



# Commission Meeting Minutes

## South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks

523 E Capitol Avenue | Pierre, South Dakota 57501

January 8-9, 2026 | Ramkota Convention Center, Pierre, SD

### REGULAR COMMISSION MEETING

#### Call Meeting to Order

Chair Rissler called the meeting to order at 1 pm CST at the Ramkota Convention Center on January 8, 2026. Commissioners Stephanie Rissler, Jon Locken, and Travis Theel, Jim White, Julie Bartling, and Travis Bies were present. Commissioner Bruce Cull was present online. With seven commission members present or online, a quorum was established. The public and staff could listen via SDPB Livestream and participate via conference or in person, with approximately 110 total participants attending via Zoom or in person.

#### 1. Conflict of Interest Disclosure [Action Item]

Chair Rissler requested the disclosure of any potential conflicts of interest, but none were brought forward.

#### 2. Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes [Action Item]

Chair Rissler called for any additions or corrections to the regular minutes of the December 2025 meeting. Minutes are available at <https://gfp.sd.gov/commission/archives/>.

MOTIONED BY BARTLING, SECONDED BY BIES TO APPROVE THE DECEMBER 2025 REGULAR COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES. The motion carried unanimously.

#### 3. Additional Salary Days [Action Item]

Chair Rissler called for additional salary days from the Commissioners. Additional days were submitted for approval for Commissioner Bies for one day.

MOTIONED BY WHITE, SECONDED BY THEEL TO APPROVE THE ADDITIONAL COMMISSIONER SALARY DAYS. The motion carried unanimously.

#### 4. License List Request [Action Item]

- a. A request was made by Mary Slattery for all permits issued to individual hunters for a particular parcel of property within Sioux Falls. Because only one name appeared on that list, and because SDCL 1-27-1.5(22) exempts from public disclosure records which would constitute an unreasonable release of personal information, the Department recommended to the Commission that it deny the request.
- b. A request was made by Rock'n Diamond Outdoors for all non-resident pheasant license holders. Because the stated purpose of the list was "for advertise new lodge built in 2025," and because ARSD 41:06:02:04 does not preclude disclosing a license list for that purpose, the Department did not object to the Commission approving the request.

MOTIONED BY BIES, SECONDED BY LOCKEN TO DENY THE LICENSE LIST REQUEST FROM MARY SLATTERY. The motion carried unanimously.

MOTIONED BY LOCKEN, SECONDED BY THEEL TO APPROVE THE LICENSE LIST REQUEST FOR ROCK'N DIAMOND OUTDOORS. The motion carried unanimously.

#### 5. Election of Officers [Action Item]

Chair Rissler opened the floor to nominations for the Commission Officer Positions.

MOTIONED BY LOCKEN, SECONDED BY THEEL TO NOMINATE BARTLING FOR VICE-CHAIR. The motion carried unanimously.

MOTIONED BY THEEL, SECONDED BY WHITE TO NOMINATE RISSLER FOR CHAIR. The motion carried unanimously.



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### 6. 2026 Legislative Session

[Info Item]

Department Secretary Robling gave a brief update on the legislative items being brought during the 2026 legislative session.

### 7. New Staff Introductions

[Info Item]

Jeff VanMeeteren, Director of Parks & Recreation, introduced one new employee: Chad Austin, Park Maintenance Technician at Farm Island in Pierre.

Director Kirschenmann introduced the three new employees to the Wildlife Division. They are Kelsi Craig, Sr. Secretary in the Licensing located in the Ft. Pierre office, Kody Elbert, Conservation Officer stationed in Vermillion, and Kaden Krutzfeldt, Habitat Conservation Technician located in Aberdeen.

Scott Simpson, Deputy Secretary, introduced one new employee: Callyn Fox, Assistant Finance Director, located in the Foss Building in Pierre.

### Open Forum

Senior Staff Attorney, Nick Michels, opened the floor at 2:03 pm CST for discussion from those in attendance in matters of importance to them that are listed on the agenda, not as a finalization or may not be on the agenda.

2:04 pm: Janet Moore of Rapid City, SD, testified virtually in opposition of the Nest Predator Bounty Program.

