage, the addition of cross pipes to protect the road from damage due to water runoff, and asphalt patching to improve roadways surfacing. Shiloh Road is used

to access the PFBC's Benner Spring State Fish Hatchery, as well a popular parking area to access the Spring Creek Canyon Trail and State Game Lands 333.

SPORT FISH AND HABITAT

Hatchery Trout Stocking

PFBC's hatcheries distributed approximately 778,000 adult Brook, Brown, Rainbow, and Golden Rainbow Trout as part of the pre-season trout stocking efforts from February through March 2024. Throughout Pennsylvania, these adult trout were stocked into approximately 3,800 miles of streams and 111 lakes.

Notice of Stocking (NOS)

Staff oversaw the implementation of the NOS program related to the Chapter 71a rulemaking and continued NOS work during the quarter. Since the January 1, 2024, implementation, staff garnered knowledge through client interactions and comments to enhance the NOS program. External program enhancements included updates to the application form, instructional resources, and website content. Internal program enhancements included continued development of the NOS IntranetApps module and internal processing protocol. As of March 31, 2024, staff received NOS submissions for 2,264 stocking events at 800 stocking locations with 231 NOS submissions received through the HuntFishPA website.

Woodcock Lake Habitat Project (Crawford County)

Staff, along with Woodcock Township and United States Army Corps of Engineers, placed 69 concrete reef ball structures into Woodcock Lake as habitat for larger sport fish species. This lake has a mostly featureless bottom, and the reef balls will offer exceptional cover for the fish. Partners are also enhancing the lake's aquatic habitat by placing more than 260 tons of rock rubble humps. These structures provide cover for fish and improve macroinvertebrate habitat.