



NEWS

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SERVICE SEEKS PUBLIC COMMENT ON REGULATIONS ADDRESSING SNOW GOOSE OVERPOPULATION

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today it is seeking public comment on changing migratory bird regulations to reduce burgeoning populations of mid-continent lesser snow geese in response to an ecological crisis on their arctic nesting grounds.

In a Notice of Intent published in the Federal Register, the Service asked the public how migratory bird regulations might be altered as a first step in reducing the current population of 4 million birds to sustainable levels of 1.5 million in the next few years.

"Snow geese are literally devouring the nesting areas in Canada that they share with many other species of wildlife," said Paul Schmidt, chief of the Service's Migratory Bird Management Office. "What once were thriving tundra ecosystems with diverse plant and animal life are fast becoming denuded wastelands. At lower populations, the tundra can be maintained, but at these levels, an important ecosystem is damaged. We need to take action soon to reduce the populations or face the possibility of irreparable harm to the ecosystem."

Biologists believe the rapid spread of soybean and rice farming in the snow goose wintering grounds in Texas, Louisiana, and other Gulf Coast states in the 1950s and 1960s is responsible for the explosive growth of the mid-continent population. Rice and soybean fields offer snow geese a rich banquet that leaves them fat and healthy for their northern migration.

Similarly, conversion of pastures to corn, barley, oats, rye, and wheat in the northern states and provinces along the migratory route offers an additional source of high nutrition during the migration. As a result, natural mortality has fallen and the population has climbed 5 to 7 percent a year for more than three decades.

Snow geese feed by grubbing, or pulling up and devouring, the roots of plants. When the mid-continent population stood at 900,000 birds in the 1960s, the fragile arctic ecosystem could withstand the grubbing. But as the population grew, the birds began to eat more than could regrow during the short arctic growing season.

Where the cord grasses and sedges preferred by geese once flourished, the ground is now cracked, bare, and dotted with

sterile, salt-encrusted craters. Biologists question whether the nesting areas will ever recover because, in the absence of plants, the soil has become saline.

The Service, working with the Canadian Wildlife Service, state wildlife agencies, and various U.S. and Canadian conservation organizations, is weighing a number of alternatives to reduce the mid-continent population.

In addition to the support already afforded by the Migratory Bird Convention to control the population, recently negotiated amendments to the convention further support the Service, in coordination with the Canadian government, in implementing a management control measure to reduce the population using alternative control methods.

Snow geese are smart birds that are notoriously hard to hunt because they tend to flock together in huge numbers and are easily spooked. Simply raising bag limits or increasing the hunting days in the regular season (already at the normal limit of 3½ months) has not increased hunting mortality enough to offset the population increases because most hunters do not get a full bag.

"Simply doing nothing and letting nature take its course is not a good alternative," Schmidt said. "Not only do we risk severe damage to a fragile ecosystem shared by many other species but also we face the real possibility that the snow goose population itself will crash as its nesting habitat is destroyed. Already we are seeing many goslings starving to death in the nesting areas because there is simply nothing to eat. Frankly, it is irresponsible to sit by and watch an ecosystem be degraded and hundreds of thousands of birds and other wildlife suffer from disease and starvation, particularly when the cause can be traced right back to human changes in the landscape."

The public may submit written comments until June 5, 1998. They should be mailed to Chief, Office of Migratory Bird Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, MS 634, ARLSQ, 1849 C Street, NW, Washington, DC 20240.

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 and water consisting of 512 national wildlife refuges, 65 national fish hatcheries, 38 wetland management districts with waterfowl production areas, and 50 wildlife coordination areas.