

harvest strategy proposed by the Council.

#### 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 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 will use 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. The season may be split according to the applicable zone/split duck-hunting configuration approved for each State.

Further, for the second time in the past 3 years, we have departed from the 1994 canvasback harvest strategy. During the coming year, we will work with 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 daily 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 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 will again 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. The season may be split according to the applicable zone/split duck-hunting configuration approved for each State.

Further, for the second year in a row, we are departing from the interim harvest strategy for the reasons noted above, and in recognition that the habitat conditions in key pintail breeding areas offer some real chance to achieve population growth. During the coming year, we will work with the Flyway Councils to review the harvest strategy, particularly the provision that permits seasons that are expected to reduce future breeding populations.

#### viii. Wood Ducks

*Council Recommendations:* The Atlantic Flyway Council recommended 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).

*Written Comments:* The Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife and the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries expressed disappointment in the Service’s decision not to support the Atlantic Flyway Council’s request for a three-wood-duck bag limit in October.

*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 west-tier 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