

# NATURAL RESOURCES COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes, January 20, 2026

## MEMBERS PRESENT

Bryan Poynter, Chair  
Jane Ann Stautz, Vice Chair  
Alan Morrison, Secretary  
Clint Woods  
Noelle Szydlyk  
Laura Hilden  
Jeff Stallman  
John Wright

## DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES STAFF PRESENT

Chris Smith	Executive Office	Brandt Baughman	State Parks
Ryan Mueller	Executive Office	Holly Lawson	Communications
Greg Sorrels	Executive Office	Bella Foster	Water
Whitney Wampler	Legal	Kristi Johnson	Water
Lisa Anderson	Legal		
Ron Hellmich	Nature Preserves		
David Knipe	Water		

## GUESTS PRESENT

Ginger Murphy	Dale Grok	Cory Peter
Mike Maxwell	Joni Forestal	Ed Villanyi
Gene Hopkins	Gordon Byers	Teresa Giller
Tom Swinford	Briana Clark	Brian Hall

Bryan Poynter, Chair, called to order the regular meeting of the Natural Resources Commission (Commission) at 10:02 a.m., ET, on January 20, 2026, at Fort Benjamin Harrison State Park, The Garrison, 6002 N. Post Road, Indianapolis. With the presence of eight members, the Chair observed a quorum.

## APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The Chair asked for a motion to approve the Commission's October 7, 2025, meeting minutes.

Jane Ann Stautz moved to approve the minutes as submitted. Alan Morrison seconded the motion. Upon a voice vote, the motion carried.

## REPORTS OF THE DNR DIRECTOR, DEPUTY DIRECTORS, AND THE CHAIR OF THE ADVISORY COUNCIL

Alan Morrison, Director of the Department of Natural Resources (Department), provided his report, which is summarized as follows:

Morrison first congratulated the Hoosiers on their National Championship win. He then discussed his gratitude and excitement regarding serving as the Director of the DNR for the past year and his excitement for the future. He recognized the passion and work ethic of DNR employees and expressed his gratitude and excitement. He visited many DNR properties this year. He expressed amazement with all employees across all DNR properties.

He discussed the new playgrounds, which will replace several older playgrounds, which were made possible through the Lilly grant. Brandt Baughman shared that more than fifty (50) playgrounds are being built.

Morrison announced several new trails and the groundbreaking for McCormick's Creek Campground. Morrison mentioned groundbreaking for the new District 6 law enforcement facility in Edinburgh.

DNR is working to obtain primary enforcement authority (primacy) for Class IV injection wells, which is carbon capture or sequestration. Morrison mentioned Whitney Wampler and Danae Schneck as assets on that project. Primacy gives the State of Indiana the authority over the Class IV wells, instead of the EPA.

Ryan Mueller is heading up a major water study, which is set to be completed by the end of 2026, to comply with an Executive Order. Morrison discussed the importance of water use and management.

Madalynn Conner, the DNR's Chief of Staff, is heading up a major rare earth elements study, which is set to be complete by the end of 2026, to comply with an executive order. Morrison discussed rare earth elements and the executive order requiring the DNR to examine what we have and create a management plan on how best to use or mine said elements.

The legislative session is moving forward. The DNR has edited and reduced its agency bill as it is making the Executive Order to reduce regulatory burden a priority. Morrison discussed the reason for this being prioritizing use of taxpayer dollars and being more efficient for the citizens of Indiana. The DNR is closely tracking a bill which prohibits sex offenders from entering State Park properties, Morrison mentioned safety as a main priority. The DNR is tracking additional bills including the forestry bills, law enforcement bills, and Will Haines, legislative director, is tracking somewhere between one hundred (100) and one hundred fifty (150) bills that may affect DNR.

Chris Smith, Deputy Director of the Lands and Cultural Resources Bureau, provided his report, which is summarized as follows:

The DNR hosted a day of service on January 19, Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Despite the cold volunteers still came out and the DNR is still gathering the final numbers of how many people attended.

Many hunting and trapping seasons are in effect or currently wrapping up. The deer reduction zones are open until the end of January. As of January 19, the total for this deer season is one hundred thirty-one thousand three hundred eighty-nine (131,389) deer, a ten (10) year high. This year's first bobcat trapping season began on November 8<sup>th</sup> and ended with the statewide quota of two hundred fifty (250) being reached four weeks into the season. The DNR is doing a review of the bobcat trapping processes and will provide a report.

The Division of Forestry has completed, and passed, both of their audits, they are audited by two independent agencies each year to ensure sustainable forestry practices are being implemented.

Jack Siefert, Division of Forestry, and his crew have been working to clean up various tornado damage across the state.

