

SUBJECT: Adoption of Wisconsin's ten-year plan for waterfowl management

FOR: DECEMBER, 2007 BOARD MEETING

TO BE PRESENTED BY: Kent Van Horn, Migratory Bird Specialist

SUMMARY:

The intent of this plan is to outline strategies for maintaining and improving a quality waterfowl hunting tradition in Wisconsin and continuing the state's contribution to the continental management of migratory waterfowl populations.

The plan proposes six primary objectives that will guide waterfowl management for the next ten years, 1) Continue to provide habitat and habitat management, 2) Monitor and evaluate waterfowl populations across seasons and locations, 3) Improve the overall waterfowl hunting experience, 4) Manage resident Canada goose populations to balance conflicting societal perspectives, 5) Strengthen and maintain Wisconsin's waterfowl hunting heritage 6) Refine and better understand the variables that affect resident breeding and migration populations of waterfowl and apply that knowledge to management strategies.

RECOMMENDATION: Adopt Wisconsin's ten-year plan for waterfowl management.

LIST OF ATTACHED MATERIALS:

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|----|-------------------------------------|---|-----|-------------------------------------|----------|
| No | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Fiscal Estimate Required | Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> | Attached |
| No | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Environmental Assessment or Impact Statement Required | Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> | Attached |
| No | <input type="checkbox"/> | Background Memo | Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Attached |

APPROVED:

/s/
Bureau Director,

11/07/07
Date

/s/
Administrator,

11/07/07
Date

/s/
Secretary, Matt Frank

11/28/07
Date

- cc: Laurie J. Ross - AD/5
- Kent Van Horn - WM/6
- Kim Benton - WM/6
- Bill Vander Zouwen - WM/6
- GLIFWC & Tribes - 13 (WM/6)

- Cons. Congress Exec. Comm. - 4 (LS/5)
- Diane Brookbank - CS/G3
- Barbara Zellmer - WM/6
- Randy Stark - LE/5
- Tim Andryk / Carol Turner - LS/5

- Bob Manwell - CE/8
- Regional Wildlife Supervisors - 5 (WM/6)
- LE Regional Supervisors - 5 (LE/5)
- Tom Van Haren - LE/5

DATE: November 6, 2007

TO: Natural Resources Board Members

FROM: Matthew Frank

SUBJECT: Request approval of Wisconsin Waterfowl Strategic Plan

I am requesting Natural Resources Board (NRB) approval of the Wisconsin Waterfowl Strategic Plan 2008-2018 which has identified strategies for improving waterfowl management and waterfowl hunting over the next 10 years.

Waterfowl management and waterfowl related recreation are an important part of Wisconsin's past, present and future. Wisconsin currently supports a diverse group of about 85,000 waterfowl hunters who venture into this state's wetlands, lakes, rivers and fields to harvest 300,000-500,000 ducks and geese each fall. Wisconsin currently ranks 3rd in the nation for the number of waterfowl hunters and these hunters have been strong supporters of conservation raising millions of dollars for waterfowl habitat in this state. It is estimated that Wisconsin duck hunters alone spend about \$48 million annually on waterfowl hunting. Waterfowl are a shared international resource requiring management cooperation across state and national boundaries and Wisconsin is recognized as an important state for breeding and migrating waterfowl in North America. In Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources is charged with the primary stewardship responsibility for waterfowl populations and habitats as well as the management of waterfowl hunting, however, we are fortunate to have many strong partners within the state who share in this work.

