

INVASIVE SPECIES COMMITTEE

Meeting Minutes

91st North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference

Thursday, April 2, 2026 • 3:30–5:20 PM

Columbus, Ohio

Acting Chair: John Navarro, Ohio DNR, Division of Wildlife — Executive Administrator, Fish Management and Research

AFWA Staff Support: Melanie Steinkamp, AFWA

1. CALL TO ORDER / INTRODUCTIONS / APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Acting Chair John Navarro called the meeting to order at 3:30 PM. He noted he was filling in for Nicole and Tom, who were unable to attend. Navarro introduced himself as the Ohio DNR Fish Chief and former Aquatic Stewardship administrator, noting his background in aquatic invasive species and aquatic diversity. Melanie Steinkamp of AFWA was introduced as co-facilitator. Participants signed in via QR code.

Navarro briefly reviewed the agenda: Ohio State Spotlight, State Agency Roundtable, Breakout Groups, Feral Swine Working Group Update, Federal Partner Roundtable, Legislative Update, and Wrap-Up.

Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes

Navarro noted the previous meeting minutes had been distributed by email and were circulating in the room.

Motion to Approve: Moved and seconded. No discussion. No nays. Minutes approved.

2. OHIO STATE SPOTLIGHT

Presenter: John Navarro, Ohio DNR

Grass Carp in Lake Erie

- Invasive carp refers to four species: grass carp, bighead, silver, and black carp. Black carp have not yet arrived in Ohio but are expected.
- Reproducing grass carp have been documented in Lake Erie. A likely contributing factor is that Ohio did not implement its triploid requirement until several years after allowing grass carp for vegetation control, providing a window for diploid fish to enter the system.
- Ohio's approach is guided by the Great Lakes Fishery Commission's second five-year interagency plan, with a goal of crashing the population before it reaches densities that damage aquatic vegetation — critical for native fish and waterfowl.
- Coordinated removal began in earnest in 2018, targeting the Maumee and Sandusky Rivers (Sandusky is the primary site). Removal methods have evolved significantly:

- o Electrofishing and trammel nets were used early on but proved time-consuming.
- o A raft now enables access to shallow upper reaches of the Sandusky River. In 2023, a concentration of fish was removed in that area; subsequent years have shown fewer fish.
- o Gill nets set overnight in the lower Sandusky have proven highly effective, as grass carp appear to move at night.
- o Telemetry-tagged fish and fixed receivers allow real-time tracking, enabling managers to find and target fish as they move — similar to a Judas Fish approach.
- Catch-per-unit effort is declining and relative abundance in tributaries has dropped — evidence the program is having an effect.
- Lessons Learned: Evolving methods and real-time data sharing among partners are essential. Early reluctance to share telemetry data due to publication concerns has been resolved; information now flows to managers in real time.
- Note: Huron River had a one-off spawning event but is not considered a major contributor. Maumee and Sandusky remain the primary spawning tributaries.

GLMRIS Focus Area 2 – Ohio (Bighead and Silver Carp)

- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) GLMRIS study identified four Ohio pathway connections between the Ohio River Watershed and the Lake Erie Watershed where bighead and silver carp could potentially migrate.
- Grand Lake St. Marys and Mosquito Lake (Grand River): Assessed as very low risk — on the back burner.
- Ohio-Erie Canal (Long Lake / Akron connection): Risk reduction project completed. Now closed and classified as low risk.
- Little Killbuck Creek (Medium Risk): A low-lying area where the two watersheds connect during flooding. Ohio DNR is leading a berm construction project to elevate the land between the two watersheds.
 - o Phase 1 (\$3M) involved construction of a berm on the first parcel. Completed May 2025. Includes a break in the berm (fencing) that allows water passage but not adult fish, plus three culverts to receive screens when warranted.
 - o Phase 2 (\$3M) involves a second landowner (a private farmer); work initiated in 2025.
 - o Risk is assessed based on flood levels. The highest-risk connection on the first parcel has been addressed; work is progressing to higher-risk sections on the second parcel.
- All funding is through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI).
- Ohio is also participating in the Brandon Road Lock & Dam deterrent project on the Chicago Area Waterway.

Feral Swine in Ohio

- Full-time elimination activities began in 2014. A total of 1,117 feral swine removed since April 2009.
- In state FY2025 (July 2024 – June 2025), elimination activities occurred on 1,288,760 acres, including 53,037 acres of state land.
- Over \$344,700 in verified agricultural damages; disease monitoring supports Ohio's pork industry.
- Established populations are now concentrated in five areas spanning eight southern counties in the Ohio River watershed. The northern populations have been eliminated.
- Ohio projects feral swine eradication within five years.
- In 2025, feral swine/wild boar were removed as a game species in Ohio (ORC 1531.01) to eliminate any economic incentive for moving animals.
- Methods used include helicopter surveillance, camera monitoring, trapping (whole-sounder traps preferred), ground shooting, and drone support. USDA Wildlife Services conducts most removal work. Recent surveys found no animals in current target areas.
- Discussion: Members noted that feral swine are extremely intelligent. For example, they are capable of eating bait around a trap trip-wire without triggering it. Whole-sounder removal trapping is therefore preferred to avoid educating individual animals. Other states noted they face more severe populations; Ohio's geographic advantage (Ohio River as a natural barrier) aids eradication prospects.