The DNR hosted hikes on January 1 and had four thousand (4,000) participants. This is the fourth year the DNR, in collaboration with the Natural Resources Foundation and Bob Ross Inc., is taking registrations for the Happy Little 5K. The registration fees help fund tree planting on DNR properties. The 5K can be completed anywhere, anytime between April 22, Earth Day and April 24, Arbor Day. The DNR raised more than forty-one thousand dollars (\$41,000) last year.

Poynter asked Brandt Baughman if the new playgrounds will be new, or replacements of older playgrounds. Baughman answered that most of the playgrounds are replacing old playgrounds or placing playgrounds in more suitable locations.

Ryan Mueller, Deputy Director of the Resource Management Bureau, provided his report, which is summarized as follows:

The Division of Entomology and Plant Pathology is seeking out opportunities to educate the public and industry. Last November staff gave a presentation to the Indiana Society of American Foresters. On January 21, Eric Biddinger will be giving a nursery update to the Indiana Arborist Association. On February 10 and 11, Biddinger will give two presentations to the Indiana Green Expo. Entomology has done an excellent job with outreach and has had success with social media posts generating lots of attention.

Mueller discussed Governor Braun's Executive Order which requires that a statewide water inventory and management plan be created. This study will build on regional studies and create a statewide development framework. This project will also include the development of an online water data platform. These studies will be concluded by September of 2026 and then the DNR will hold stakeholder input workshops around the

state. Final report will be given to the governor and general assembly by December 31, 2026.

The DNR Division of Reclamation was recognized for winning the Interior States Abandoned Mine Lands Reclamation Award for the South Lake Highwall Project. This project covered ten and one half (10 ½) acres of water and seventy-one (71) acres of revegetated acres. Three thousand five hundred fifty (3,550) linear feet of dangerous highwalls were eliminated, roughly forty-nine (49) acres of spoil slopes were graded, at least five acid seeps were addressed, and acid mine drainage was prevented in various locations. This project provided safety and environmental improvements, improved ecological services, increased quality hardwoods and regeneration research plots, increased accessibility and access for recreation, and enhanced wildlife habitat. This project was a collaborative effort between the DNR's Abandoned Mine Lands program, the Division of Forestry, and Jefferson Township. This is the ninth time in eleven (11) years that the DNR's Abandoned Mine Lands Program has won the Interior States Abandoned Mine Lands Reclamation Award, which is given by the U.S. Department of the Interior's Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement.

Greg Sorrels, Deputy Director of the Administration Bureau, provided his report, which is summarized as follows:

January kicks off audit month, and the DNR currently has six (6) audits they're participating in.

For staffing the DNR currently has fifty-eight (58) full-time vacancies, but it is managing fifty (50) so the DNR will release eight positions to be filled. For intermittent staffing, the DNR aims to have one thousand (1,000) employees.

The DNR received twenty-one (21) law enforcement vehicles which are being outfitted, and the previous vehicles will be passed on and outfitted for, DNR properties.

The DNR has new federal grants, approved by the budget committee, that have been approved which include a landscape restoration and consolidated forestry grant and a capital project at Turkey Run Inn for a swimming pool.

The DNR is beginning preparation for the 2027-2028 biennium budget.

#### CHAIR AND VICE CHAIR

#### **Information: Consideration of 2026 meeting dates:**

The remaining 2026 Commission meeting dates are March 17<sup>1</sup>, May 19, July 21, September 15, and November 17. All meetings, except the July 21 meeting, are scheduled to be held at Fort Harrison State Park, The Garrison. The July 21 meeting is scheduled to be held at Pokagon State Park.

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<sup>1</sup> The date considered at the NRC Meeting was March 17<sup>th</sup>, the date of the actual meeting will be March 24<sup>th</sup>.

Chairman Poynter noted the Commission meeting is being live-streamed and there is information on the Commission's website for people who wish to make comments related to an agenda item.

Poynter made a Statement regarding Patrick Early's retirement from the Commission. Poynter stated that Early was an incredible valuable member of the Commission and his work in natural resources and conservation deserves to be celebrated. Poynter noted that the Natural Resources Advisory Council will be discussed with Director Morrison and others moving forward. Poynter asked the Executive Office to recognize Early in some meaningful way.

Poynter noted that it did not make the January agenda and that the elections of officers will take place at the March meeting.

Poynter encourages everyone attending the NRC meeting to purchase their park passes and notes that Jessica, from DNR Communications, is present and has passes available for purchase.

Poynter noted that Jeff Stallman was present in person and gave him an opportunity to introduce himself. Poynter further recognized the Academy of Sciences and their value to the Commission and the State.

