

Meeting Date: November 20, 2020

Agenda Item No. 16

Agenda Item: Waterfowl Seasons Discussion

Bureau Chief Approval: TB

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Background:

Idaho's waterfowl seasons are set within a framework established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), after they consult with all state fish and wildlife agencies. Regulatory decisions are made using biological data observed the previous year. This process and schedule mean season frameworks (e.g., outside dates, season lengths, bag limits) are finalized early enough for state agencies to select and publish season dates well in advance of fall seasons.

The Adaptive Harvest Management (AHM) process determines the general duck season framework. This process was adopted by the USFWS in 1996 and is used to evaluate duck habitat and populations annually. The AHM process informs the optimal season framework for U.S. duck seasons. Special harvest strategies are used for some of the less common ducks. Goose seasons are determined by flyway management plans for each goose population. Pacific Flyway states have been offered liberal season packages – 107 days – since 1996.

For 2019-20, two new options were made available to states:

- 1) The authority to provide additional (2) hunting days to Veterans-Active Military personnel. Any days chosen for these days would be removed the maximum of 107 hunting days allowed during a liberal season structure.
- 2) The federal framework closing date for ducks and dark geese was expanded from the last Sunday in January, to January 31. Even though the time frame was extended, the number of hunting days allowed within the federal framework remained unchanged - 107 days during a liberal season structure. For the 2020-21 season, there were 128 days between the Saturday nearest September 24 (September 26) and January 31. As such, if a state wants to take advantage of an early opening date or the latest closing date, they must adjust accordingly on the other end of the season, or use a split season to close the season for a period of time if they wish to both open on an early date and close on the latest date.

Zones and split seasons are special regulations designed to distribute hunting opportunities and harvest according to when waterfowl populations are available for harvest in different regions of a state (e.g., wetlands in eastern Idaho tend to freeze earlier in the fall than wetlands in southwest Idaho). A zone is a geographic area or portion of a State, with a contiguous boundary, for which independent dates may be selected for the regular duck season.

While states may change zones and season splits for geese before the season each year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) requires states to configure zones and season splits for ducks for 5-year periods. The current five-year period ends after the 2020 season, and the deadline for Idaho to submit its duck zone/split configurations to the USFWS for the 2021-2025 seasons was July 1, 2020.

A season split is a way to accommodate both an early opener and a late closure; however, respondents to waterfowl hunter opinion surveys consistently (dating back to 2012) oppose a split season structure. Furthermore, states are not allowed a split season structure for ducks if they choose 4 zones. The Commission has approved 4 zones during the last 2 “open seasons” on zone reconfiguration because of hunter preference for a continuous season, which predicates each zone has either an early opening date or a late closing date, but not both.

In 2019 and 2020, the Department conducted mail and web-based surveys to obtain input from hunters on how to structure migratory game bird (i.e., ducks, geese, and doves) seasons and zones, within the confines of the federal framework, which includes flexibility in the start and end dates. The intent is for this information to be used to guide Idaho waterfowl seasons for the 2020-2025 seasons. These data were used to develop 2020-2021 migratory game bird season proposals, 2021-2025 duck zone proposals, and 2021-22 goose zone proposals, which were approved by the Commission previously in 2020.

Statutory Authority and/or Policy Issues:

Idaho Code 36-104(2) grants authority to the Commission to determine when an open season may be declared for the taking of wildlife. IDAPA 13.01.09.301 establishes rules regarding the take of migratory game birds.

Idaho’s migratory game bird seasons are set within a framework established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service after meeting with all state fish and wildlife agencies.

Public Involvement Process:

In 2019 and 2020 the Department conducted mail and web-based surveys to obtain input from hunters on how to structure the migratory game bird (i.e., ducks, geese, and doves) seasons and zones, within the confines of the federal framework, which includes flexibility in the start and end dates. Barring direction for further survey work to assess waterfowl hunter desires, this information is intended to inform Commission decisions on Idaho waterfowl seasons through the 2025 season. There were over 4,100 respondents to the 2019 goose hunter opinion survey, and over 6,300 respondents to the 2020 duck and dove survey.

The 2020-2021 Migratory Game Bird season proposals were available for public comment on the Department’s website from March 23 – April 3.

Justification:

N/A.

Staff Recommendation:

This agenda item is for Commission information. No action is required.

Action Requested:

N/A.