

Comment 43: The Service should issue guidelines making it clear what constitutes depredation on a public resource.

Service Response: In developing the rule, USFWS wanted to maximize the flexibility of other agencies in determining what constitutes a public resource depredation. We understand that there are concerns about all of the “what ifs” that could conceivably take place in the absence of guidelines. We have made the purpose of the depredation orders clear, and we trust that our agency partners will not abuse their authority. If they do, we have the option to suspend or revoke their authority under the depredation order or to amend this rule.

Comment 44: In the proposed rule, the only advanced requirement for agencies to initiate a control program is to submit a one-time notice to the Service. The rule does not require evaluation of potential impacts before control actions occur.

Service Response: In the final rule, under the public resource depredation order, we have added a clause for advance notification of control actions that would take 10% or more of the birds in a breeding colony. This will allow us to review such actions for compliance with the purpose of the order and for impacts on overall cormorant populations. Inherent in the idea of this public resource depredation order is the Service’s trust in the professionalism and conservation expertise of the States, Tribes, and APHIS Wildlife Services. At the same time, we will continue our role of providing oversight to ensure that the cumulative effects of activities under the depredation orders do not threaten the long-term conservation of DCCO populations.

Comment 45: There is no process outlined for disputing control at a particular site. Control activities might come into conflict with ongoing research activities.

Service Response: We do not intend to establish guidelines for dispute resolution or public notice of proposed control efforts. In some cases, NEPA analysis will be necessary and this will open the door for limited public input regarding specific management actions. We cannot guarantee that conflicts won’t occur between control and research activities. Researchers will need to coordinate with local resource agencies (as, presumably, they are already doing) on this issue.

Comment 46: The public resource depredation order should have a requirement for agencies to formally assess a control site before control is

carried out to determine potential impacts to other species.

Service Response: We do not intend to require formal assessment of control sites before control is conducted. The final rule requires that agencies must provide advance notification for certain actions, including information on the location and a description of the proposed control activity, specifying what public resources are being impacted, how many birds are likely to be taken and what approximate percentage they are of total DCCOs present, and which species of other birds are present. Additionally, in their annual reports, agencies must provide us with detailed information on why they’re conducting control actions, including what they’re doing to minimize effects on other species. Agencies don’t have to report this information until after control actions have occurred, but we believe this process is sufficient.

Comment 47: The proposed rule seems to violate the Service’s mission to “conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.”

Service Response: We do not in any way believe that the rule interferes with our conservation mission. Our responsibility is to ensure the long-term conservation of DCCO populations, and we will do so. A mission is a general statement of an agency’s vision that, by its very nature, cannot encompass every potential management responsibility. We believe that managing certain species to address economic or social concerns, while ensuring the long-term conservation of such species is consistent with our mission.

Comment 48: The Service has not established a process by which other agencies could set population goals.

Service Response: At some point in the future, we may initiate a process for setting population goals. States and other agencies are fully capable of doing this on their own in local situations (DCCO management efforts on Little Galloo Island in New York are a good example). The public resource depredation order does not authorize regional population management, and, therefore, regional goals are not yet necessary.

Comment 49: The return of an extirpated species to its former breeding range is a positive ecological event.

Service Response: Weseloh *et al.* (1995, p48) wrote that DCCO population increases in North America “have involved more than just a re-occupation of areas which experienced severe population declines or extirpations

* * * previously unoccupied breeding and wintering areas have now been colonized” and gave three citations supporting this hypothesis. Regardless of whether or not DCCOs had previously occurred in some parts of their range, we have to manage and conserve them by today’s standards, not those of a hundred (or more) years ago. Our intent under the final rule is not to eliminate cormorants on a regional or national level but to manage them, even to the point of reducing local populations, so that there are fewer impacts to natural and human resources. We fully understand that fish-eating birds are a natural part of the ecosystem and that, within limits prescribed by the need to consider the bigger picture than “ecological” factors alone, population recovery is a positive event.

Comment 50: Only State wildlife agencies should be allowed to take or permit the take of DCCOs at nesting colonies in their State.

Service Response: Under the public resource depredation order, any agency that takes DCCOs must have landowner permission and, if required, a State permit to take DCCOs. We believe that these clauses are sufficient to avoid compromising State oversight.

Comment 51: Issuing a resource depredation order for DCCOs under the proposed rule would set a dangerous precedent for fish-eating birds in the United States and in other nations to our south.

Service Response: We do not agree with the statement that the depredation orders are a “dangerous” precedent. Each conflict must be evaluated on its own merits. If problems with other fish-eating birds arise in the future, we will give full and fair consideration to these issues.

Comment 52: The Service should require safe management practices when DCCO control is conducted to protect birders.

Service Response: Conducting DCCO control in a manner that does not threaten human health or safety is the responsibility of the agencies and individuals carrying out the actions.

Comment 53: The scientific and public outcry against the Service’s proposed rule should be convincing. Sound science is being supplanted by perceptions fueling political cries for substantial lethal population controls.

Service Response: We would note that there is also public outcry against the status quo and in support of the final rule. We believe that our decision is supported by the available data. Furthermore, the rule requires that agencies who act under the public