

**LOUISIANA FORESTRY COMMISSION
BATON ROUGE, LA
MARCH 14, 2017
MINUTES**

CALL TO ORDER

The Louisiana Forestry Commission meeting was called to order by Chairman Scott Poole at 10:11 am.

ROLL CALL

The roll was called by Epney Brasher

Members Present:

Chairman Scott Poole, Michael Hudson, Bill Jenkins and Dr. Allen Rutherford

LDAF Staff Present: Wade Dubea, Epney Brasher, Lindsey Hunter, Damian Johnson, Dane Morgan, Don Smith, Roy St. Pierre and Melissa Sylvia.

Guests included: Buck Vandersteen from LFA, George Tiley and Shaun Tanger

Public Comments: Dane Morgan, Assistant Commissioner of the Office of Management & Finance, briefed the commission on action taken by the legislature in the last special session regarding statutory dedicated funds. Resolution HBR1 would sweep a certain percentage of all statutory dedicated funds to cover the general bond debt of the state. The Commissioner's position is that there is ample money in the treasury to cover that bond debt without touching the dedicated funds. The Department is on sound position legally. There is a provision in each of the funds that requires that every dollar taken from the fund after it passes thru the bond redemption fund has to be replaced to be used for the intended purpose of the fund. There was no money taken from the statutory dedicated funds during the special session. This instrument is to be considered in the regular session. The Department did lose state general funds during the special session of about \$1.25 million to be taken by the end of the fiscal year. It will have some effect on the Office of Forestry. But since it has been a wet year, most of that can be taken from the supply budget without it affecting personnel. The Department is trying to fill the vacancies within Forestry to make it whole. Our experience has been that when vacancies are left, we lose the positions during the session. We cannot afford to lose any firefighters. The Department is asking for the Forestry Commission to take the same position in opposition to this taking of the statutory dedicated funds for FPP - Forest Productivity Program and Forest Protection Assessment for bond debt payment and let the legislature know of the opposition. The people of Louisiana voted for this assessment and for the funds to be used for the intended purpose. There is a difference between an assessment, a fee and a tax. If the monies are swept from these funds and used for another purpose other than intended, they are to be repaid in the same fiscal year.

MOTION: Dr. Allen Rutherford made a motion to have a letter drafted in opposition to Resolution HBR1; Mike Hudson seconded the motion. All were in favor.

Dane Morgan was stating that the challenge would probably end up in court thru a lawsuit by the Board of Commission and go to the Supreme Court for final decision.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

MOTION: Dr. Allen Rutherford made a motion to approve the minutes of the meeting held on December 12, 2016; Mike Hudson seconded the motion. All were in favor.

NEW BUSINESS

Melissa Sylvia, who is now in charge of Indian Creek, was introduced to the board members. The rules have been updated for Indian Creek and Lindsey Hunter gave a report on the updated rules changes.

MOTION: Mike Hudson made a motion to adopt the rules as stated; Bill Jenkins seconded the motion. All were in favor.

BUDGET

Epney Brasher reported on the mid-year budget cut. It was reduced to \$200,000 for the Office of Forestry. It stands at that point going into the legislative session, so it depends on what happens in the session. The sale of Department lands taking the place of money cut from the budget is no longer on the table. Wade discussed the budget and vacant positions along with salaries for Enforcement Officers.

The Office of Forestry has taken all the cuts over the last eight or nine years and worked really hard to try to not discontinue any services to the public and to the forestry community. We are at a critical point now and with anymore cuts and we will have to prioritize the services that we provide. We have downsized some of the services. We are still doing everything we can to address all the requests that come into our offices.

Firefighting is the top priority at this point and management is second as the rules stand now. Everything else falls below that now. We are at a critical point now. If we drop down any further on our firefighters, it would be dangerous to our employees as well as the public to try to fight the wildfires. Then the law would have to be changed to take that responsibility from our Department. All options have to be put on the table at these critical points. There was much discussion about using industry employees and equipment to help fight fires and the legal aspects and liability of such actions. There was discussion on how to best use the FPP funds that are not being used by the program at this point. One suggestion was that research was included in the fund from the start. The practices were discussed along with the rate payments by the feds along with the state funding.

DIVISION REPORTS

Damian Johnson introduced himself to the Commission as the new chief pilot. He gave a report on the Aviation branch and the planes. Wade commended the team of three that keep the planes going: Damian Johnson, Carl Koenig (the mechanic) and Patricia Dayberry. The planes do fire patrols, BMP flights and forest health flights too. Drones were discussed.

Roy St. Pierre discussed the vacancies of the Enforcement Officers. They are hoping to fill those positions soon to help with the cases that are being worked now. The wet weather coming thru helped the Enforcement Officers to work timber theft cases instead of arson.

Don Smith discussed the fire crews that are working out of Woodward helping fight fires in northern Oklahoma along with crews from other states.

OLD BUSINESS

The nursery properties are in the process of being put up for sale probably by the Division of Administration. The first attempt to lease the nurseries did not come out well, but there has been interest in buying the properties. There was discussion about Project Learning Tree possibly moving to another agency or sponsor.

The June meeting will be held on the 13th here in the Baton Rouge office. The fall meeting will be at the LFA conference on August 30th at 7 am.

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: Mike Hudson made a motion to adjourn the meeting; Bill Jenkins seconded the motion. All were in favor. Meeting was adjourned at 12:05 p.m.