3. STATE AGENCY AND PROVINCIAL ROUNDTABLE

South Carolina

- Alabama bass genetics: SCDNR has been conducting multi-year genetics work to assess the spread of Alabama (and Florida) bass, which are not native to much of the state. The Wylie system (Santee drainage, bordering NC) is severely impacted. Beginning in 2027, selective stocking of Florida-stock largemouth bass will begin in affected systems; brood stock collection and genetic verification is underway now. Florida bass and Alabama bass are listed as injurious in Ohio (and now SC is moving in that direction).
- Australian crayfish: A high school student was discovered growing Australian crayfish in his garage for sale in the food market under a grant from The Citadel. SCDNR was unaware of the situation. The agency oversees all aquaculture permitting for crayfish, mussels, and fish (not USDA/state agriculture). The issue is being actively worked through.
- Gulf and South Atlantic Regional Panel AIS Meeting: Scheduled for April 14–15, covering aquatic invasive species, including plants, fish, and invertebrates.

- Zebra mussels: Approximately 18 months ago, zebra mussels were found in an old diving quarry (formerly a rock quarry), likely introduced by divers from Tennessee. An eradication plan was executed: the quarry was chemically treated, killing all organisms. eDNA monitoring is ongoing; all indications (eDNA and visual surveys) suggest eradication was successful. This may be the first documented use of eDNA to confirm absence rather than presence. The state's water is generally not considered hospitable to zebra mussels.
- Alabama bass spread: Now found throughout the entire state, having migrated from SC/GA origins east and north. Smallmouth bass in most river systems are expected to be replaced within 10–20 years. Already gone from some ridge systems; coastal plain populations are dominated by Alabama bass.
- Other issues: Ongoing invasive catfish problems; apple snails found in one basin for the first time; invasive crayfish (red swamp crayfish is #1; 3–4 other invasive species present) are spreading into the Blue Ridge Escarpment region, where many endemic crayfish species are only now being discovered. Interactions between invasive and endemic crayfish are a concern.
- Triploid grass carp: SC allows triploid grass carp and tests all loads. On average, 1–2 loads per year fail testing (diploids detected). Those loads are either euthanized or escorted back to the source. SCDNR conducted a two-year undercover operation purchasing grass carp from retailers; all tested triploid, providing some confidence in the market.

Arizona

- Smallmouth bass suppression at Glen Canyon Dam: Now in its second year, ADGFD and partners are mixing cooler water via non-power bypass tubes below Glen Canyon Dam to prevent smallmouth bass spawning in the Colorado River. Before Lake Powell lowered, the water never cooled enough for spawning; changed conditions enabled it. No smallmouth bass spawning has occurred during either year of cold-water mixing. Concerns remain about long-term feasibility and power company opposition.
- Golden mussels: The spread of golden mussels from California eastward is considered potentially inevitable. Arizona is bordered by the Colorado River and is preparing accordingly. ADGFD would like to strengthen the state's invasive species law to include a mandatory statewide clean/drain/dry requirement (currently only required when recreating in known infected waters), but the political timing has not been right.
- New Zealand mud snails are widespread in Arizona.
- Note: Smallmouth bass are themselves invasive in parts of the Colorado River system, though valued in other areas.

Missouri

- Feral swine removal continues with good success. Invasive carp removal work is ongoing in tributaries, including incentivized harvest and research.
- Missouri remains a diploid grass carp state. Conversations with the small but longstanding aquaculture industry about transitioning to triploid-only have not yet succeeded. One producer raises bighead carp exclusively for federal research (USGS, USACE); removal of that operation has proven difficult. Discussions are continuing.
- Request to Ohio: Dunker asked Navarro to share Ohio's grass carp removal data, as it would help make the case to Missouri aquaculture operators about the consequences of diploid grass carp escapes.

North Carolina

- Zebra mussels (see also SC): NC found zebra mussels in an old diving quarry approximately 18 months ago. Eradication appears successful based on eDNA monitoring.
- Alabama bass are found throughout the entire state and are spreading. Smallmouth bass will likely be gone from most systems within 20–30 years.
- Invasive catfish, apple snails (first basin detection), invasive crayfish (red swamp crayfish and others), and New Zealand mud snails are all present and expanding.
- Grass carp contamination warning: Oakley noted that loads from certain producers (including Malone in Arkansas) have been found to contain non-target species — crayfish and other fishes — in the same tanks. NC has turned trucks around when discovered.

