

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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CHLORINE TO BE USED IN EFFORT TO COMBAT DUTCH DUCK PLAGUE
AT LAKE ANDES NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE IN SOUTH DAKOTA;
17,000 WATERFOWL DEAD SO FAR

Spencer Smith, director of the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service, said today that his agency is spreading chlorine in the water areas of Lake Andes National Wildlife Refuge in South Dakota in an effort to alleviate what probably is Dutch duck plague, its first major outbreak in the United States. Within the past month, 17,000 waterfowl have died at Lake Andes.

"We will do everything we can to prevent the spread of this disease, which is now more dangerous because of its discovery in a large wild, uncontrolled flock," Smith said.

Dutch duck plague, also called duck virus enteritis, was unknown in the United States prior to 1967, but the deaths of 65 wild black ducks on Long Island were attributed to the disease in November of that year. In subsequent years, Dutch duck plague has killed wild ducks in small numbers in the Long Island and San Francisco Bay areas.

Ducks, swans, and geese are susceptible to the plague, but there is no danger to humans. Most of the deaths at Lake Andes have been to mallard ducks, but a few goldeneyes, widgeon, wood ducks and black ducks have been included.

"All of the evidence we have received to date from the Department of Agriculture, which diagnoses diseases classified as 'exotic,' is that we are dealing with duck virus enteritis," Smith said.

(OVER)

Losses have been running about 1,000 birds per day, the director reported. The refuge traditionally winters about 100,000 waterfowl.

"At present," Smith said, "our strategy is to hold the birds where they are to decrease the opportunity for the outbreak to spread." Smith indicated that the disease is transmitted through the fecal matter of birds and that areas where the birds have been will be treated with chlorine on a daily basis.

The task is made a little easier, he pointed out, because diseased birds become dehydrated and congregate near water. Only 7 or 8 acres of the 375-acre lake contain open water this time of year, with the rest frozen.

Smith said that his agency is cooperating with the Canadian Wildlife Service and State fish and game agencies, especially the South Dakota department, in controlling the disease. The Fish and Wildlife Service also has contacted wildlife officials in the Netherlands for their information about the disease, which has been a chronic problem in that part of Europe for a long time.

"We hope the disease can be reduced enough within the next couple weeks so that it will not be a serious problem for north-migrating birds which will be reaching the area after that time," Smith said.

He indicated that the Service considered the alternative of killing the birds on the refuge, but decided this action would be impractical because it could not be done without scaring the birds and leading to dispersal of at least 50 percent of the flock.

Smith said that the Service was redirecting its research program to find out as much as possible about the disease as quickly as possible. "There still are many unanswered questions," Smith said, "such as the rate and magnitude of transmission of the disease in the wild, the response of birds to vaccines, and whether birds that recover then become carriers."

"The Service is moving with its research capability to respond to these and other unknowns about the disease," the director said. "I simply must proceed on the assumption that this is the first major outbreak and more should be expected."

Smith said that about 50 persons are now working on the problem on the refuge, which is now quarantined to the public to lessen the chances of the disease spreading.