



# NEWS

*from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

March 14, 1997

Hugh Vickery 202-208-5634

## **SERVICE SEEKS PUBLIC COMMENT ON CHANGING REGULATORY ALTERNATIVES FOR DUCK HUNTING**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is seeking public comment on whether to modify the regulatory alternatives it considers in setting duck-hunting seasons. The potential changes include increases in season lengths and bag limits in some of the existing alternatives as well as the addition of a very restrictive alternative.

The Service published a notice in the March 13, 1997, Federal Register asking for public comment before it formally proposes any changes.

Last year, the Service considered three regulatory alternatives--"restrictive," "moderate," and "liberal"--before selecting the "liberal" alternative. Under changes recommended by the Adaptive Harvest Management Working Group, bag limits and season lengths would be increased in the "moderate" and "liberal" options. These changes are intended to provide additional hunting opportunity in a way that is biologically sound and that reflects the desires and needs of state wildlife agencies.

"Liberal" regulations would be permitted only when mallard populations could be maintained at or near the goal of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. Historically, regulations have been tied to mallard populations because they are the most common duck harvested and are a bellwether for many other species.

The working group also recommended that a fourth "very restrictive" alternative be added. This alternative is intended to provide limited hunting seasons in years when waterfowl populations drop to low levels but when closing the season would be unnecessarily restrictive.

The Adaptive Harvest Management Working Group includes technical experts from the four flyway councils, which represent state and Provincial interests, the Canadian Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. According to the working group, the recommendations are intended to provide maximum hunting opportunities consistent with long-term resource conservation and the desire to maintain duck populations at levels specified in the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.

Although bag limits and season lengths could increase over those used in the recent past, the biological impact would not. The reason is a long-term decline in hunter numbers. The number of waterfowl hunters peaked in 1970 at 2 million and declined steadily to a low of 1 million in 1987. In spite of liberal hunting regulations in 1994 and 1995, hunter numbers rose only slightly to 1.2 million.

"We are comfortable that the changes suggested by the working group are consistent with sound resource conservation," said Acting Service Director John Rogers. "However, we are aware of concerns some people may have about increasing the bag limits and season lengths, especially given the reports of disappointing hunting seasons in some areas this past fall."

Although the projected fall flight in 1996 was one of the largest in decades, mild weather and abundant habitat may have reduced hunting success in some areas.

Under the liberal regulations in place for the 1995-96 and 1996-97 hunting seasons, an average of 10 percent of the adult male mallards in the fall flight were taken by hunters. In the 1970s and early 1980s, when similar regulations were used, the harvest rate for adult male mallards was 13 percent.

Given the number of waterfowl hunters expected in 1997 and assuming that population and habitat conditions again call for the "liberal" alternative, the working group anticipates a harvest rate of about 12 percent. Harvest rates for hen mallards and other ducks usually are less than for male mallards.

The Adaptive Harvest Management process was designed to help waterfowl managers better understand the impacts of hunting regulations on harvest and population levels. The process is intended to provide a more formal framework for addressing controversial harvest-management issues, thereby providing a more objective, better informed, and less contentious decision-making process.

The Service will offer its proposal for regulatory alternatives for ducks in the Federal Register in mid-May, with a public comment period ending on or about June 27, 1997. Final regulatory alternatives will be published in the Federal Register on or about July 15, 1997. Comments can be sent to Chief, Office of Migratory Bird Management, U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, ms 634-ARLSQ, 1849 C Street NW., Washington, DC 20240.