Waterfowl hunters know that some year's seasons are better than others. Waterfowl populations rise and fall through the years, mostly based on water and habitat quality on the breeding grounds.

With scaup, also known as bluebills, the situation is different. Data from more than 50 years of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and partner surveys indicate the continental scaup population has declined substantially since the early 1980s. Population estimates the past few years have been among the lowest recorded. While some may question the available data, few would say the scaup population is what it was 25 years ago. Data show a steady, long-term population decline.

A number of ideas have been advanced to explain the decline. These vary from a change in the food availability during migration to contaminants affecting the bird's ability to survive and reproduce. Another idea is that warming conditions on the breeding grounds may be reducing scaup's ability to reproduce. While we don't believe that hunting has been a principal factor affecting the long-term decline of scaup, the best scientific assessment currently available suggests that harvest is currently approaching levels that could affect the population and exacerbate declines.

I know the scaup harvest strategy recently adopted by the Service has raised some controversy. We have reached a point in the population decline where we need to carefully consider measures to preserve the scaup hunting heritage if scaup populations continue to fall. The recently adopted harvest strategy uses all available data to assess the ability of this valued resource to sustain hunting.

Over the coming weeks, the Service, in consultation with the Flyway Councils, will weigh all available information to make a final decision on appropriate hunting seasons for the coming year. While resource status is paramount in these decisions, we never lose sight of the impact they have on our most critical conservation partner, the American hunter.

Work on a scaup harvest strategy has been ongoing for 5 years. It has been adjusted several times based on technical feedback. To date, no other science-based strategy has been offered. In the coming years, as always, we will continue to work with our partners to refine the harvest strategy and seek to better understand the reasons for the scaup decline.

I remember the drought in the 1980s when many waterfowl populations were at a low point. The Service and state wildlife agencies took management action and reduced seasons and bag limits. It gave many species enough of a break so that when water came back in the mid-to-late 1990s, along with good habitat provided by many conservation programs, numbers improved and so did hunting.

I am a passionate waterfowl hunter and by that I mean conservation comes first. More than supporting our scaup strategy as the Service's Director, I believe in it as someone committed to the future of our nation's waterfowl and waterfowl hunting traditions.

Thank you,
H. Dale Hall
Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service