

## Waterfowl Regulations and Season Dates Update 2021 Opt-in Public Input Questionnaire Detailed Report

Updated: 3/23/2021

### Executive Summary

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources gathered responses regarding potential changes to the waterfowl regulations and season dates in an opt-in public input questionnaire. This information along with preliminary results from waterfowl hunter attitude surveys, and data from breeding waterfowl population surveys and harvest statistics informed proposals for potential changes in the spring of 2021. A link to the opt-in questionnaire was posted to the DNR website. Responses were recorded from 01/11/2021 to 01/31/2021. 3,856 individuals responded to the questionnaire. Consistent with the population of MN waterfowl stamp purchasers and small game license holders, respondents were predominately white and male. Most survey respondents were affiliated with Ducks Unlimited and other waterfowl and conservation groups. The average age of those who responded to the questionnaire was 57.9. Over 90% of those who responded reported hunting waterfowl during the past year, while the average number of years hunted was over 23.

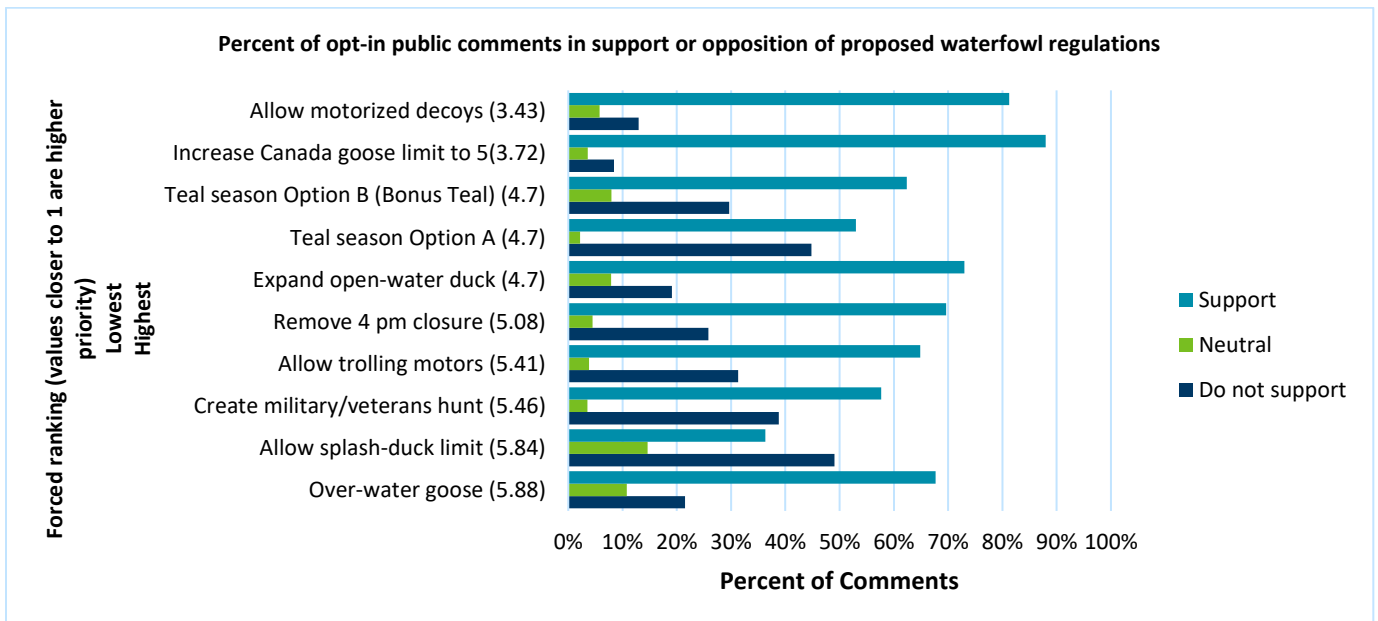


Figure 1 is a summary of the responses to the questionnaire. The vertical axis represents a forced ranking of priority regulation changes. Motorized decoys was the highest priority with an average rank of 3.43 and over-water goose was the lowest priority with an average rank of 5.88. The horizontal axis represents the percentage of open-ended comments in support of the proposed change, not in support of the proposed change, or neutral. There was support for most of the proposals, with the only exception being the splash-duck limit that was not supported. Of the two options proposed for teal season, option B (bonus teal) was slightly more favorable. Preferences were split between support/not in support on teal season option A as well as the military/veterans hunt.

Respondents also were split on preferences for season dates 30.3% preferred September 25 – November 23, 26.6% preferred Sept 25 – Oct 3, close 5 days, reopen Oct 9 to Nov 28, and 23.8% preferred Sept 25-Oct 3, close 12 days, reopen Oct 16 to Dec 5.