2:08 pm: Nancy Hilding of Black Hawk, SD representing Prairie Hills Audubon Society testified virtually in opposition of the nest predator bounty survey, the posting timeline of the meeting agenda, and commented on use of budget and grants.

Senior Staff Attorney Michels closed the open forum at 2:14 pm CST.

### 8. Public Water Zoning and Iron Creek Lake Access Improvements [Action Item: Proposal]

Sam Schelhaas and Trenton Haffley presented a proposal to establish Iron Creek Lake in Lawrence County as a no-wake zone. There has been significant work done with the locals around the lake over the last year, which included a survey of the property. Additionally, there were many dilapidated docks and other structures in and around the lake that were removed. This lake is 24 acres in size and is used primarily by kayaks and paddle boards.

MOTIONED BY BIES, SECONDED BY WHITE TO ACCEPT THE PROPOSAL WITH FINALIZATION IN MARCH. The motion carried unanimously.

### 9. Lake Albert Waterfowl Refuge

[Action Item: Proposal]

Jacquie Ermer, Regional Wildlife Supervisor, provided a brief background on Lake Albert Waterfowl Refuge located in Grant County. At the request of the eight landowners whose property is within the Lake Albert Waterfowl Refuge, a recommendation was presented to the Commission to remove the refuge status.

MOTIONED BY BARTLING, SECONDED BY LOCKEN TO APPROVE THE PROPOSAL WITH FINALIZATION IN MARCH. Motion carried unanimously.



# Commission Meeting Minutes

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### 10. Hunt for Habitat

[Action Item: Proposal]

Chad Switzer, Wildlife Deputy Director, provided background on the codified law granting the Commission authority to promulgate rules for the Hunt for Habitat raffle. From 2019 through 2025, the Hunt for Habitat program generated more than \$2 million in revenue for habitat development and management on public lands. The Department recommended removing specific license packages from administrative rule and replacing them with a provision allowing “no more than ten big game licenses,” a change proposed by the Commission. Under this proposal, the Commission would have the authority to modify and finalize future raffle packages through administrative action. For 2026, the Hunt for Habitat raffle would include a total of ten licenses offered in the following packages: one Custer State Park Trophy Bison; one Custer State Park Trophy Bison and any white-tailed deer package; one any-deer license (statewide, excluding Custer State Park); and three any-deer (statewide, excluding Custer State Park) and elk packages.

### 11. Custer State Park Storm Damage Update

[Info Item: Parks]

Josh Schmaltz CEO of Ramkota Companies and Matt Snyder, Regional Park Supervisor, provided a power point showcasing the December 18, 2025, windstorm damage. Approximately 37 buildings were damaged due to fallen trees along with damage to picnic tables, electrical pedestals, and the boundary fence. Roads throughout the park were blocked due to downed trees. The entire park was without power for 6 days. Staff from across the state, as well as local DOT staff and the Department of Corrections, have come to the aid of Custer State Park to assist with the removal of fallen trees and overall storm cleanup.

The Mickelson Trail and State Snowmobile trails were also impacted. Staff were able to remove the fallen trees from the snowmobile trails within a matter of days. Two crews are still working on removing trees from the Mickelson Trail.

### 12. Custer State Park R&M Project Update 2025 and 2026 Plan

[Info Item: Parks]

Josh Schmaltz CEO of Ramkota Companies and Matt Snyder, Regional Park Supervisor, provided information on the 2025 Completed Repair and Maintenance projects as well as the proposed 2026 Repair and Maintenance projects for Custer State Park Resort Company. Josh also shared with the Commission a booklet highlighting the significant Repair and Maintenance projects Custer State Park Resort Company as performed over the past 19 years they have held the concession contract.

### 13. Adventure 250: Make Your History

[Info Item: Parks]

Heather Berg, Parks GIS Program Specialist, and Rachel Comes, Volunteer Coordinator, presented information about the 2026 Annual Park Theme called Adventure 250: Make Your History in South Dakota State Parks. Adventure 250 is a statewide summer challenge that celebrates America’s 250th birthday by inviting visitors to explore South Dakota State Parks through fun, achievable adventures. Running from Open House Weekend through Labor Day, participants earn points, enter weekly prize drawings, and make their own history across parks statewide. Prizes are being sponsored by Independent Insurance Agents of South Dakota.

