

depart from the harvest strategy and restrict pintail season length to those in the "restrictive" AHM alternative. Season length would be 30 days in the Atlantic and Mississippi Flyways, 39 days in the Central Flyway, and 60 days in the Pacific Flyway. Hunting days must be consistent with established zone/split hunting configurations approved for the regular duck season in each State.

Further, for the second year in a row, we are proposing a departure from the interim harvest strategy for the reasons noted above, and in recognition that the habitat conditions in key pintail breeding areas offers some real chance to achieve population growth. During the coming year, we would like to review the harvest strategy with the Councils with regard to the provision in the interim strategy that permits seasons that are expected to reduce future breeding populations.

viii. Wood Ducks

Council Recommendations: The Atlantic Flyway Council recommends increasing the wood duck bag limit to three birds during October 1 through November 6 in the Atlantic Flyway for a 3-year experimental period (2003/04–2005/06).

Service Response: We do not support the Atlantic Flyway Council's recommendation. We are continuing to evaluate the usefulness of a modeling approach to the management of wood duck harvests; however, this work is not yet completed and we believe that changes in bag limits are premature at this time. Further, we are concerned about the potential effects of this change on local breeding populations.

4. Canada Geese

B. Regular Seasons

The Central Flyway Council recommended that regular season frameworks for dark geese in the western States consist of a framework opening date of the Saturday nearest September 24 (September 27, 2003) and a framework closing date of the Sunday nearest February 15 (February 15, 2004). The season could be divided into 2 segments, except in Wyoming, where the season could be divided into 3 segments and evaluated in accordance with Service criteria. Season length would be 107 days, except in Colorado and Texas, where the season length would be 95 days. Daily bag limit would be five dark geese in the aggregate, with the following exceptions: (a) In the Western Goose Zone of Texas, the daily bag limit would be one white-fronted goose and three other dark geese (in the

aggregate), and (b) in Colorado, the daily bag limit would be three dark geese in the aggregate. The possession limit would be twice the daily bag limit.

The Pacific Flyway Council recommended increasing the goose season length in eastern Washington from 100 to 107 days, creation of a new management area within Oregon's Northwest Special Permit Zone, elimination of California's San Joaquin Valley Special Management Area, and increasing the goose season length in Humboldt and Del Norte Counties, California, from 9 to 16 days.

Service Response: We concur with all the Council recommendations except for one aspect regarding the creation of a new management area within Oregon's Northwest Special Permit Zone. We continue to support efforts to address long-standing concerns about agricultural damage caused by Canada geese in this area, and would support the creation of the recommended zone with the condition that the daily bag limit on cackling Canada geese be reduced to two birds in the four-bird goose bag during the early portion of the goose season chosen for the new zone. We believe this restriction will help to minimize possible impacts on cackling Canada geese present in the area during this season. Cackling Canada geese are an important sport and subsistence resource and the population is currently 30 percent below objective levels and has not shown any increase in recent years. We believe that additional take of cackling Canada geese should not be encouraged at this time.

C. Special Late Season

Council Recommendations: The Atlantic Flyway Council recommended that Massachusetts' late Canada goose southern boundary of the coastal zone be extended from the present boundary in Duxbury, south to the Cape Cod Canal.

The Upper- and Lower-Region Regulations Committees of the Mississippi Flyway Council recommended that the experimental late (December) special Canada goose season in Minnesota be granted operational status.

Service Response: We concur.

8. Swans

Council Recommendations: The Central Flyway Council recommended that up to 200 tundra swan permits be temporarily transferred from South Dakota to North Dakota beginning in the 2003 season.

Service Response: We concur. The transfer of swan hunting permits within a Flyway is in accordance with

guidelines in the Cooperative Flyway Management Plan for the Eastern Population of Tundra Swans.

In addition, the Service has completed the final environmental assessment (EA) for general swan seasons in the Pacific Flyway (the availability of the draft EA was announced in the May 16, 2003, **Federal Register** [68 FR 26642]). The EA includes a review of the 5-year experimental general swan hunting seasons that took place from 1995 to 2000, as well as a summary of the results of subsequent 2000–03 hunting seasons. Information from the most recent breeding and wintering populations surveys is also included in the EA. Three alternatives are evaluated to address the future of operational swan hunting seasons in Utah, Nevada, and the Pacific Flyway portion of Montana. The issuance of a new EA fulfills the Service commitment to assess the Pacific Flyway swan seasons at the end of the 2002–03 hunting season as established in the most recent EA on the issue, the availability of which was announced in the April 25, 2001, **Federal Register** (66 FR 20828). The EA focuses on the issue of whether or not to establish an operational approach for swan hunting. Related efforts to address population status and distributional concerns regarding the Rocky Mountain Population of trumpeter swans are also discussed. Three alternatives, including the proposed action, were considered. Copies are available from the Service's Web site at www.migratorybirds.fws.gov or by writing to Robert Trost, Pacific Flyway Representative, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Migratory Bird Management, 911 N.E., 11th Avenue, Portland, Oregon 97232–4181.

Public Comment Invited

The Department of the Interior's policy is, whenever practicable, to afford the public an opportunity to participate in the rulemaking process. We intend that adopted final rules be as responsive as possible to all concerned interests and, therefore, seek the comments and suggestions of the public, other concerned governmental agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and other private interests on these proposals. Accordingly, we invite interested persons to submit written comments, suggestions, or recommendations regarding the proposed regulations to the address indicated under **ADDRESSES**.

Special circumstances involved in the establishment of these regulations limit the amount of time that we can allow for public comment. Specifically, two