## **Input on specific proposed regulation changes**

### **Motorized decoys**

*Description: Allow motorized decoys throughout the season statewide*

A proposal to allow motorized decoys statewide ranked as the highest priority action out of all options provided in the questionnaire. Those in favor of the regulation change focused on allowing the use of tools developed and allowed in other states, and emphasized that waterfowl harvest should be guided by the limit, not the method. Effectiveness of motorized decoys was questioned by many responders, claiming that they are not new in the eyes of waterfowl and would not be a noticeable impact on hunting success. People proposed the use of motorized decoys on Wildlife Management Areas could be a compromise tool and shared that adding dates to any regulation on motorized decoys would come with opposition.

### **Canada goose limit**

*Description: Allow a bag limit of 5 Canada geese*

There was a high level of support for increasing the bag limit of geese to five. Though the population varies throughout the state, the increased limit would be a popular way to deal with the overpopulation in some areas and balance the nuisance permits issued (farmers, golf courses, municipalities). People felt this change would synchronize limits with other states, and potentially lead to less complicated regulations, while allowing hunters the opportunity to harvest more birds if they desire. Comments opposed to the regulation change state that this would benefit guide services the most, and lead to a potential waste of meat. A stamp option was mentioned, with hunters allowed to harvest a higher limit with purchase of a stamp.

### **Teal Season Option A (Early Teal Season)**

*Description: Beginning in 2021, establish a 3-year experimental early teal season for as many as 16 days in duration prior to the regular duck season, allowing up to 6 teal daily*

Support for an early Teal season is mixed. Although the number of responses in favor of the season outweighed the number against it, there appear to be strong percentages of respondents in opposition as well as in support of this season. Responses in favor of the season focus on the desire to benefit from local birds and their nesting area, before the birds migrate. Responses against the early season focus on impact to the remainder of the season, by potentially moving ducks out of the area prior to the traditional opening season date. Identification of birds is a major concern, as the timing of the season and variable spring weather patterns may result in broods barely able to fly and not fully colored. Several comments mentioned a similar season effort in the 1960s, which was changed shortly after enacted. Harvest of non-target species is considered to be a high risk by those against an early season, particularly wood ducks and mallards. If this season were to be considered, there may be better support if it were enacted during youth waterfowl hunt or early goose season dates. The proposed season length of 16 days was believed to be too long by many, with an alternate length of 9 days (including 2 weekends) suggested.

## Teal Season Option B (Bonus Teal)

*Description: Allow a bonus of two blue winged teal daily during the first 16 days of the season*

A majority of responses were in favor of allowing two bonus Blue-winged Teal during the first 16 days of the season. A large number of responses to this question were blank, and many were indifferent, with difficulties in understanding the intent of the question and how the bonus birds would impact the overall limit. Many believed that bonus birds would be a better option than an early season. Some stated the bonus teal may be a good solution to the bird identification issues mentioned in comments on the early season. People shared that a nine or 10-day bonus period could be considered instead of the 16-day proposed. Uncertainty around this question dealt with whether the regular limit would increase to 8, or remain at 6. Many responses indicated that 8 birds is too many to harvest, questioning the hunter's need for 8 bids and the integrity of the population (i.e., if it could support additional harvest).

## Open-water duck

*Description: Expand over (open) water duck hunting to additional lakes (current regulations require concealing vegetation)*

Responses to the question regarding expanding open water duck hunting to additional lakes were largely supportive. This regulation change would increase opportunity for hunters to utilize different strategies to target late-season diver ducks. Many identified how increased development has impacted the availability of emergent vegetation in some areas, resulting in limited hunting areas in certain areas. There is support for including a minimum acreage limit on this proposal, with some people suggesting that it should apply to larger bodies of water, including rivers. Support also exists for a "distance from shore" stipulation included. Those opposed to this regulation change are concerned about potential safety hazards and conflicts with shoreline owners and other recreational activity on lakes. This also raises concern among some people about disturbing off-shore resting areas for ducks. If this regulation were enacted, people felt detailed language regarding distance from shore and distance from other parties should be included, as well as additional safety recommendations.

## Remove 4pm closure

*Description: Extend hours to sunset instead of 4pm for early season*

The option to extend season hours to sunset instead of 4pm for the early season is widely supported by those that responded to the questionnaire. This change is believed to provide an increased opportunity for hunters that work or attend school and are hindered by a 4pm closure. This change would match other hunting regulations (for other species), making an effort toward simplifying regulations. Those opposed to this regulation change cite the need for birds to roost and feed without disturbance, with concerns that it could lead to early migration. The balance of increased opportunity with concerns about increased pressure was commonly noted.