### 14. 2025 Year End Revenue and Camping Reports

[Info Item: Parks]

Jeff VanMeeteren, Director of Parks & Recreation, presented the December monthly and year-to-date report numbers for the Division of Parks & Recreation related to camping units and revenue. December camping units were up 1% for the month but remain down 5% YTD. The Parks Division revenue was down 16% overall for the month of December primarily due to poor weather but revenues remain strong with a 16% increase YTD. The standard graphs and charts were shared with the Commission to depict how park



# Commission Meeting Minutes

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revenue has come in for the Division overall and the impact of the new nonresident park entrance license fees as compared to other entrance fees.

Additionally, annual visitation numbers were shared with the Commission indicating 8,976,000 park visitors for 2025. Over the past 10 years visitation at all state park system areas has increased by 19%. A list of 10 Parks Division accomplishments were summarized with the Commission.

### 15. CWD Action Plan

[Action Item: Wildlife]

Wildlife program administrator, Andrew Norton, provided a summary of the CWD Action Plan and comments received during the two-month comment period. There were a mix of comments desiring GFP do both more and less in regard to CWD monitoring and management. The GFP Commission voted to unanimously to adopt the CWD Action Plan, which was unchanged from the draft shared with the public in November.

MOTIONED BY BIES, SECONDED BY BARTLING TO APPROVE THE CWD ACTION PLAN. Motion carried unanimously.

### 16. Bighorn Sheep Auction License

[Action Item: Wildlife]

John Kanta, Terrestrial Section Chief, shared that beginning in 2013, GFP has made a bighorn sheep license available for auction by a non-profit organization. Administrative rule states that if three or more bighorn sheep licenses are offered by the commission, one of those licenses shall be made available for auction. The entity auctioning the license must agree to give 100% of the proceeds back to GFP. This year, GFP received two applications for the auction license. The commission selected IA FNAWS to auction the license.

MOTIONED BY BIES, SECONDED BY WHITE TO APPROVE THE BIGHORN SHEEP AUCTION LICENSE RECIPIENT. The motion carried unanimously.

### 17. Turkey Hunter Recruitment License

[Action Item: Wildlife]

Terrestrial Section Chief, John Kanta, shared that beginning in 2023, the commission adopted rules to offer the opportunity for non-profit organizations to sponsor youth turkey hunters on turkey hunts. The organizations can select up to two youth to sponsor on a mentor turkey hunt. The commission may issue no more than ten turkey recruitment licenses. This year, GFP received one application for turkey hunter recruitment licenses. The commission approved.

MOTIONED BY BARTLING, SECONDED BY THEEL TO APPROVE THE TURKEY HUNTER RECRUITMENT LICENSE RECIPIENT. The motion carried unanimously.

### 18. Chronic Wasting Disease and Hemorrhagic Disease

[Info Item: Wildlife]

Senior wildlife biologist, Byron Buckley, provided information regarding Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) and Hemorrhagic Disease and the potential impacts on game populations in South Dakota. Additionally, information was provided on GFP's management strategies regarding these diseases to ensure deer and elk herds remain healthy and self-sustaining for future generations to enjoy our natural resources and hunting opportunities.

### 19. Limited Draw Returned License Policy

[Info Item: Wildlife]

Chad Switzer, Wildlife Deputy Director, and Dani Tobin, Licensing Program Administrator, presented background information and outlined proposed changes to returned licenses that will take effect in 2026. The changes include: (1) establishing deadlines for returning limited-draw licenses; (2) assessing a \$10 fee for residents and a \$30 fee for nonresidents; (3) allowing fee exceptions for unique circumstances; and (4) clarifying when fees would be assessed, how preference points would be handled, and eligibility for



# Commission Meeting Minutes

## South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks

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subsequent draws. The fees are intended to offset transaction and credit card processing costs. A communication plan was also presented to ensure transparency and timely information-sharing with customers.

