

**Program Area:** Wildlife Management

**Subject:** Proposed guidance for dove field management

**Length of Public Input Period:** 21 days

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The department is developing guidance for use by wildlife managers and technicians to improve the placement and management of dove fields. Fields planted with crops on public lands to attract doves for hunting are a service that is desired by the hunting public and which the department strives to provide. This management is relatively new to Wisconsin and the department is learning this practice and adapting it for our own use by understanding public desires and altering management activities.

This draft guidance was developed by department staff and we will solicit comments on it for 21 days. All comments will be considered, revisions will be made to the guidance documents as needed, and final guidance will be made available to internal and external stakeholders.

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## **Guidance for Dove Field Management**

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This product is intended to be guidance/considerations for wildlife managers and technicians that can be used to improve the placement and management of dove fields.

As a foundation of these recommendations the following background is presented:

- Fields planted with crops on public lands to attract doves for hunting is a desired service by our hunting public and something that we will strive to provide.
- This management is relatively new to the Wisconsin DNR and we need to continue to learn and adapt this practice by understanding the public desires, altering management practices and reviewing existing rules as they relate to this public hunting opportunity.
- This is not a new practice nationally and has been successfully implemented elsewhere so we are using what knowledge we can from other states.
- While desired, the public dove hunting fields tend to be used for a very short period of time with most activity on a site occurring for 2 days – 2 weeks beginning September 1. After that period, public use and effectiveness of the field drops significantly. This is also the common experience in other states.
- Recognize that this form of concentrated hunting is different than most other Wisconsin hunting experiences such as deer, turkey or pheasant where hunter densities are much reduced. As a result, public dove hunting fields may require special management considerations.

1) **Property Selection** – At an area or district level wildlife staff should determine which properties would be most suitable to establishing a dove hunting field. The agency goal is to provide this opportunity where feasible and to first focus on lands that already have a cropping history or blocks of upland. The following are parameters or considerations for a property that would be a good choice for locating a dove hunting field.

- Upland locations that are large enough to support dove fields on the interior of the property.
- A cropped public dove hunting field is consistent with the property's master plan (food plots are part of the plan). If they are not then a master plan variance would be needed.
- Good public access.
- Existing crop fields or grass landscapes that might be managed with a crop-grass rotation.
- In an agricultural landscape that supports doves.
- Within a couple of hours drive of population centers.
- Can it be used for hunter recruitment? Dove hunting is a low cost, minimal equipment and easy introduction to wing shooting.

- Consider Extensive Wildlife Habitat Properties – These properties tend to be smaller in size, or narrow which means that may they not be ideal for other wildlife uses such as nesting cover for pheasants and ducks.
- Look for opportunities to put multiple fields within a county or local area to provide options and spread out hunting pressure.
- New properties are good locations to test new field management strategies since hunter experience/expectation has not been established.
- Avoid areas where municipal ordinances may be in conflict with the hunting practice.
- Can the latitude, growing season length or dominant soil of the property support a crop that will attract doves? Most of our experience so far has been with sunflower in the southern part of Wisconsin. Sunflower is a preferred attractant, however, other crops and management scenarios should be considered, particularly further north. Table 1 attached.

2) **Field Location** – Selecting a location for a field within a property

- Will the soil type support the desired crop? A good sunflower dove field tends to be drier with a more sandy, gravel well drained soil. This soil type usually allows planting earlier in the spring and facilitates better weed control/exposed ground attractive to doves.
- Some staff noted negative impacts on crop growth from heavy deer browse. Consider the potential for deer browse impacts when locating fields.
- Consider the distance of the field to water and roosting sites for doves. The daily pattern of dove movement is an early morning feeding and watering period, then day roosting followed by a late afternoon feeding and watering period before they roost for the night.
- Consider the potential sharecroppers in the area and the size of the equipment they use. Can they easily access the field? If there are gate openings and roads to use, are they wide enough?
- Locate and manage fields to avoid conflicts with neighbors. Consider that shot can land up to 300 yards away. Dove hunting public fields are more intensive than many forms of hunting on public areas. Is the field near our property boundary? Is there a residence or business near the field? Are there trees that can screen the dove field from adjacent landowners?
- A field located more toward the interior of the property is preferred. This creates a situation where the surrounding land use is state wildlife area and reduces potential conflicts with neighbors.
- Many of current dove fields are under 10 acres and all under 20 acres. It is ideal to select a location where there is enough land for 2-3 adjacent fields with each at least a few acres. The fields are then rotated among crop types in cooperation with the share-cropper. This allows the maintenance of one access route, parking lot, public information on field location etc.
- Mortality of doves from ingestion of lead shot has been documented. When locating a dove field consider whether the site and subsequent

tillage of the location will expose doves to lead shot from past uses such as heavy pheasant hunting.

