



NEWS

from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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SERVICE EXTENDS COMMENT PERIOD ON PROPOSED MID-CONTINENT LIGHT GOOSE REDUCTION

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will extend by one week its deadline for public comment on two proposals that would take steps to halt irreversible damage to arctic nesting grounds caused by overabundant mid-continent light geese.

The Service's proposed rules would permit states to use regulated hunting outside of established hunting frameworks to control populations of mid-continent lesser snow geese and Ross' geese, known as "light geese. The comment period for the proposed rule was set to expire January 8. The extension will give the public until January 15 to submit written comments to the Service.

The holiday season is a busy time, which may reduce the effective length of the public comment period. The addition of seven days should offset the influence of the holidays on the public's ability to provide comments on the proposals, said Robert Blohm, acting chief of the Office of Migratory Bird Management.

To date, the Service has received nearly 80 separate comments on the rule, which was put out for comment in early November. According to Blohm, the Service wants to make sure the public has adequate time to review and respond to the environmental assessment of the proposed action.

Blohm said the one-week extension would ensure that every effort is made by the Service to gather comments before a final rule is formulated.

He stressed that a longer extension of the comment period would make it difficult for state game and fish commissions to implement the proposed changes in time for them to take effect before the end of current light geese hunting seasons.

The proposed rules would give state wildlife agencies in 18 midwestern and southern states the authority to allow hunters to use unplugged shotguns and electronic calls for the remainder of any regular light goose seasons after all other migratory bird seasons have closed. Under those same conditions, states could also establish a special conservation order, that would allow the

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continued take of light geese after the required closure of all migratory bird seasons on March 10 until the 1999-2000 season opens August 31.

The two proposals address an ecological crisis caused by an explosion in mid-continent light goose populations from an estimated 800,000 geese in the 1960s to more than 3 million today. Service biologists consider this to be a conservative estimate, and the actual population may be as high as 10 million birds. This is far more geese than the fragile arctic tundra with its short growing season can support.

Increasing agricultural and refuge development along waterfowl flyways through the Midwest and South have provided light geese with ample forage during their yearly migrations.

The resulting decrease in the mortality rate of lesser snow geese and Ross' geese has triggered explosive population growth that is contributing to the destruction of critical Arctic feeding and nesting grounds centered around Canada's Hudson Bay.

Light geese feed by pulling up and eating the roots of plants, a natural practice known as grubbing. At healthy population levels, grubbing actually helps stimulate plant growth in the salt marshes around the bay. But competition for food has pushed geese to over-graze these areas, denuding large swaths of vital summer plant growth. Scientists believe that habitat degradation has contributed to declining populations of more than 30 other bird species in the area.

The Service hopes to issue a final rule in time to implement the proposed conservation measures for the end of the 1998-99 season in late February and early March.

The public may submit written comments on the proposals until January 15, 1999. Comments should be mailed to Chief, Office of Migratory Bird Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, 1849 C Street, NW., MS 634 ARLSQ, Washington, DC 20240.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of more than 500 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts.

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