

regulations to one step because it is expected to significantly reduce temporal variability in hunting regulations, as well as lower the prospect of closed hunting seasons. These benefits are expected to accrue with little or no impact to the size of the mallard population or harvest. However, the Central and Pacific Flyway Councils oppose the "one-step" constraint, principally because it is expected to significantly reduce the frequency of liberal seasons. We believe that further discussion of the "one-step" constraint is needed to develop consensus regarding the trade-offs inherent in this constraint. Consensus is necessary because it is not feasible to permit this constraint for some Flyways and not others (since all Flyways must share a common management objective for shared breeding stocks). Therefore, we will not implement the "one-step" constraint for the 2003–04 duck-hunting season.

There has been longstanding concern within the waterfowl management community about the prospect of closed seasons arising from the AHM process for midcontinent mallards in instances where the biological data and historical experience show that may not be necessary. Based on the management objective that has been in place since 1996, closed hunting seasons might be prescribed in about 30% of all years in the three western Flyways as a way to more rapidly increase mallard population size when it falls below the goal of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. The Flyway Councils' recommendation would significantly reduce the frequency of closed-season prescriptions (to about 17% of all years), apparently with little biological impact. Based on current biological assessments, closed hunting seasons do not appear to be necessary from the perspective of sustainable harvesting when the midcontinent mallard population (traditional survey area plus the Great Lakes region) exceeds 5.5 million. The impact of maintaining open seasons above this level also appears to be negligible for other midcontinent duck species (scaup, gadwall, wigeon, green-winged teal, blue-winged teal, shoveler, pintail, redhead, and canvasbacks). Therefore, we intend to accept the recommendation to maintain open duck-hunting seasons when the midcontinent mallard population is above 5.5 million. However, we note that closed seasons targeted at particular species or populations could still be necessary in some situations regardless of the status of midcontinent mallards.

## B. Regulatory Alternatives

*Council Recommendations:* The Atlantic Flyway Council, the Upper- and Lower-Region Regulations Committees of the Mississippi Flyway Council, the Central Flyway Council, and the Pacific Flyway Council recommended that regulatory alternatives for duck-hunting seasons remain the same as those used in 2002, with the exception that the "very restrictive" alternative be eliminated.

The Pacific Flyway Council supports framework-date extensions as outlined in the Service's May 6, 2003, **Federal Register**, and notes that selection of framework extensions is contingent on approval by State wildlife regulatory organizations.

*Written Comments:* The Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the Colorado Division of Wildlife supported elimination of the "very restrictive" alternative.

*Service Response:* We note that expected harvest rates under the "very restrictive" alternative do not differ significantly from those under the "restrictive" alternative. Moreover, the "very restrictive" alternative would be expected to be prescribed for only about 5% or less of all hunting seasons. Because elimination of the "very restrictive" alternative appears to have negligible resource impacts, we concur with the recommendation of all four Flyway Councils and intend to eliminate this alternative from consideration for the 2003–04 hunting season. All other aspects of the regulatory alternatives will remain as proposed in the May 6 **Federal Register**.

## D. Special Seasons/Species Management

### i. September Teal Seasons

*Council Recommendations:* The Atlantic Flyway Council recommended that States that have participated in the recent experimental teal season (Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia) be offered an operational September teal season beginning in 2003. They recommend that the season run for nine consecutive days during September 1–30, 2003, with a bag limit not to exceed four teal, whenever the breeding population estimate for blue-winged teal exceeds 3.3 million in the traditional survey area. Delaware, Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia may have shooting hours between one-half hour before sunrise to sunset, while shooting hours for Maryland and South Carolina may be between sunrise and sunset.

The Upper- and Lower-Region Regulations Committees of the Mississippi Flyway Council

recommended that the 16-day September teal seasons continue to be used when the blue-winged teal breeding population is at or above 4.7 million, based on the recently completed report, "Assessment of 16-Day September Teal Seasons 1998–2000 in the Central and Mississippi Flyways."

The Central Flyway Council recommended that Nebraska's experimental September teal season become operational.

### ii. September Teal/Wood Duck Seasons

*Council Recommendations:* The Atlantic Flyway Council recommended that the bag limit for Florida's special September wood duck and teal season remain at 4 wood ducks and teal in the aggregate.

### iv. Canvasbacks

*Council Recommendations:* The Atlantic Flyway Council recommends modifying the 1994 Canvasback Harvest Strategy to allow for a limited canvasback harvest (season within a season) during years when the predicted harvest exceeds the allowable harvest, but can still be achieved by a more restrictive package (moderate, restrictive, or very restrictive). The season closure threshold would remain at a predicted spring breeding population of 500,000.

The Central Flyway Council recommended that the existing interim harvest strategy for canvasbacks be followed during the 2003–04 season.

### v. Pintails

*Council Recommendations:* The Central Flyway Council recommended that the existing interim harvest strategy for pintails be followed during the 2003–04 season.

### vii. Youth Hunt

*Council Recommendations:* The Atlantic Flyway Council recommended that the Service allow all States the option of holding "youth waterfowl hunt days" on nonconsecutive hunting days, while maintaining the requirement that they must be held on non-school days.

## 4. Canada Geese

### A. Special Seasons

*Council Recommendations:* The Atlantic Flyway Council recommended that the Service increase the September Canada goose hunting season bag limit to 8, with no possession limit beginning with the 2003–04 hunting season. They further recommended that North Carolina's Northeast Hunt Zone Special September Canada goose season