



NEWS

from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

March 4, 1998

Hugh Vickery 202-208-5634

SERVICE ALLOWS AQUACULTURALISTS TO TAKE CORMORANTS PREYING ON COMMERCIAL FISH STOCKS

In today's Federal Register, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published a depredation order allowing catfish farmers and other commercial aquaculturalists in 13 states to take cormorants that are preying on their fish stocks after nonlethal means to protect their fish have been shown not to work.

The order will be one component of an integrated program to reduce cormorant depredation losses at aquaculture facilities. Lethal take will supplement and increase the effectiveness of the nonlethal alternatives available to aquaculturists.

The order is not intended to control the cormorant population, estimated to be increasing annually at a rate of 6-7 percent; rather, it is directed at site-specific problems in which cormorants are eating catfish and other commercially important fish species.

"Populations of double-crested cormorants have exploded in recent years, causing significant economic loss to fish farmers," said Service Director Jamie Rappaport Clark. "With this depredation order, the Service is letting aquaculturalists take action to protect their livelihood when nonlethal methods are ineffective. This action will have no significant effect on the cormorant population but will provide needed relief on a site-specific basis."

The Service estimates the depredation order will save as much as \$20 million in fish taken each year in the \$714 million aquaculture industry. The greatest impact will be in the Mississippi Delta region where catfish farmers lose an average of 3 to 7 percent of their inventory each year to double-crested cormorants. Some farmers are being hit particularly hard by the birds while others are not affected at all.

The order applies to the following states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas.

Aquaculturalists may shoot birds only at facilities with an established nonlethal harassment program as certified by officials of state wildlife agencies and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

To take cormorants under this depredation order, aquaculturalists must first obtain certification from their state wildlife agency that a cormorant depredation problem exists, that they have employed nonlethal techniques to control cormorant depredation, that nonlethal controls have not been effective, and that lethal control is warranted.

Double-crested cormorants are long-necked, large-bodied diving birds. Their webbed feet and hooked beaks are adapted for chasing and capturing fish under water. Cormorant populations are now believed to be at an all-time high of between 1 and 2 million birds.

Aquaculturalists have had to rely on either harassing the birds, which is often ineffective, or putting net covers over their facilities to keep the birds out, which is often unfeasible or prohibitively expensive.

The order will require aquaculturalists to maintain a monthly log of the number of birds taken. These logs will be supplemented by phone and mail surveys conducted by the Service. Several other sources of data will also be reviewed annually to monitor the effects of the order on cormorant populations.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages 94 million acres of land water consisting of 512 national wildlife refuges, 65 national fish hatcheries, 38 wetland management areas with waterfowl production areas, and 50 wildlife coordination areas.

The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, administers the Endangered Species Act, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes Federal excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies. This program is a cornerstone of the Nation's wildlife management efforts, funding fish and wildlife restoration, boating access, hunter education, shooting ranges, and related projects across America.