

Mississippi Wildlife Federation to sue wildlife foundation, state wildlife agency and fair & coliseum commission, top execs

Press Release

The Mississippi Wildlife Federation (MWF) has issued its Notice of Claim with intent to sue the Foundation for Mississippi Wildlife, Fisheries & Parks, the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks, the Mississippi Fair and Coliseum Commission and others for violation of constitutional, contractual and property rights and for conspiring to take over its annual Mississippi Wildlife Extravaganza held historically at the Mississippi State Fairgrounds, as well as denying MWF access to state owned public space paid for by state and federal public funding.

The Notice of Claim – sent by the law firm of Pittman, Roberts, & Welsh, PLLC on behalf of MWF on April 24 – also names Don Brazil, chief executive officer of FMDWFP; Sam Polles, executive director of MDWFP; Andy Gipson, Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce; and Steve Hutton, former director of the fair commission; and event promoter Jack Fisher.

Claims against the defendants allege that they collaborated and conspired “under the color of state law” to retaliate against MWF for its political stance on an environmental issue, deprive MWF of its constitutional rights, conspired to use government power to deprive MWF of its contractual and property rights, and/or to otherwise cause injury to MWF by denying the group use of exhibition space at the State Fairgrounds for its annual Wildlife Extravaganza, as well as access to other public facilities. MWF contends that the Foundation “was a willful participant with MDWFP, the Fair Commission, and the named individuals (either in their official or individual capacities)” in a series of actions aimed at taking over MWF’s Extravaganza and violating its constitutional right to use state owned facilities.

“Litigation is always a last recourse,” said Ashlee Ellis Smith, MWF CEO. “This conspiracy not only undermined MWF’s efforts to promote conservation and hunting in Mississippi – it denied access for thousands of Mississippians, stripped state employees of their constitutional rights and reveals high-level corruption that affects all taxpayers in the state.”

The suit stems from actions taken in August 2019 by the Foundation during a meeting at the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC) that was attended by Polles, members of the Foundation, MDAC members and staff and the fair commission, along with others. The purpose of this meeting was to devise a plan to use governmental authority to strip the MWF of its contractual and other rights to lawfully conduct its business on state property. This included but was not limited to MWF’s contractual and other rights to sponsor the Wildlife Extravaganza at the Mississippi Trade Mart.

MWF has also been denied access by MDWFP to a number of state-run properties where it has customarily held its mission-based initiative programs (e.g., cancellation of the MWF’s annual youth Outdoorama at Turcotte and MDWFP’s takeover of the Federation’s annual Youth Squirrel Hunts on state-run WMAs, as has been done for a decade). It is further alleged that Polles and other supervisors at MDWFP have instructed MDWFP and state employees (at MDWFP, the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science, and the state parks system) that they are forbidden from attending or volunteering with MWF events.

Prior to the 2019 Extravaganza, MWF became aware of a public misperception that the Federation was actively opposing (or otherwise preventing completion of) the installation of pumps at the Steele Bayou Control to push backwater out of the Mississippi Delta. Regardless of the accuracy of this misperception, any position taken by the MWF in public was constitutionally protected speech.

For 33 years, MWF has held the Extravaganza on the same weekend at the same place during the first week in August. Most vendors participating in the event operate within an expo circuit, and do not have flexibility to change show dates. As the fair commission itself has acknowledged, “Mississippi outdoor enthusiasts have grown accustomed over the past decades for the opportunity in early August of attending an outdoors focused expo at the fairgrounds.”

In its Notice of Claim letters, the MWF states, “Regardless of the accuracy of this perception, any position taken by the MWF in public was constitutionally protected speech. In an effort to subvert the efforts of MWF to put on a successful event, four days before last year’s Extravaganza, the MDWFP publicly withdrew its support of and participation in the event and indicated it would withdraw all future support and funding. Privately, MDWFP employees were informed by Polles, the MDWFP’s executive director, that they were not allowed to attend the event in any capacity, either as a volunteer or for personal enjoyment, and that such attendance (even in plain clothes) would result in the termination of their employment. In the past, MDWFP employees routinely attended the event in support of MWF’s efforts and to provide services where needed, such as scoring buck deer brought in by attendees. At all times, MDWFP acted with clear knowledge of the adverse financial impact that the MWF would incur.”

Less than two weeks after the 2019 Extravaganza, Brazil, Polles and Gipson (and/or someone acting on their behalf) called a meeting at the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce. Known attendees included Polles, Brazil, Gipson, prominent members of the agricultural industry, and potential event promoters. Commissioner Gipson presided. The purpose of this meeting was “to devise a plan to strip the MWF of its contractual/other rights to lawfully conduct its business on State property.” This included but was not limited to MWF’s contractual/other rights to sponsor the Wildlife Extravaganza at the Mississippi Trade Mart. Additionally, the Foundation, Brazil, Polles, Gipson, and Hutton conspired to retaliate against the MWF for its constitutionally protected First Amendment speech regarding the backwater pumps issue. These efforts were further purposed to ensure that funds from the Extravaganza would be distributed directly to the Foundation and/or to Brazil and Polles for an unlawful, preferential, or personal use. During this meeting Polles indicated that he and Brazil would be requiring a direct payment of funds to MDWFP and/or the Foundation from the potential promoters.

A second meeting of the above-named attendees plus Hutton was held on or around Aug. 16, 2019, on the MDAC premises in which it was announced that the State Fairgrounds lease

for the Extravaganza was being taken from MWF and given to the Foundation. “Thereafter, the amount of a direct payment demanded by Brazil and Polles from the potential promoters was discussed,” and “Following this meeting, sham procedures were installed for the rental of the Trade Mart ... the contract for the Extravaganza weekend was not awarded to the MWF, but instead went to Foundation, as Polles had announced, it was communicated to potential Extravaganza event planners that participation was now ‘pay to play,’ and MWF has been denied access by MDWFP to a number of state-run properties where it has customarily held its mission-based initiative programs (e.g., cancellation of the MWF’s annual youth Outdoorama at Turcotte, a takeover of the MWF’s annual Youth Squirrel Hunts on state-run WMAs). It is further believed that Dr. Polles has instructed MDWFP and state employees (at MDWFP, the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science, and the state parks system) that they are forbidden from attending or volunteering with MWF events.”

“If these individuals are allowed, through secret meetings and hidden agendas, to use their state power

to try and economically punish an organization for its stance on a political issue, or to take over a lawful private business enterprise for their economic gain, then every nonprofit and for-profit group in this state will remain in peril of having their constitutional and contractual rights trampled” said Ellis Smith.

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Expiration dates extended for state issued credentials

Press Release

The Mississippi Department of Public Safety announces expiration date extensions in accordance with Executive Order 1474 issued on April 20, 2020 to cope with and respond to the COVID-19 emergency.

All valid driver’s licenses, learner’s permits, intermediate licenses, firearm permits, security guard permits, and ID cards set to expire between March 14, 2020 and June 30, 2020 shall instead expire on August 3, 2020.


Online services are available for renewal and duplicate driver’s licenses, ID cards and address changes that can be made from any computer, tablet, or mobile phone at www.dps.ms.gov and www.driverservice-

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bureau.dps.ms.gov. Driver license stations remain closed to the public except for the 9 MHP District Troop Stations across the state until further notice. The 9 MHP District Troop Stations will only provide the following services:

- Sex offender registry transactions
- ALL Commercial Driver License (CDL) transactions

The Driver Service Bureau will adhere to social distancing with the 10-person maximum recommendation at any location which will include staff members.



Nikki Merchant
Trent Boutwell
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Eryca Edwards
Andrew Gilmore
August 8

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