General Discussion — Grass Carp Certification

Several members discussed the FWS Grass Carp Certification Program. The FWS recently held a webinar featuring Malone (Arkansas) as a producer. Multiple members expressed confidence in the certification program itself, while acknowledging logistical and cost concerns for states that must import fish from other states.

4. NATIONAL INVASIVES INITIATIVE – BREAKOUT GROUPS AND REPORT OUT

Facilitator: John Navarro, OH DNR (Aquatic Group); Melanie Steinkamp, AFWA (Terrestrial Group)

The committee divided into Aquatic and Terrestrial breakout groups (Aquatic was the larger group). The discussion question was: *"What was a failure in invasive species management in your state/province, and what did you learn from it?"* Groups had 15 minutes. Report-outs were captured on slides visible to the room.

Aquatic Group Report-Out

- Not reacting fast enough: Multiple members shared examples of delayed response to new detections that allowed species to become established or spread. The field is still not consistently being taken seriously by decision-makers.

- Inability to educate the public: Communicating the importance and potential consequences of aquatic invasive species to the general public remains a persistent challenge.
- Law enforcement not taking it seriously: Wildlife officers have historically been reluctant or uncomfortable engaging with invasive species enforcement. Ohio noted progress; education and outreach with wildlife officers has made them more comfortable and proactive.
- Species-specific tunnel vision: Missouri cited hydrilla management as an example - a second invasive plant moved in while all attention was on hydrilla. The second species may be less severe, but it is now established because no one was watching for it.
- All funds concentrated on a single species: A member (Lake Erie context) noted that all available funding has historically been directed at quagga mussels, leaving no resources to address other priority invasive species entering the system.

Terrestrial Group Report-Out

- Incomplete remediation: Lack of resources, inadequate awareness, or inconsistent attitudes about how much decontamination is necessary result in patchwork treatment rather than complete eradication. Short-term budget cycles prevent the “long game” approach. Inconsistency exists even within USDA NRCS and Farm Service Agency offices on how seriously to take the work.
- Education – public, legislators, and policymakers: This is a shared challenge across groups. Members noted that private enterprises with economic interests in invasive species have much more reliable access to legislators than natural resources agencies. Getting in front of legislators before a species becomes a recognized crisis is extremely difficult.
- Proactive risk assessment tools: The group discussed the need for tools that can evaluate whether a newly detected or proposed species has the potential to become a major invasive problem. Examples discussed:
 - o Florida cited pythons as an example of failure: initial assessments suggested they wouldn’t survive in the Everglades; they did.
 - o Nilgai in Texas: permits were issued for outfitters to import nilgai for big game hunting; they are now a widespread invasive.
 - o Pearl Harbor invasive coral removal: introduced via aquarium dump off a public pier; the Navy is funding removal as mitigation for a project. Lesson: greater regulation of what pet stores can sell – people will continue releasing unwanted animals.
 - o Aquatic risk assessment tools do exist (e.g., FWS history of invasiveness + climate match tool). The group noted these may not be fully replicated for terrestrial plants, amphibians, and reptiles, though adaptation should be possible.

- Slow regulatory response: Regulations often do not exist until a species is already a recognized problem. By then, it may be too late to prevent establishment. The pet trade was repeatedly cited as an example requiring earlier regulatory intervention.
- Legislature is reactive, not proactive: Members noted that legislators are more willing to fund response to visible crises than to invest in prevention or early action. This is structurally limiting for invasive species management, where early action is the highest-value intervention.

Common Themes Identified

Strong overlap between the aquatic and terrestrial groups on three themes: (1) the need for better education of legislators and the public; (2) resource constraints driving incomplete or reactive management; and (3) regulatory lag enabling species to establish before tools are in place.

5. FERAL SWINE WORKING GROUP UPDATE

Presenter: Bryant White, AFWA (presenting on behalf of Terri Brunjes, Kentucky DFWR, who was not available)

- The Feral Swine Working Group was established approximately five to six years ago to create a central forum for all groups working on feral swine damage management, including the Southeastern Wildlife Working Group, the National Wild Pig Task Force, and USDA APHIS National Feral Swine Damage Management Program, and to relay information to state agency directors through AFWA.
- Dual goals: (1) eradicate or eliminate feral swine populations wherever feasible; (2) control damage where eradication is not currently possible.
- A national and international contact list of feral swine professionals is being developed. Virtual quarterly meetings are planned for January, April, July, and October. The April meeting is being skipped this year, as many practitioners will be attending the International Wild Pig Conference (April 20, 2027, Montgomery, Alabama).
- The first virtual meeting (January) drew approximately 70 participants, compared to approximately 12 at Tuesday's in-person working group session, underscoring the value of virtual meetings for reaching on-the-ground practitioners who cannot travel to conferences.