While the Department's waterfowl program engages in a regular dialogue each year with duck and goose hunters regarding the annual status of waterfowl populations and hunting regulations, many topics are beyond the scope of these annual discussions. Topics such as habitat protection, Canada goose population management, information on fall waterfowl populations, the waterfowl hunting experience and waterfowl hunter education/recruitment all require a broader discussion and long range management strategies. To address these topics, the Department initiated a planning process to chart the future of its waterfowl management program beginning in 2005 (Tables 1,2). Throughout this process we have worked to collect public input from a variety of sources including our Migratory Game Bird Committee, the Migratory Committee of the Conservation Congress, a variety of waterfowl hunting and wetland interest groups, special workshops and hunter surveys, annual Department waterfowl public meetings, special sessions at the Wisconsin Waterfowl Hunters Conference as well as letters, phone calls and emails. In addition, a plan for the management of migratory waterfowl requires communication with partners and other planning efforts at the state, regional, flyway, national and international level. An abundance of available scientific information has been reviewed and serves as a foundation for this plan. This plan is intended to work in concert with related initiatives and plans that address policy and protection of wetland habitats and the needs of other wetland wildlife that are a part of parallel efforts by the Department and our partners.

I have attached an executive summary of the Wisconsin Waterfowl Strategic Plan 2008-2018 and a full draft of the plan for your review. The strategies and resources that would be required to implement the objectives listed in the executive summary can be found on pages 39-45 of the plan document. Over 200

comments were received on the strategic plan during the final June- August 2007 public review period and a summary of the comment themes are addressed in Appendix B (page 46-49) of the plan document. The strategies identify the steps necessary to maintain quality programs and improve in several areas. In most cases, the strategies can be implemented over the next 10 years by maintaining current programs, realigning some priorities and resources, experimenting with new ideas and in a few cases, requiring new or restored resources. The intent of this plan is to outline strategies for maintaining and improving a quality waterfowl hunting tradition in Wisconsin and continuing Wisconsin's contribution to the continental management of migratory waterfowl populations.

Wisconsin Waterfowl Strategic Plan: Executive Summary

Wisconsin has a long history of being an important state for waterfowl populations and waterfowl management. It has been nearly 140 years since the first waterfowl harvest limits were established, ushering in waterfowl management in Wisconsin. Since these beginnings, our human population has grown, we have lost 50% of our original 10 million acres of wetlands, and waterfowl management has evolved while we have continued to maintain a strong waterfowl hunting heritage. A review of our past and present conditions provides this picture of our current status:

- Waterfowl breeding populations in Wisconsin are at their highest levels since estimates were first attempted in the 50's and 60's and systematic surveys began in 1973.
- Over 10 years of 60 day/6 duck daily bag seasons combined with over 100 days of Canada goose hunting in most of these years, representing the highest combined hunting days and bag limits for Wisconsin waterfowl hunting opportunity in 60 years and hunters are generally satisfied with the regulations.
- While threats to waterfowl habitat continue, excellent programs are in place to continue a diligent system of acquisition, restoration and enhancement at the state and regional level. However, reductions in staffing and budgets on state and federal lands limit the ability to maintain quality habitat and conduct restorations, while state level private land policies and potential changes to national programs in the Farm Bill could significantly reduced private land habitat work.
- Waterfowl harvest levels are average to high compared with historical levels.
- Over 60% of the fall duck harvest consists of mallards, wood ducks and blue-winged teal, which are also our top three breeding ducks in Wisconsin.
- Waterfowl hunter numbers are average compared to historical levels in Wisconsin and high compared with other states. Enthusiasm for the sport continues to be high in Wisconsin.
- There is a lack of information in Wisconsin on populations of waterfowl during migration and a lack of current information on waterfowl hunting pressure and activity at the local level.
- Despite long seasons and apparent high waterfowl populations, 30 – 60% of Wisconsin's duck hunters have not had their expectations met during recent hunting experiences.
- The most important variables for improving the waterfowl hunting experience for Wisconsin duck hunters are providing opportunities/locations for duck hunters to see more ducks and experience less hunter crowding.

With this evaluation we present 6 primary objectives and associated strategies for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource's waterfowl management program:

Objective 1: Continue to provide and expand habitats and management necessary to meet the year round ecological needs of Wisconsin's diverse waterfowl community and other wetland species with recognition given to the state's role as a waterfowl production state and its waterfowl hunting heritage.

