2021 Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey Cancellation Questions and Answers Document

What migratory bird monitoring programs are expected to be cancelled for 2021 and why?

The Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) and many state and provincial agencies have again cancelled their participation in the Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey (WBPHS). In addition, the Canadian border remains closed to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service survey personnel, preventing us from conducting survey operations in Canada, which comprises a large portion of the surveyed area. CWS made the decision to suspend fieldwork as a result of evolving conditions related to COVID-19 in Canada.

The Service considered the utility of conducting only the United States portion of the WBPHS and determined that lacking other data from cooperator agencies, the value of Service-collected data alone were not sufficient to justify the risk and cost associated with a partial survey in the conterminous United States. Service participation in the WBPHS will be limited to the Alaska component of the WBPHS which can be used to inform regulatory decision making in the Pacific Flyway.

Other migratory bird surveys, such as the aerial mid continental sandhill crane survey, the woodcock singing ground survey, and USGS's Breeding Bird Survey will continue as planned.

What is the expected impact to harvest management decisions for the 2022-23 hunting season?

The Service fully expects to allow migratory bird hunting during the 2022-23 hunting season. For species with missing data, the Service will carefully assess expected population abundance and growth rates and allow harvest based on projections derived from long-term data including harvest, survival and reproduction, and population models.

What species population estimates and harvest management decisions will be impacted by cancellation of these surveys?

Cancellation of these surveys will impact population estimates and harvest management decisions for most duck species and many some goose species and populations. The Service, in consultation with the Flyway Councils, will use long-term data from spring/summer monitoring for these species to make regulatory harvest management decisions.

What is the Service's proposed strategy for making decisions about duck season?

Duck season regulations are based on the status of mallards in the Mississippi, Central, and Pacific Flyways, and on the status of four species (green-winged teal, common eider, wood duck, and ring-necked duck) in the Atlantic Flyway.

Explicit Adaptive Harvest Management strategies already exist and have been adopted by the Service and Flyway Councils for developing those regulations. In addition, other strategies or decision tools have been developed for species of concern, including pintails, scaup, black ducks, canvasbacks, and wood ducks.

For the general duck seasons, the Service will use the long-term data and models to predict 2021 spring abundances of ducks and habitat conditions in place of the spring 2021 data, which cannot be collected. The results from these predictions will be combined with the existing harvest strategies to determine appropriate levels of harvest for the 2022-2023 season. This will ensure the sustainability of ducks and provide hunting opportunities for the American public.

What is the Service's proposed strategy for pintail and scaup season decisions?

The proposed strategy for these species of special concern will be similar to that for the general duck season where explicit Adaptive Harvest Management strategies have been adopted by the Service and Flyway Councils for developing harvest management regulations.

Similar to the general duck seasons, the Service will use long-term data and models to predict 2021 spring abundances of these ducks and habitat conditions in place of the spring 2021 data, which will not be available. Results from the predictions will be used with the existing harvest strategy to determine appropriate levels of harvest for the 2022-2023 season. This will ensure the sustainability of ducks and provide hunting opportunities for the American public.

If the Service doesn't have current status information, how can the agency justify opening hunting seasons?

Fortunately, the Service and other conservation partners have long-term monitoring programs for most species of migratory game birds including both population status and harvest information. Those long-term data indicate that most populations are above long-term averages and objective levels identified in management plans.

Where the Service does have current population data and other information for species, that information along with likely habitat conditions and expected harvest pressure under various hunting season scenarios to determine whether hunting seasons will pose any risk to those populations.

Does the Service expect hunting season regulations to be similar to the previous year?

Generally, yes, because most populations are healthy and can sustain harvest at the levels set in place previously. However, in some cases changes may be appropriate and the Service will work with Flyway Councils to identify any populations of special concern.

Will other surveys and summer/fall banding operations be impacted?

Currently, Canada has cancelled most field operations related to monitoring, but decisions are being reviewed and reconsidered on a month-by-month basis.

The Service will make a decision on whether banding operations will be possible in Canada in coming months in consultation with the Canadian Wildlife Service in consideration of international travel restrictions related to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. If the Service is unable to send banding crews to Canada this summer, like last year we plan to conduct enhanced domestic banding operations in order to maintain continuity in this important long-term database.

Other surveys will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis as international travel restrictions and cooperator agency operational status changes.