

Meeting Date: May 6, 2021

Agenda Item No. 5.E.

Agenda Item: 2021-2022 Migratory Game Bird
Season-setting (ACTION)

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. Furthermore, this process allows the Commission to set seasons for all migratory game birds at the same time. Consequently, all migratory game bird regulations are now published in the same brochure.

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.

The Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey was not conducted in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic; consequently, adjustments to optimization methods and AHM decision frameworks were developed to inform duck hunting regulations based on a predicted 2020 breeding population size and the regulatory alternatives selected for the 2020 hunting season.

Based on the liberal regulatory alternative selected for the 2020 hunting season, and a predicted 2020 breeding population size of 410,000 mallards in Alaska, and 530,000 observed in the southern Pacific Flyway, the optimal choice for the 2021 hunting season in the Pacific Flyway is the liberal regulatory alternative; a 107-day season for all waterfowl, except scaup (86 days). The maximum number of hunting days and bag limits allowed by the federal framework can be taken with no long-term impacts on Idaho's waterfowl resource.

The federal framework for ducks and dark geese was expanded in 2019-20 to January 31.

The federal framework for light geese (snow and Ross's) was expanded in 2008-2009 to March 10 for interior states within the Pacific Flyway. Idaho has implemented late-winter seasons since 2010.

In 2013, the federal framework for white-fronted geese was separated from Canada geese, and expanded to March 10 within the Pacific Flyway. Idaho has implemented a late-winter season for white-fronted geese since 2014.

Sandhill crane seasons are directed by the Pacific Flyway Council Rocky Mountain Population Crane Plan.

Dove seasons are determined by the mourning dove harvest strategy, which is based on leg band returns, for doves in the Western Management Unit.

American crow seasons are set by states as per the hunting regulations defined in the Federal Register (i.e., 50 CFR 20.133).

Zones and split seasons are special regulations designed to distribute hunting opportunities and harvest according to temporal, geographic, and demographic variability in waterfowl populations. There are established guidelines to provide a framework for zones and splits.

For ducks,

- 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.
- Once a zone and split option is selected during an open season, it must remain in place for the following 5 years.

Any State may continue the configuration used in the previous 5-year period. If changes are made, the zone and split-season configuration must confirm to one of the following options:

- No more than 4 zones with no splits,
- Split seasons (no more than 3 segments) with no zones, or
- No more than 3 zones with the option for 2-way (2-segment) split seasons in one, two, or all zones.

The USFWS's rationale for requiring duck zones and season splits to be set for 5 years at a time include:

- Their ability to conduct assessments of the consequences of zones and splits on duck harvest and effect of season length and bag limit on duck harvest;
- Administrative burden associated with making more-frequent changes;
- Concern over the proliferation of zones and splits; and
- Little perceived need to change zones and splits annually for hunter satisfaction, recruitment, and retention.

The Fish and Game Commission chose not to modify the duck zone configuration for 2021-2025 seasons in 2020; however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service granted states the ability to select duck zone configuration for the 2022-2025 seasons during 2021. The deadline for states to request changes to duck zone configurations for the 2022-2025 seasons is May, 2022.

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. This information will be used to guide Idaho waterfowl seasons and zone configurations for the 2020-2025 seasons, and was used to develop proposals for 2021-2022 Migratory Game Bird seasons and 2022-2025 duck zone configurations.

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 USFWS 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. This information will be used to guide Idaho waterfowl seasons for the 2020-2025 seasons, rather than re-defining the seasons each year. 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 2021-2022 Migratory Game Bird season proposals were available for public comment on the Department's website from March 12–24. Staff will provide a summary of public response to the Commission at the meeting. No open houses were held due to COVID-19 closures and social distancing recommendations. However, the Department did record a season proposal overview video and held a virtual open house event on March 11 to provide an overview of proposals and answer questions. Over 400 participants provided 31 submissions during the virtual event. Additionally, the Department made 23 different posts/features on migratory game bird seasons-setting across three social media platforms (i.e., Facebook pages, Twitter, and Instagram) and reached over 37,000 people.

The Department conducted a survey on season preferences and duck zone configuration among migratory bird permit holders –from Adams and Valley counties north - for whom the Department had a valid email address. Permit holders were sent an email with a link to a survey on the Department's website. The survey platform was available from April 12-23.

Justification:

Commission action is required to set the migratory game bird seasons for 2021-2022, and to set duck zone configurations for 2022-2025.

Staff Recommendation:

The Department recommends taking the maximum allowed number of hunting days and bag limits allowed by federal framework. The proposed daily duck bag limit would be 7 ducks, but not more than 2 female mallards, 2 scaup, 2 redheads, 1 pintail, and 2 canvasbacks. The proposed daily bag limit for Wilson's snipe would be 8 and the proposed daily bag limit for coots would be 25. The proposed daily bag limit for Canada geese would be 4 (except in Zone 4 during September 1-15, when the daily bag limit would be 5), the proposed daily bag limit for white-fronted geese would be 10, and the proposed daily bag limit for snow and Ross's geese would be 20. The proposed possession limit would be three times the daily bag limit.

There is no daily bag limit for American crows.

The proposed daily bag limit for doves would be 15 mourning and white-winged doves in the aggregate.

The proposed daily and season limit for sandhill cranes is 2 cranes.

Final recommendations on seasons and duck zone configuration will be presented at the Commission meeting.

Action Requested:

Approve 2021-2022 migratory game bird seasons.

Suggested Motions:

The Commission adopt staff recommendations for the 2021-2022 migratory game bird seasons.

The Commission adopt staff recommendations for the 2022-2025 duck zone configuration.