

# Minnesota DNR Response to Public Comments on 2015 Spring Turkey Season Review



## Public comments on 2015 Spring Turkey Season Review

This document is a response to the topics most commonly addressed in public comments received by MN DNR during the 2015 spring turkey season review.

In fall, 2015, MN DNR engaged the public to seek recommendations to the Section of Wildlife on potential changes to the spring turkey hunting season. The Section's objective was to identify a spring turkey hunting season structure that increases hunter opportunity while providing a safe, quality hunting experience.

For this purpose, DNR engaged the public through four regional discussion meetings and a public comment period. Input gathered at the four discussion meetings, in addition to data from a 2014 survey of adult turkey hunters, was used to develop a proposal for changes to the spring turkey season. This proposal was posted on the DNR turkey management webpage from Oct. 26 – Nov. 8, 2015, and public comment on the proposal was accepted via the following sources:

- Online questionnaire (155 comments received)
- Email (3 comments received)
- US postal mail (2 comments received)

DNR completed a careful review of all comments received. This input was incorporated into a final decision regarding changes to the spring turkey season, which is now available to view on the turkey management webpage and will be applied to the 2016 spring turkey season.

Unfortunately, we are unable to provide an individual response to each comment received, but on the following pages we provide a brief summary of, and response to, the topics most commonly addressed in the comments received. Comments are summarized by heading, with a brief response from DNR following each summary.

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### Time periods

**Proposed:** DNR proposed having five 1-week time periods followed by one longer (9-13 day) time period. Each time period would begin on a Wednesday and include a full weekend. The first time period would still begin on the Wednesday nearest April 15, and the last day of the season would be May 31.

**Final decision:** Accept proposed change.

### Comment summary:

Public comment showed overall strong support for this change. Benefits cited by commenters included increased hunting opportunity, increased simplicity and consistency of season structure, and the potential to increase hunter satisfaction and retention. Concerns cited included the potential for increased hunter interference leading to decreases in safety and hunter satisfaction. Some commenters also expressed concern that this change would lead to greater conflict over access to private land for hunting.

### DNR response:

The original proposal prior to the regional discussion meetings was to start the season on a Saturday. Based on input received during the regional meetings the proposal was modified to begin each time period on a Wednesday, and have each be one week long except for the longer final time period. Most commenters supported beginning the time periods on a Wednesday so hunters with limited vacation time could take either a Friday or Monday surrounding the weekend. We will continue to monitor ease of access to private land using hunter surveys, and if access issues increase significantly, we will investigate ways to address problems.

### Lottery

**Proposed:** DNR proposed using a lottery system only for the first two time periods; however, because DNR also proposes to lengthen the first two time periods to one week each, this would still cover a total of 14 hunting days (similar to the 15 days included in the current first three lottery time periods).

**Final decision:** Accept proposed change.

### Comment summary:

Public comment showed overall moderate support for this change. Those who expressed support for this change indicated that a lottery is still needed to reduce hunter interference during the popular early time periods, and noted that this proposal maintains a similar number of hunting days as are included in the current lottery. A primary concern cited by commenters included the potential that this change may increase crowding during the 3<sup>rd</sup> time period, or C season. Some commenters indicated they would prefer to use a lottery system for three or more time periods; others indicated they would prefer to eliminate the lottery system entirely.

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### *DNR response:*

After considering the comments we accepted the proposal because it is likely that the first non-lottery time period will be very attractive to hunters, whether it is in the C or D time period. By reducing the number of lottery time periods to just 2, more people will have the opportunity to hunt without going through a lottery system. We are retaining the lottery in the B time period despite the fact that it has been traditionally undersubscribed because the B time period, like all time periods, will now have a weekend and there is uncertainty whether or not this will attract a significant number of new hunters into this time period.

### **“Second chance” for unsuccessful hunters in early time periods**

**Proposed:** DNR proposed allowing unsuccessful hunters from any of the first five time periods to hunt again in the final, longer time period using their original license.

**Final decision:** Accept proposed change.

### *Comment summary:*

Public comment showed overall mixed to mild support for this change. Benefits cited by commenters included increased hunting opportunity, a likelihood of increased hunter success and satisfaction, and the flexibility to reschedule hunting plans in response to weather events, illness, etc. Concerns cited included the potential for increased hunter interference in the final time period, leading to decreases in safety and hunter satisfaction. Some commenters also expressed concern that this change would lead to greater conflict over access to private land for hunting. A few commenters indicated this change may discourage hunters from registering birds harvested in early time periods and lead to illegal harvesting of additional birds in the final time period. Several commenters suggested that unsuccessful hunters in early time periods be required to revalidate their license and/or pay a small fee in order to hunt again in the final time period.

### *DNR response:*

We accepted this change as a way of offering more opportunity to hunt turkeys late into the season, and this appears justified as currently the last two time periods receive very little hunting pressure. We will monitor how many hunters utilize this second chance opportunity and if hunter numbers result in excessive interference rates or a drop in hunter satisfaction, we will adjust accordingly.

### **Archery**

**Proposed:** DNR proposed extending archery throughout the entire spring turkey season, beginning the Wednesday nearest April 15 and ending on May 31.

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**Final decision:** Accept proposed change.