Objective 2: Monitor and evaluate waterfowl populations in Wisconsin across seasons and locations. Existing data provides a long term picture of Wisconsin breeding waterfowl populations, however, adequate data is lacking at a statewide and local scale for fall waterfowl numbers and distribution.

Objective 3: Improve the overall waterfowl hunting experience and the measures of waterfowl hunter satisfaction at the state level. Public input has consistently identified that the quality of the waterfowl hunting experience is affected by interactions (positive and negative) with other hunters as well as seeing and harvesting birds.

Objective 4: Manage resident Canada goose populations at a level that balances conflicting societal perspectives. One segment of society values our resident Canada geese for hunting and wildlife viewing while another segment considers them a nuisance or a source of damage to agricultural interests.

Objective 5: Strengthen and maintain Wisconsin’s long waterfowl hunting heritage by developing new strategies for waterfowl hunting education and recruitment and by building upon existing Department programs. Waterfowl hunter numbers in Wisconsin appear stable over the last 25 years while other groups of hunters (gun deer, small game etc.) have shown different trends from increasing to decreasing over this period. Education on waterfowl hunting techniques, opportunities and ethics can improve the overall hunting experience.

Objective 6: Through continued research, refine and better understand the variables that affect resident breeding and migration populations of waterfowl and apply this knowledge to management strategies.

Table 1. Waterfowl Strategic Plan timeline.

Issue Identification and Planning
Winter 2004/2005 – Established Migratory Game Bird Committee with representatives from partner agencies and waterfowl groups. Solicited ideas for the planning process.
March 2005 – Public Input session as part of the Wisconsin Waterfowl Hunter’s Workshop. This workshop was attended by 170 waterfowl hunters from around the state.
June 2005 – Conducted public open houses in 5 locations around the state to seek additional information from waterfowl hunters on issues, desires and strategies for waterfowl management in Wisconsin.
Data Collection and Coordination with Other Flyway and National Efforts
2005 through 2006 – Department staff participation in related Flyway planning efforts and National Waterfowl Hunting Strategy Team.
Summer 2005 – Assist in development of National and Wisconsin Duck Hunter Mail Survey.
Fall 2005 – Survey mailed to a random sample of 1300 duck hunters and results summarized.
February 2006 – Results of Duck Hunter Survey released.
Spring 2006 – Analysis and presentation of Duck Hunter Survey results, feedback from March Waterfowl Hunters Conference and advisory committee of results for plan development.
Summer/Fall 2006 – Department staff work with Upper Mississippi Great Lakes Joint Venture in development and review of regional waterfowl habitat plan that drives Wisconsin’s objectives.
Fall/Winter 2006 – Work with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Mississippi Flyway to chart new direction on Management of Canada geese.
Plan Development
Winter 2006/2007 – Draft plan development.
Winter 2006/2007 – Coordination with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service waterfowl property plans in Wisconsin.
Draft Plan: Public Presentation and Review
March 2007 – Presentation of draft plan objectives at March Waterfowl Hunters Conference.
April 2007 – Draft plan for internal and Migratory Game Bird Committee review.
May 2007 – Discussion of plan at Migratory Game Bird Committee meeting.
June–August 2007 – Public review period.
Fall/Winter 2007 – Plan completion and presentation to Natural Resources Board.

Table 2: Summary of public input for strategic plan.

- Annual Department meetings/hearings – 100’s of comments each year
- Conservation Congress Spring hearings annually – 1000’s on specific questions
- March Waterfowl Conference – ‘05,’06,’07 all had input from over 100 hunters
- Waterfowl group and local meetings – several meetings each year
- Statewide random duck hunter survey -1300
- State and federal duck/goose harvest data
- Annual Horicon zone and youth hunt surveys
- Strategic Plan workshops in ‘05
- Spring/Summer ‘07 input from meetings, groups, email, mail etc. – over 200 people