

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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BOTULISM THREATENS WATERFOWL IN CALIFORNIA

Secretary of the Interior Walter J. Hickel today expressed concern over an outbreak of botulism in the Tulare Lake Basin of California's San Joaquin Valley and directed the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife to implement an all-out cooperative program to meet what he termed an emergency of national significance.

This potentially disastrous outbreak of botulism could kill at least 25 percent of the 2 million migratory waterfowl that will begin arriving at Tulare Lake about August 10.

Already, 10,000 of the 30,000 pintails and other waterfowl that summer at Tulare Lake have died from botulism, a disease caused by certain toxin-producing bacteria found in many soils.

The only feasible means of dealing with the disease is to discourage birds from entering toxic areas and keeping them out through frequent harassment. Airboats, helicopters, and pyrotechnics are effective in the herding process, but the manpower and equipment necessary on an area the size of Tulare Basin is tremendous.

In an all-out effort to minimize the loss of birds, Secretary Hickel has directed the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife to devote all available resources to the problem. "In addition," the Secretary said, "I have urged that Bureau to recruit whatever additional help it can from other departments of government, particularly the military establishment. This potential for a major die-off of waterfowl is of national significance; it extends well beyond the borders of California."

The Department of the Interior rejected the idea of issuing an emergency declaration to permit hunting in the stricken areas well in advance of the regular hunting season. The effect--hoped for but by no means assured--would be to drive birds from areas of botulism infection to disease-free areas on the periphery and to deep waters which are normally free of infection.

"This strikes me as being a cure tantamount to the disease. Killing many healthy birds in the hope of saving others that may become afflicted appears to be a radical approach to the problem and one of unproven value," said Secretary Hickel. "I feel confident that relief can be brought to the situation short of killing additional birds through hunting."

Botulism spreads rapidly when fertile soils containing the bacteria are covered by shallow water and warmed by the sun. When waterfowl ingest the bacteria-produced toxins, death nearly always results, although this type of botulism is not known to affect human beings or domestic livestock.

California's spring floods put 87,000 acres of "new" water over Tulare basin land containing the botulism-producing organism. All factors--soil, water, temperature--have worked toward conditions conducive to this present outbreak.

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