### 20. Lake Oahe Fishery Update

[Info Item: Wildlife]

Dylan Gravenhof, Missouri River Fisheries Biologist, presented information gathered from various fisheries surveys on Lake Oahe from the 2025 season. Overall, the walleye population on Lake Oahe currently looks great, exemplified by another fantastic fishing season for South Dakota's anglers in 2025. Data from gill net surveys showed the highest walleye abundance on Lower Oahe (~5 fish/net) over the last 9 years. Similarly, walleye abundance on Upper Oahe (~3.5 fish/net) was the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest in 9 years. Walleye growth looks great with fish attaining 16.9 inches at age-3 on the lower end and 15 inches at age-3 on the upper end. Fish condition in both zones continues to be good. Approximately 3.5 million walleye fingerlings were stocked in Upper Oahe in spring 2025, with plans to stock a similar number on Lower Oahe in 2026. Additionally, GFP staff stocked 2,638 adult GZD across Lake Oahe in 2025 to bolster prey fish abundance. Surveys indexing cold water prey fish abundance show very strong numbers of Rainbow Smelt, but reduced numbers of Cisco. Lastly, angler surveys from 2025 estimated close to 28,000 boat trips on Lake Oahe between the months of May and July. This number of trips is right near the peak number observed during the fishing boom of COVID, highlighting the exceptional fishing currently found on Lake Oahe.

### 21. Elk Action Plan

[Info Item: Wildlife]

Andy Lindbloom, Senior Big Game Biologist, presented an overview of the draft revision of the South Dakota Elk Action Plan. The Elk Action Plan outlines priorities, objectives, and management strategies to focus GFP's efforts over the next 4 years. The current population objectives are 6,000 to 8,000 elk in the Black Hills hunting units and 500-600 in Custer State Park. Outside of the Black Hills, most units west of the Missouri River will be managed for low density, while units east of the River will be managed to prevent the establishment of elk populations. The current management strategies focus on elk habitat, managing for biologically and socially acceptable elk populations, and cooperatively working with private landowners to resolve elk depredation. The GFP Commission has asked the Department to further investigate the potential to increase the upper end of the population objective in the Black Hills.

### 22. Canada Goose Action Plan

[Info Item: Wildlife]

Rocco Murano, Senior Wildlife Biologist, presented information about the South Dakota Giant Canada Goose Action Plan Revision. The revised plan will span 2026-2030, at which time another revision will be completed. Minor changes to management options are meant to simplify and clarify options for field staff. The focus of the action plan is to provide objectives and strategies for hunting season recommendations based on biological survey information and optimize hunter access and opportunities while mitigating agricultural damage.

### 23. WDM Action Plan

[Info Item: Wildlife]

Chad Switzer, Wildlife Deputy Director, presented background on the Department's Wildlife Damage Management (WDM) Program and the revision of the WDM Action Plan. With 28 full-time wildlife damage specialists, the program offers a variety of assistance tools and programs to help mitigate wildlife conflicts. The draft action plan includes the following four goals: 1) Support landowners in minimizing damage to livestock, crops, and property by delivering practical and responsive wildlife damage management services; 2) Promote strong landowner and stakeholder relations through effective communication; 3) Deliver excellent customer service and maintain program transparency; and 4) Strengthen and expand partnerships with landowners to promote habitat enhancement and increase public hunting access on private lands. Each goal has respective objectives, strategies, and action



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items. The action plan will be made available for public comment, and the Commission will consider adoption at the March 2026 meeting.

### **24. License Sales Report**

[Info Item: Wildlife]

Director Kirschenmann provided an overview of license sales for small game and fishing for the 2025 License Year. License sales were strong and trending in a positive trajectory. He also provided an update on Habitat Conservation License plate decal sales and memberships sold at the Pete Lien and Sons Shooting Sports Complex; both showing a high level of participation.

### **25. Adjourn**

[Action Item]

A Regular Commission Meeting will be held on March 5-6 at the State Library Commons, 800 Governors Drive, Pierre, SD starting at 1 pm CST.

MOTIONED BY BARTLING, SECONDED BY BIES TO ADJOURN THE MEETING AT 10:00 AM CST ON JANUARY 9, 2026. Motion carried unanimously.

Submitted respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kevin Robling".

Kevin Robling, Department Secretary