Jeff Stallman then introduced himself. Stallman stated that he is taking over Marc Milne's position as the representative of the Indiana Academy of Science. Stallman is part of the Biodiversity and Natural Areas Committee. Stallman stated that by training he is a mycologist and conservation biologist. Stallman then explained that a mycologist is a fungi specialist.

Poynter then thanked Jeff Stallman for being there.

### **Updates on Commission and AOPA Committee**

Poynter asked Jane Ann Stautz, Vice Chair, to provide an update on the AOPA Committee. Stautz stated that the AOPA Committee has not met since the last NRC meeting. Stautz stated there is no update from OALP. Stautz stated that the transition is moving smoothly. Whitney Wampler stated that the DNR has followed up with OALP several times since the transition of cases to OALP July 1, 2025, and the ALJ's have said there are no pending issues at this time.

Poynter wanted to make a comment about how rewarding it is for the Commission to see the success of the trappers this bobcat trapping season. Noted its value for conservation and thanked everyone for their work.

## **DNR, DIVISION OF STATE PARKS**

Poynter stated that we have two nature preserves up for consideration of dedication today. The Barnabey Woods Nature Preserve and the Sundew Prairie Nature Preserve.

### **Consideration of the dedication of Barnebey Woods Nature Preserve in Owen County.**

Ron Hellmich, assistant director of the Division of Fish & Wildlife, presented The Barnabey Woods Nature Preserve for consideration of dedication and a summary of his report follows:

The proposed Nature Preserve is located in Owen County and provided one hundred forty-one and one half (141 ½) acres within the Shawnee Hills natural region. The region has excellent tree species and forest structural development. The site contains Illinois glacial till and sandstone bedrock. There is a waterfall which creates a good habitat for rock dwelling species. The area is owned by the Sycamore Land Trust. Hellmich then invited Tom Swinford from the Sycamore Land Trust to speak.

Poynter noted that it was great to see Tom Swinford and asked him to introduce himself again.

Tom Swinford, director of land preservation for Sycamore Land Trust, presented and a summary of his report follows:

Sycamore Land Trust, a nonprofit out of Bloomington, IN, has existed since 1990. The Sycamore Land Trust has protected eighteen thousand (18,000) acres. Swinford thanked the Commission, the President Benjamin Harrison Conservation Trust, Nature Preserves, and Fish and Wildlife. This is the Sycamore Land Trust's ninth dedicated nature preserve. This preserve was brought to Sycamore Land Trust by Professor Karl Barnebey. The land is immediately adjacent to Owen-Putnam State Forest. Professor Barnebey offered a fifty percent (50%) bargain sale, and the rest was covered by the President Benjamin Harrison Conservation Trust as well as some Sycamore Land Trust supporters. Swinford stated that it is a very strategic area for both water quality and wildlife preservation. Swinford also noted the areas' historical value and water quality value. Swinford again thanked the Commission.

Poynter thanked Swinford. Poynter then asked if there is a movement to accept the consideration of the dedication of Barnebey Woods as presented.

John Wright moved to accept the consideration of the dedication of Barnebey Woods Nature Preserve as presented. Jane Ann Stautz seconded the motion. Upon a voice vote, the motion carried.

### **Consideration of the dedication of additional property at Sundew Prairie to the Hoosier Prairie Nature Preserve in Lake County.**

Ron Hellmich presented additional property at Sundew Prairie to the Hoosier Prairie Nature Preserve for consideration of dedication and a summary of his report follows:

The Hoosier Prairie Sundew Prairie addition Nature Preserve is located in Lake County. This nature preserve is located within the northwestern morainal natural region. This property adds twenty-four and seventy-seven hundredths (24.77) acres of wet sand prairie and oak savannah to the Hoosier Prairie Conservation Area. The associated flora includes several state ranked species including northern bald club moths, paper birch and several sedges. The land is within the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore and is owned by the

DNR. The Divisions of Fish & Wildlife and Nature Preserves recommend dedication of this site as a state nature preserve.

Poynter asked if there is a motion for the consideration of the dedication of additional property at Sundew Prairie as presented.

Jane Ann Stautz moved to accept the consideration of the dedication of additional property at Sundew Prairie as presented. Alan Morrison seconded the motion. Upon a voice vote, the motion carried.

## **DNR, DIVISION OF WATER**

### **Consideration of petition for Geist Reservoir Conservancy District.**

Poynter states that many people want to speak and invites Kristi Johnson to speak.

