

Big Hunting Creek Working Group

November 20, 2024 Meeting Minutes

Presiding: Kevin Haney, Potomac Valley Fly Fishers

Participating: David Payne, Antietam Fly Anglers / Potomac Valley Fly Fishers;

Ed Dizon, Potomac Valley Fly Fishers / Potomac Valley Trout Unlimited;

Karli Rogers, USGS Fisheries;

Scott Offutt, Cunningham Falls State Park;

Michael Kashiwagi, Maryland DNR Fisheries;

Andy Grosko, Free State Fly Fishers;

Jim Kennedy, Brotherhood of the Jungle Cock Maryland chapter

- 1) Kevin presented and distributed the updated brochure “Fly Fisherman’s Guide to Big Hunting Creek”. It replaces a similar brochure distributed in years past at locations in Cunningham Falls State Park and Catoctin Mountain National Park and was published by the Friends of Big Hunting Creek, a group no longer in existence. Kevin had 1,500 copies printed and paid for the printing as a donation.

There was discussion as to whether it would be desirable to create similar brochures for other streams in the area. No conclusion was reached and the subject remains open, with Fishing Creek being the most likely candidate for a possible brochure if good places can be found to distribute them.

- 2) Michael Kashiwagi gave a detailed presentation on the state of wild trout populations in streams along the Catoctin Front. A copy of the presentation accompanies these minutes. Key take-aways include:
 - a) Recent drought conditions, particularly during the fall spawning seasons of recent years, have resulted in weak survival rates for the past three spawning seasons throughout the region.
 - b) Rain and increases in water levels in late summer and into the spawning season tend to result in high survival rates. High water in wintertime is as bad or worse for a year class of trout than drought because high water right after the eggs hatch tends to wash the hatchlings into areas where survivability is unlikely.
 - c) A good year class can result in strong adult numbers, particularly for brown trout, through several years of low spawn survivability. Historically, there are good and bad spawning years but the overall adult population is largely unaffected from year to year as long as there is a good spawn year every three or four years.
 - d) Brook trout populations, except in Fishing Creek, are in decline all along the Catoctin front. While brown trout typically live as long as six years or more, brook trout typically live only three years. As a result, multiple years of weak spawning numbers result in a decline in adult populations much more quickly than is the case for brown trout. The result in Little Hunting Creek has been a substantial decline in brook trout except in the stream’s extreme upper reaches. The situation for brook trout is even more dire in the upper reaches of Owens Creek. Brook trout have not been present in numbers capable of

reproduction in Big Hunting Creek for several years, though they remain present in the tributary High Run.

- e) Big Hunting Creek, owing to cold water release from Hunting Creek Lake, is the stream with the best water temperature from a trout perspective; Fishing Creek, owing to a wholly undeveloped watershed and strong springs, is the second best in the Catoctins; Owens Creek, which has similarly protected headwaters, has not had a good temperature and flow in the past several years.
 - f) The spawn on Beaver Creek, west of the Catoctin Ridge, was weak in 2023 owing to the drought. The stream's main limestone spring near Hagerstown saw an unusual greatly diminished flow in 2023, which came after a major fish kill (whose cause remains unknown). The decreased spring flow affected the operation of the Albert Powell trout hatchery.
 - g) Interestingly, the absence of brown trout in the upper reaches of Beaver Creek below the hatchery appears to have allowed for rainbow trout fingerling escaping from the hatchery going uneaten. An unusual number of fingerlings were recorded in the 2024 stream surveys, presumably because the brown trout were not present to eat them.
- 3) Conservation projects: Kevin raised the subject of the group getting involved with projects to improve stream habitat. One project that was discussed was stream improvement work on Big Hunting Creek downstream of Bentz pond after its removal. The stretch through the town park and downstream could provide good trout habitat and the trolley tail provides access, but improved trail access and stream improvements may be needed. The trout habitat downstream is expected to improve after the removal of Bentz Pond, as colder water will get farther downstream.

Action Item: Jim will talk to town officials to see if they support such a project in the future. If so, we could develop a project plan in the future.

In addition, the possibility of the group raising money to purchase water temperature monitor devices that are placed in waterways was considered. The devices cost about \$150 each and the more that are available, the better the data they can collect. The goal could be to ensure lost loggers are replaced and additional ones are available for expanded monitoring. No conclusion was reached.

- 4) Work continues on the plan to use a trail camera to provide anglers with real time water flow information about Big Hunting Creek. The main issue at present is finding a host website; government websites are strictly restricted for system integrity reasons.

Action Item: Kevin will investigate if it is possible to host a webcam on the PVFF web site. Karli will see if the USGS tech team has any camera recommendations.

- 5) The degree to which the proposed Maryland Piedmont Reliability Project powerline, which would make electricity produced at Peach Bottom Atomic Power Station in Delta, Pa. more available to customers in Maryland, would affect trout streams in the region remains a cause for concern. It is believed some streams in northern Baltimore County, as well as other areas, could be adversely affected.

- 6) A December 2 hearing on the proposed cold-water classifications at six locations in Western Maryland has been scheduled. Big Hunting Creek affiliated organizations have all sent letters in support of the change and no further action is required.
- 7) Maryland DNR conducted a survey on Maryland's first youth fishing day, which was March 23, 2024. The number one suggestion from adults who took kids fishing was to add more small ponds to the places that open on youth fishing day.
- 8) A change in the put and take classifications for several ponds, including Bentz Pond on Big Hunting Creek, is open for public comment. Changes are proposed to enhance the Youth Fishing Day in years to come. In the 2023 inaugural Youth Fishing Day, some ponds that were stocked with kids in mind remained open to general fishing in the days leading up to the Youth day. As a result, Whiskey Spring Pond in particular ended up being largely fished out before Youth day. The changes will result in a total of 16 additional ponds statewide being closed to fishing before Youth day, ensuring young people better access to trout. Bentz Pond, however, doesn't fall into this category.
- 9) Kevin raised the possibility of expanding the role of the Big Hunting Creek Working Group beyond Big Hunting Creek, perhaps evolving into something like the Central Maryland Fly Fishing Council. The idea was widely applauded. Going forward, the group's focus is likely to expand to cover information sharing between all of the local fly fishing groups and government agencies, and advocacy, conservation and promotion of fly fishing for trout in Frederick and Washington counties, and possibly other regions. Of particular interest is advocating for conservation of wild trout populations and the streams where they live.

Action Item: Each member will take this idea back to their organization and see if they would support such a group. If so, Kevin will develop a proposal.