- When thinking about dove field placement and subsequent manipulation of the crop, we need to think about whether we would put the hunter in an illegal hunting situation with the location.
  - Do not plant within 50 feet of a road center since it is illegal to discharge a firearm in this zone. Consider grass or shrub borders to separate the field from a road.
  - Hunters cannot shoot within 100 yards of a building devoted to human occupancy so do not plant within 100 yards of a building devoted to human occupancy.
  - Doves perch on power lines. Hunters may be tempted to shoot at doves while on or near power lines so avoid developing fields near power lines.

### 3) **Field management**

- 90 day Clearfield sunflower has been the product of choice for fields.
- This sunflower seed requires a spring planting date on or before May 10 to allow proper growth and maturation before the dove season.
- The target manipulation date is the last 2 weeks of August prior to the opening of the season on September 1. Typically we are manipulating ½ of the sunflower or target crop acres and leaving ½ standing.
- Most of our public crop fields are being managed through a combination of share-cropping agreements and staff work. The share-croppers are providing the planting, pre-emergence chemical treatment and harvest/manipulation according to our direction. The DNR staff are providing post-emergence spraying. The share-cropper plants some land with sunflowers (or other crop) for public benefit and in exchange is provided land to plant and harvest corn (or other crop) in a field that is rotated with the dove field. (An example letter is attached).
- Use the manipulation pattern to encourage the hunter to shoot in a safe direction and away from roads, neighbors etc. Hunters will stand in the crop and shoot over the manipulated portion of the field.
- While most of our experience in dove fields has been sunflowers, as a program we should consider and test different crop types and management strategies; complete harvest of crop, manipulation in different patterns, harvesting in stages, different crop rotation sequences.
- In a review of other states the following crops have been used for public dove hunting fields; wheat, buckwheat, sunflower, millet, brown top millet, corn, winter wheat, sorghum, milo. Most of these sites are south of Wisconsin so variations in growing season and soil will create differences in success. The use of wheat and winter wheat in particular should be explored (see attached table).
- Weed control is important to the quality of the field in order to provide open ground attractive to doves.

**Example Sharecropper agreement letter – Dove Field**

This letter provides specific conditions for the sharecropping agreement between the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and PP Farms for XX Wildlife Area.

Special Conditions:

A) PP Farms (PPF) agrees to plant the following fields and are responsible to supply all seed, fertilizer, chemical, labor and equipment, etc.

B.)For seeding the sunflower fields:

- 1.) The DNR will provide the sunflower seed for all contract years.
- 2.) PPF will plant, spray 1-2 times to control weeds, and will apply one application of starter fertilizer.
- 3.) PPF will mow 1/2 of plot 1-2 weeks prior to opening of dove season (Sept 1) leaving the remainder as a wildlife food plot. Seeds must mature prior to mowing.

C.) PPF will not have to pay for land rent (acre for acre) of planted sunflowers in field #31,32 for their efforts to establish these sunflower plots.

D.) Time frame schedule

	2012	2013	2014
Field #31	Sunflowers	Field corn/Soybeans	Sunflowers
Field #32	Field corn/Soybeans	Sunflowers	Field Corn/Soybeans

E.) In the event that PPF does not plant or defaults from this agreement, all land under this amendment in these fields would still be required to pay land rent at \$160/acre up to or equaling 15 acres for that contract year. In the event that there is an unavoidable environmental cause for failure to plant these fields, this will be taken into consideration and a new agreement can be determined.

F.) Fall tillage, insecticides, restricted use herbicides, and green chopping of corn is prohibited.

G.) A chemical use report will be sent to PPF each year and reported back to the DNR for chemicals used on state land for each contract year.

H.) During the weekends of the gun deer hunting season, no farming operations shall be conducted on state owned lands.

I.) No changes of this agreement can be made without prior approval of Al Ramminger, PO Box 139, Portage, WI 53901. 608-742-8338.

And the covenants herein contained shall bind the parties mutually. The agreement shall not be transferred without prior written approval of said transfer by the DNR. In witness whereof, the parties have hereunto set their hands and seals the day and year first above written.

State of Wisconsin, Department of Natural Resources

By: Wildlife Technician

Date

Sharecropper

Date

Title