Kristi Johnson, DNR Division of Water, presented and a summary of her report follows:

Johnson first noted that legal representation for both petitioners and remonstrators are present. The petition for the establishment of Geist Reservoir Conservancy District was filed on October 18, 2024, in Hamilton County Superior Court by court order dated October 14, 2025. The petition was referred to the DNR Division of Water for review. The DNR requested comments from agencies and received responses from IDEM, Hamilton County Health Department, Hancock County Health Department, Marion County Soil and Water Conservation District, and the Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission. None of the responses opposed the establishment of the conservancy district. The public hearing was held on December 8, 2025, at the Fishers Municipal Theater. Notice for the hearing was published in the Indy Star, a newspaper of general circulation in Hamilton, Hancock, and Marion Counties. Everyone had a chance to comment during the first public hearing and comment period and therefore a second public hearing was unnecessary. The Mayor of Fishers made a comment that they did not oppose the establishment of the conservancy district. Citizens Energy, owner of Geist Reservoir, provided a comment noting that they do not oppose the establishment of the conservancy district and will sign an operating agreement if it is going to be established. Additional comments were received and a summary of comments are in the hearing officer report. Johnson states that the Division of Water recommends the establishment of the Geist Reservoir Conservancy District. It is the Division's opinion that the petition and supporting exhibits meet the criteria required for establishment. Johnson stated that the purposes of developing forest, wildlife areas, and recreational facilities remain since it will be established as a reservoir conservancy district, and not a normal conservancy district. If the report is approved by the commission, it will then be filed with the Hamilton Superior Court. Johnson also recognized that the petition does not contain the expected level of detail generally associated with such petitions, however there was sufficient evidence provided through the public hearing and comments to recommend the establishment of the proposed Geist Reservoir Conservancy District.

Poynter then asked who would like to speak first.

Briana Clark, attorney for the petitioners, spoke first and a summary follows:

Clark stated that her client supports the establishment of the proposed Geist Reservoir Conservancy District. Clark noted the lack of detail in the petition and stated that details will be included in the district plan. Clark noted she is personally excited for the hiking opportunities to come and noted her previous hiking experience of hiking Kilimanjaro. The only comments provided in opposition were regarding the lack of detail in the petition. Clark stated the Commission's decision should be based on (1) if the Commission views the district as necessary; (2) if it holds a promise of economic and engineering feasibility; (3) if it offers benefits in excess of the costs; (4) will it serve the public health, and (5) whether it covers and serves a proper area. Clark stated that the DNR's report addressed all of said factors and the recommendation was in favor of the establishment of the conservancy district. Clark stated that the people attending the Commission meeting in favor of the conservancy district will echo the findings of the report. Clark then thanked the Commission.

Poynter then asked if anyone had questions. Clark directed any questions to Cory Peter.

An audience member spoke and began to ask a question. Poynter stated that the Commission will follow protocol and if there is time, and necessity, the individual would be given an opportunity to speak later.

Poynter then asked Mr. Maxwell to speak.

Mike Maxwell, attorney for Remonstrators with the law firm Clark Quinn, presented and a summary follows:

Maxwell represents the Marina Limited Partnership and Marina 2 Corp. Maxwell first noted the Marina's prior requests for an additional public hearing and comment period. Remonstrators feel they were not given adequate notice nor time to comment. Maxwell noted problems with the draft that has been proposed to the Commission. Maxwell states that the Marina did not receive petitioners' materials until late in the afternoon on Friday before the Monday morning public hearing. Maxwell states that the Marinas did not have adequate time to prepare their experts and allow them to present their testimony. Their experts were given the opportunity to comment by email, however Maxwell stated that they should have had the opportunity to comment in person. Maxwell commented on issues in the draft report, namely that the DNR was required to make factual determinations on each of the statutory conditions. They do not believe the draft report complies with the statute because (1) the determinations were ambiguous and (2) determinations seem to contradict the commentary preceding the determination. Maxwell stated that the draft report seems speculative and circular. Maxwell stated that the petition "mostly" covered the requirements in the Indiana Code to make a determination, but "mostly" should not count when the trial court will rely on the determinations made. Maxwell stated the final position that they do not think the draft report should be adopted.

Poynter asked Kristi Johnson to come back up. Poynter clarifies that the Commission is not an adjudicatory body in this matter, and the NRC is strictly an advisor. Poynter then asked Johnson if she had any comments to Maxwell's statements.

Johnson stated that there was a pre-conference meeting before the public hearing where both sides had legal representation and both sides agreed to the proceedings for the public hearing. Johnson stated that at the public hearing, DNR provided over an hour for other comments. Johnson stated that, concerning the report itself, the language used was standard and similar to all reports.

Poynter then reiterated that the Commission provides a strictly advisory role. And asked for any further questions. He then asked Mr. Byers to speak.