6. FEDERAL AND PARTNER ROUNDTABLE

USGS — Presented via slide

- FY2026 appropriated funding: \$45.5 million for the Biological Threats Program — similar to FY2025 levels.
- Congressional mandates: invasive carp, European green crab, and Everglades invasive species (e.g., Burmese python).

- Additional priorities: dreissenid and golden mussels, fire-prone invasive grasses, brown treesnake, blue catfish, southern house mosquito, Phragmites, and tamarisk.
- Continued emphasis on early detection and control tools. Nearly 150 publications released in 2025.
- USGS also distributed a handout summarizing recent biological threats research. A full publication list from 2025 was circulated and will be emailed to committee members.
- Contact for more information: Paul Heimowitz, USGS Invasive Species Program Manager and USGS representative to the AFWA IS Committee (pheimowitz@usgs.gov).

APHIS Wildlife Services

- APHIS Wildlife Services works collaboratively with state programs and federal land management agencies on direct wildlife control and human-wildlife conflict, including a significant invasive species portfolio.
- Brown treesnake (Guam): Ongoing cargo inspection and physical removal to prevent export off the island. Sniffer dogs trained to detect snakes in shipments. Managing snakes on the island due to power grid impacts. Program presented earlier by the Pest Management Board.
- Island restoration: APHIS conducts regular island restoration projects across U.S. territories and associated islands in the Caribbean (including rat removal on Midway Atoll; current work on Savannah Island near St. Thomas/USVI), and responds to invasive mongoose and monitor lizards on Caribbean islands.
- Feral swine – national program: Goal is complete eradication in the northern half of the country. Since 2014, feral swine have been eradicated in 10 states. Two additional states (Washington and Wisconsin) have not detected feral swine in two consecutive monitoring rounds and are in “failed to detect” status; formal eradication declaration awaits two years of clean monitoring. In total, 18 states have transitioned to a lower population classification level since 2014.
- Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot Program (Farm Bill): A \$105M six-year program (split between APHIS and NRCS) that was originally established in 2018, lapsed in 2025, and is now being restarted. APHIS handles direct control; NRCS handles restoration and cost-share assistance to landowners. The first round included 12 states and 32 pilot project areas. This year, 14 states have been invited to submit proposals; those are under review.
- Nutria: A three-state MOU with FWS is completing its third year and is being updated. APHIS is also doing offshore island nutria removal and has expanded collaboration to California, which has a growing nutria problem.

7. LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

Presenter: AFWA Staff (using the AFWA Government Affairs briefing document prepared for the North American Conference)

The following items from the AFWA Government Affairs packet were flagged as relevant to this committee:

Mississippi River Basin Fishery Commission (H.R. 1514 / S. 1078) Explicitly calls out aquatic invasive species as a significant threat throughout the basin that "must be controlled in a coordinated manner" — and notes the lack of a formal interstate structure to address them. AFWA is actively advocating for the Commission's establishment, including through WRDA 2026.

State Boating Act (S. 3985) This bill is directly tied to invasive species work — it would restore states' ability to collect fees for Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) management as part of the boating registration process, which the U.S. Coast Guard's 2022 guidance had disrupted. This is a critical funding mechanism for many state AIS programs.

Farm Bill — Feral Swine Eradication Program While not aquatic, the permanent authorization and increased funding (\$150 million through 2031) for feral swine eradication is an invasive species win worth noting.

Water Resources Development Act of 2026 AFWA submitted requests for WRDA 2026, which is a potential legislative vehicle for the Mississippi River Basin Fishery Commission. The Corps of Engineers' ecosystem restoration authorities under WRDA are also relevant to AIS management efforts.

The full AFWA Government Affairs briefing was passed around the room. Committee members may request a copy from AFWA staff.

8. WRAP-UP AND ADJOURNMENT

Meeting Format Discussion

Navarro raised a question from Chair Nicole (in absentia) regarding whether the committee's current two-hour meeting format provides adequate time, given the breadth of invasive species issues. Multiple members indicated the format feels rushed.

Action Item: AFWA staff to raise meeting time/format discussion with committee members at the fall AFWA meeting. If members agree more time is needed, a formal request to extend meeting time will be submitted.

Acting Chair Navarro thanked participants for their engagement and noted the committee finished approximately 20 minutes early.

Meeting adjourned at approximately 5:00 PM.

These minutes were prepared from meeting notes, presentations, and report-out materials from the April 2, 2026 session. Please submit corrections or additions to AFWA staff. Minutes are subject to approval at the next committee meeting.