

Service Response: We do not support the Central Flyway's Option B. The regulatory alternatives for the 2003–04 hunting season were discussed in the June 23 **Federal Register**. We believe that new approaches to multispecies harvest management should be addressed in the overall context of AHM harvest management for ducks. The AHM Task Force, AHM Working Group, and Flyway Councils are considering development of multispecies approaches, and these forums would be appropriate places for further discussion of the Central Flyway proposal.

D. Special Seasons/Species Management

iii. Black Ducks

Council Recommendations: The Atlantic Flyway Council recommended allowing States the opportunity to return to a 2-black-duck daily bag limit providing they close the black duck season one day for each day a 2-black-duck bag limit is employed. No offset would be required for days when the black duck bag limit was restricted to 1 bird. Both increased bag days and closed days must be consecutive, except that 1 split is allowed. This regulation will be evaluated annually by the Atlantic Flyway Council.

Service Response: We do not support the Atlantic Flyway Council's recommendation. This request is similar to the Council's request last year, which the Service denied due to the difficulty in assessing options on a Flyway basis and the inability to assess whether or not these options are harvest-neutral. Until there is some formal agreement to manage black duck harvests on something less than a rangewide basis, we believe black ducks should continue to be managed at that level. Although black duck numbers may have improved slightly in recent years in some areas, they still remain below goal, and this spring's breeding population estimates declined 13 percent.

Presently, we are waiting for the International Black Duck Harvest Management Working Group to complete its report, which is due in November. Until we have some formal agreement among the stakeholders, including the Mississippi Flyway, we believe it is premature to consider the harvest strategy proposed by the Flyway.

iv. Canvasbacks

Council Recommendations: The Atlantic Flyway Council recommended 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. For 2003, the Council recommended that the Service allow a restrictive canvasback season of 30 consecutive hunt days for the Atlantic Flyway, with a one-bird daily limit.

The Upper- and Lower-Regulations Committees of the Mississippi Flyway Council recommended that the Service allow a restrictive canvasback season of 30 consecutive hunt days for the Mississippi Flyway, with a one-bird daily limit.

The Central Flyway Council recommended that the existing interim harvest strategy for canvasbacks be followed during the 2003–04 season. The Council further recommended under Option A (described in section 1.B. Regulatory Alternatives) that the canvasback season be 39 days, which may be split according to applicable zones/split duck hunting configurations approved for each State.

The Pacific Flyway Council recommended a canvasback season of 86 days, plus 2 youth hunt days in the Pacific Flyway, with a daily bag limit of 1, and flexibility for States to select dates for canvasback seasons during any period within the duck season framework dates.

Service Response: We continue to support the harvest strategy adopted in 1994. This year, the strategy suggests that current population and habitat status, combined with the predicted harvests, would not support harvest of canvasbacks in the "liberal" season alternative. This spring, the estimate of canvasback abundance during the May survey was 558,000 birds, and the number of ponds in Prairie Canada was about 3.5 million. Using the model from the canvasback harvest management strategy, the number of birds that could be harvested in the United States during the 2003–04 hunting season, while still attaining the objective of 500,000 birds next spring, is about 102,000. The predicted harvest in the United States, associated with the "liberal" regulatory alternative in the United States, is about 119,000 birds.

We believe that if the harvest strategy indicates a full season cannot be allowed, in some cases, a limited harvest might be possible and still attain the spring abundance objective. Thus, we propose a season length at the level of the "restrictive" AHM alternative (*i.e.*, 30 days in the Atlantic and

Mississippi Flyways, 39 days in the Central Flyway, and 60 days in the Pacific Flyway) for this year. Hunting days must be taken consecutively and must be consistent with established zone/split hunting configurations approved for the regular duck season in each State.

Further, for the second time in the past 3 years, we have proposed a departure from the 1994 canvasback harvest strategy. During the coming year, we encourage the Flyway Councils to review the harvest strategy.

v. Pintails

Council Recommendations: The Atlantic Flyway Council and the Upper- and Lower-Regulations Committees of the Mississippi Flyway Council recommended that the regulations for pintails in 2003–04 be a 60-day season with a 1-bird bag limit.

The Central Flyway Council recommended that the existing interim harvest strategy for pintails be followed during the 2003–04 season. The Council further recommended under Option A (described in section 1.B. Regulatory Alternatives) that the pintail season be 39 days, which may be split according to applicable zones/split duck hunting configurations approved for each State.

The Pacific Flyway Council recommended a full-season framework for pintails, with a daily bag limit of 1 bird.

Service Response: Last year, the Flyway Councils and the Service agreed to depart from the established pintail harvest strategy and implement a "season-within-a-season" in all four Flyways for northern pintails. The season length employed was the season length for the restrictive alternative under the AHM protocol in all four Flyways. The overall harvest declined, although not as much as predicted by the current models. This year, the breeding population estimate increased to 2.6 million; however, this estimate is still about 40 percent below the long-term population average. The interim strategy recommends a 1-pintail daily bag limit nationwide. However, based on the models, the predicted harvest (slightly more than 600,000) is projected to result in a lower breeding population in 2004.

Implementation of another year of the restrictive season length for pintails is projected to result in about a 7 percent population increase. Since the use of the strategy has not achieved the desired population growth, and model projections suggest a population decline under a "liberal" season length with a 1-bird daily bag limit in all four Flyways, we propose that we again