Gordon Byers, attorney for the remonstrators, presented and a summary follows:

Byers represents the Marinas and interested parties. Byers stated that half of the population wants the conservancy district and half is opposed. Byers gave a brief history of his involvement with the water utility. Byers stated that his client has an obligation to indemnify for all of the activities on the lake. Byers stated that he believes a conservancy approach is wrong because of the large public access and public's presence on the lake. Byers proposed other solutions to the problems at Geist including (1) payment in lieu of taxes to raise revenue, (2) legal drain fees; and (3) flood water fees. Further, Byers stated that the boundary is wrong and the boundary must be changed. Byers stated that this is not a riparian rights issue because these people have no ownership in the lake, the individuals only have a right to use the lake pursuant to the license agreement. Byers took issue with the fact that lake users are going to be charged fees to use waters of the state. Byers proposed adding language to explore the possibility of alternatives of fees and income. Byers stated that they're creating a special taxing district. Byers additionally stated that the notice was inadequate. Byers shared his opinion that this is the beginning of privatization of water. Byers thanked the Commission.

Poynter gave Mr. Peter the opportunity to have the last word.

Cory Peter, president of the Geist Lake Coalition, presented and a summary follows:

Peter started by stating that he is not an attorney and he is a homeowner on Geist Reservoir. He is the president of a nonprofit, the Geist Lake Coalition. The Geist Lake Coalition was formed twenty (20) years ago to address issues that arose on the reservoir. Peter stated the goal is to maintain the reservoir for everyone that uses it. Peter stated that Geist is unique because it is privately owned by Citizens Energy but open to the public for recreation. Peter stated that the Geist Lake Coalition raised the money to help get the statute in place to create a reservoir conservancy district. Peter stated that they have collected thousands of signatures in support of the conservancy district. Peter stated that throughout the whole process, they have yet to have a homeowner stand up and say they were opposed to the conservancy district.

Poynter asked if there were any questions. Jane Ann Stautz asked about the boundaries, can you maybe explain just a little bit about how that boundary was established?

Peter stated that it is a statutory legal requirement for a contiguous boundary for the conservancy district. Peter does not see how the remonstrator's comments regarding much larger areas are possible physically. Peter stated that the boundary portion is what the homeowners believe is reasonable and the right size for the homeowners and the reservoir itself.

Stautz further asked whether the opposition mentioned exploring potential alternatives, was that considered?

Peter stated that the Geist Lake Coalition, nonprofit, has been exploring alternatives for twenty (20) years. Peter stated there is no adequate alternative. Peter stated the Geist Lake Coalition would be open to alternatives if options arose. Peter stated, that if the conservancy district does not move forward, they would be on the road to disbanding the Geist Lake Coalition because it can't be maintained as a volunteer organization. Peter stated that volunteer organizations cannot do this on their own long term. Further, Peter stated this is what the homeowners would prefer.

Poynter called Kristi Johnson again and asked if she stood by her report given what they have heard today.

Johnson said yes. Johnson further mentioned that the boundary must be continuous according to the statute. Johnson also stated they can expand boundaries at a later time. Johnson stated that a lot of conservancy districts do expand boundaries at some point.

Poynter again stated the Commission's role is limited. Poynter asked Johnson again, is the report defensible.

Johnson said yes.

Chris Smith addressed the comments regarding the language used in the report. Smith stated this was statutory in nature and the words reflect the words of the statute.

Poynter thanked everyone. Poynter stated he would entertain a motion to accept the report. The concerned citizen again voiced a comment, and Poynter informed him this was not the appropriate time nor place for his comment.

Alan Morrison moved to accept the hearing officer's report and recommendations to the superior court as presented. Jeff Stallman seconded the motion. Upon a voice vote, the motion carried.

Poynter addressed Ginger Murphy and gave her the opportunity to speak.

Ginger Murphy, on behalf of the Indiana Parks Alliance (IPA), commented on House Bill (HB) 1003 as follows.

First, she thanked everyone. Murphy is a citizen who is supportive of the Commission and DNR in rulemaking. She addressed that HB 1003 proposes to eliminate several commissions including the Commission. She posed the question to the Commission. On behalf of IPA, if the bill passes into law and keeps the dissolution of the Commission in that law, does the agency have a process to allow for similar review and open, trusted face-to-face public input and what might that process be.

Alan Morrison thanks Murphy and asks Whitney Wampler to explain the rulemaking process.

Whitney Wampler explains IC 4-22-2 Rulemaking and that there is still a review process and opportunity for public input for any rulemaking done by the DNR.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:27 a.m., ET.