

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. The 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 in California from 9 to 16 days.

*Written Comments:* The Maryland Department of Natural Resources and the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries requested that the daily bag limit for Atlantic Population (AP) Canada geese be increased from 1 to 2 for the last 10 days of the 45-day season. They cited the fact that while the spring population estimates for 2003 were similar to the previous year, production is very good and a larger fall flight is expected this year. Further, they noted that AP geese have made a remarkable recovery in recent years from the low recorded in 1995, and estimated harvest rates from the 2002–03 hunting season were lower than projected.

They believe that this modest liberalization will not deter continued growth of this population and is justified to provide greater hunting opportunities in the primary AP goose winter area.

Ten individuals from Virginia and five individuals from Maryland requested a two bird daily bag limit for a portion of the AP goose season. One individual from Maryland was against this requested increase.

*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 for 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.

Regarding Maryland and Virginia's request for a 2-bird bag limit for a portion of the AP goose season, we are encouraged by the recovery of AP Canada geese in recent years and commend the Atlantic Flyway Council for its cooperation and support of breeding-ground management programs. While harvest rates based on last year's hunting regulations appear to be low, these data are based on only one year's information. Despite the production outlook, and in view of the history of harvest impacts on this population, we suggest a conservative harvest strategy for the 2003–04 hunting season. Similarly, the Flyway Council did not support a liberalization in bag limits for the Chesapeake Region. Therefore, we do not support these requests for liberalization. We strongly encourage the Atlantic Flyway to update its management plan for AP geese, including specific population objectives and detailed strategies to guide future harvest management.

#### *C. Special Late Season*

*Council Recommendations:* The Atlantic Flyway Council recommended that the southern boundary of Massachusetts' late Canada goose coastal zone be extended southward from the present boundary in Duxbury 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 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 selected action, were considered. Copies are available from the Service's Web site at [www.migratorybirds.fws.gov](http://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.

#### **NEPA Consideration**

NEPA considerations are covered by the programmatic document, "Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement: Issuance of Annual Regulations Permitting the Sport Hunting of Migratory Birds (FSSES 88–14)," filed with the Environmental Protection Agency on June 9, 1988. We published a Notice of Availability in the **Federal Register** on June 16, 1988 (53 FR 22582) and our Record of Decision on August 18, 1988 (53 FR 31341). Additional NEPA considerations concerning general swan seasons in the Pacific Flyway are covered by the EA, "Proposal to Establish Operational General Swan Hunting Seasons in the Pacific Flyway," dated August 5, 2003. We published a notice of availability in the August 19, 2003, **Federal Register** (68 FR 50016) containing the late season proposed frameworks. Copies of both