### *Comment summary:*

Public comment showed overall strong support for this change. Benefits cited by commenters included increased hunting opportunity, and a likelihood of increased hunter success and satisfaction. Some commenters indicated that this change is reasonable due to the relatively low numbers of archery hunters, and low success rates associated with archery hunting. Several suggested this change would make it easier for parents to take children hunting and still have time to hunt alone, and that this may encourage more hunters to take up archery. Concerns cited by commenters included the potential for this change to increase hunter interference, especially in popular public land areas, and the potential that this change would lead to greater conflict over access to private land for hunting. Several commenters also expressed concern that an increase in archery hunting may lead to an increase in the incidence of wounded turkeys. A few commenters suggested that archery hunters should still be subject to the lottery in early time periods.

### *DNR response:*

Strong support for this change outweighed the concerns expressed. We will continue to monitor ease of access to private land using hunter surveys, and if access issues increase significantly, we will investigate ways to address problems. Wounding loss is an unfortunate aspect of hunting, and it affects all weapon types. Good hunter education and practice can reduce wounding loss. Archery hunters have never needed to participate in the lottery system, but if interference rates increase significantly, we will consider the need for including archers during lottery time periods.

### **Inclusion of the non-range area**

**Proposed:** DNR proposed extending permit areas 508 and 509 to incorporate the non-range area, effectively allowing turkey hunting throughout the entire state.

**Final decision:** Accept proposed change.

### *Comment summary:*

Public comment showed overall moderate support for this change. The primary benefit cited by commenters was increased hunting opportunity. Many commenters indicated that they were comfortable allowing turkey hunting anywhere that turkey populations can support it. Concerns cited by commenters included the potential that hunting the current non-range areas may limit the future establishment of turkey populations in these areas, and the potential that this change may mislead hunters by implying that turkey populations in these areas are higher than they are.

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### *DNR response:*

Pockets of turkeys currently exist in what has been labeled “non-range”, but this area is not, and likely never will be, fully occupied. In response to concerns that the new permit area would mislead hunters into thinking that more turkeys are available in this former “non-range”, it was decided not to create a new permit area, but rather add that portion of the state to the two existing northern permit areas. That way hunters could still seek turkeys in portions of the permit areas known to support strong turkey numbers if they are unsuccessful in locating turkeys with spotty distribution in the north. Current harvest rates should not hamper turkey expansion in this area, rather expansion is likely limited by habitat and weather (snow) conditions.

### **Adult mentored hunters**

**Proposed:** DNR proposed that participants (mentees) in official adult mentored hunts would not need to apply in the lottery.

**Final decision:** Accept proposed change.

### *Comment summary:*

Public comment showed overall moderate to strong support for this change. Benefits cited by commenters included increased hunter recruitment and better experiences for both first-time hunters and their mentors. Concerns cited by commenters included lack of fairness and the potential to increase crowding in early time periods, especially on public lands. Several commenters asked whether this change would reduce the number of lottery tags available for hunters not participating in an official mentored hunt. One commenter indicated that going through the lottery process is an important part of learning about hunting in Minnesota, and should be required of mentored hunters as well.

### *DNR response:*

This change will affect very few people as it only applies to DNR sanctioned mentored hunts. Most of these hunts are sponsored by partners, and typically take place on lands that are not open to public turkey hunting. It will not reduce opportunity for other hunters, and quota numbers will not be adjusted downward based up the number of mentored hunts.

### **Permit area 501 (Greater Metro Area)**

**Proposed:** DNR proposed allowing all hunters with a license in permit area 510 (greater Metro Area) to hunt the entire season, with an unlimited number of licenses offered.

**Final decision:** Reject proposed change.

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### *Comment summary:*

Public comment showed overall mixed support for this change. Benefits cited by commenters included increased hunting opportunity, the potential to increase hunter success and satisfaction, and the potential to decrease the number of birds in the metro area and thus reduce car accidents and other conflicts with turkey in this area. The primary concerns cited by commenters included increased hunter interference leading to decreased safety and satisfaction, and increases in conflicts over access to already-limited private land for hunting. One commenter indicated that this change may be perceived as unfair preferential treatment for Metro area residents, and should be an opportunity available anywhere in the state where turkey populations can support it. Another commenter suggested breaking the season into at least two or three time periods rather than one.

### *DNR response:*

Public support for this proposal was limited, and it was a very significant change that concerned many who had an opinion. This issue was not addressed by the 2015 turkey hunter survey, so there was not additional information to inform the decision.

## Other

### *Comment summary:*

A majority of comments indicated support for increasing opportunities to hunt turkey in the spring season. Many comments indicated concern that the proposed changes will increase hunter interference, reduce safety and satisfaction, and increase conflicts over access to private lands. Many commenters also indicated they are satisfied with the current season structure and see no need for changes. Several commenters indicated that it will be important for DNR to monitor hunter satisfaction before and after changes are applied, paying special attention to differences in hunter satisfaction between private and public land, and to make further adjustments in the future if hunter satisfaction declines. Additional comments addressed bag limits, winter food plots for turkeys, hunting regulations for youth and seniors, party hunting, use of electronic rangefinders, landowner preferences in the lottery, availability of information about turkey hunting, and other topics.

### *DNR response:*

The DNR will continue to monitor hunter satisfaction and interference rates, as well as asking how difficult it was to find a place to hunt turkeys through hunter surveys. Modifications to the new changes based on these results can be made in future years if necessary.