## **Trolling motor use on Wildlife Management Areas**

*Description: Allow trolling motors on all Wildlife Management Areas*

Allowing trolling motors on WMA is a regulation change that would be appreciated by many hunters, as it would increase accessibility for older/disabled/youth that have difficulties paddling. It would also improve access to larger WMA areas, and help spread out hunting pressure. Many supported limiting motor size, boat size, and WMA acreage (water). While most were supportive of the regulation change, many comments received were not supportive of the regulation change, and prefer to leave WMAs undisturbed by motorized vehicles. Allowing the use of trolling motors may lead to other motorized requests in the future, which would be undesired by many. People shared concerns that allowing motors would potentially disturb resting/rafting areas for waterfowl, and damage submersed vegetation. If this regulation were to be enacted, people shared that additional safety suggestions should be included in the regulation book – largely focused on waste disposal, battery safety, and responsible boating ethics.

## **Military/veterans hunt**

*Provide weekend hunting opportunity prior to regular season for veterans and active duty members of the military*

The majority of responses were in favor of a special weekend for veterans to hunt, although many comments were opposed to any more special seasons prior to opening duck hunting weekend. A popular option would be to have the veterans hunt on the same weekend as the youth hunt (combined), but not separate. Those in favor of the hunt also suggested a “take a vet” campaign similar to the “take a kid/mom” fishing campaigns, and felt that perhaps free or discounted license may be a better alternative. Many self-identified veterans commented that they did not feel the hunt was necessary, and were not supportive of this idea.

## **Splash-duck limit**

*Description: An experimental 3 year regulation that would allow hunters to shoot three ducks of any species*

Most comments received were not supportive of a splash duck regulation. Many comments focused on the basic firearms safety principle of knowing your target before shooting, and commented on the possibility of encouraging poor hunting ethics/etiquette. Concern for Pintail, Scaup, Redhead, and Canvasbacks was high, as this regulation could potentially lead to overharvest of some species with lower limits. Those in favor of the regulation, however, noted that it would be beneficial during youth season, when immature ducks may be hard to identify in flight. Some respondents felt this could also benefit new hunters that are not confident with identification, and eliminate some of the fear of shooting the wrong bird. There was confusion around the wording of the question, as some responses indicated that they did not favor this regulation as a newly proposed limit, or as a bonus limit. Careful wording and explanation should be considered for any future discussion on this topic.

## Over-water goose

*Description: Remove restrictions against hunting within 100 yards of surface water*

Removal of the 100 yards of surface water restriction is widely supported by those that answered the questionnaire. This regulation does not currently impact parts of the state and many people indicated that this was a non-issue for them (no comments, or lack of opinion). Those in favor of this regulation change cite the ability to hunt additional public land, as many fields are private and claimed by other hunters. This would simplify regulations throughout the state, which some felt would potentially lead to an increase in harvest of local birds. Those opposed to this change fear the impacts of disturbing roosting birds. Some responses indicated support for expanding the existing rule statewide and eliminating all water hunting throughout the season. The intent of this regulation was not clearly understood, which resulted in some people unsure how to answer – questioning if the intent of this regulation is to increase harvest or increase opportunity (in terms of places to hunt).

## Additional Comments and Themes

Survey participants were provided an opportunity to provide open comments. Over 2,000 comments were received, covering a wide variety of topics. Focusing on waterfowl regulation comments, DNR was strongly encouraged to base decisions on science and population levels rather than assumed public opinion or request of interest groups. Emphasis should be based on the role that science (data) played in coming up with options, or expanding the new regulations that are proposed. Any regulations proposed should tie into the long range duck plan. While there may be many ways to increase opportunity, there is a belief that little is being done to increase the amount of birds present, or habitat available. Any new regulations proposed to increase opportunity must ensure that quality of the hunt is not compromised. Many comments focus on the dislike of early seasons, with the belief that the duck hunting opener is compromised. Comments were received about adjusting border lines, and perhaps including a Mississippi River zone. There is a large interest in expanding the Sandhill Crane season and zone, and several mentions of a Swan season (both in favor and opposed).

## Demographics

Survey responses were mostly white males affiliated with Ducks Unlimited and other sports groups. The average age of those who responded to the questionnaire was 57.9, while the range was 11 to 87 years old. 41 responses came from youth hunters (under the age of 16). Over 90% of those who responded reported hunting waterfowl during the past year, and the average number of years hunted was over 23. No questions within the survey referenced place of residence or hunting location.

## Criteria for updating regulations and season dates

Respondents were asked to prioritize the following criteria for updates to the waterfowl regulations on a scale of 1-4 (one being the highest): increase hunting opportunity, simplify hunting regulations, and increase consistency with federal regulations and “other”. Responses ranked increasing hunting opportunity as the most important objective, followed by simplifying hunting regulations and increasing consistency with federal regulations. Options mentioned through the “other” category largely focused on issues covered in other topics within the questionnaire, including the importance of habitat, decreased duck population, seasons for Teal, Swans, and Crane, youth waterfowl season, motorized decoy use, zone regulations, and legal shooting hours. Many comments were made regarding sacrificing quality of waterfowl hunting for quantity of opportunities. Increased opportunity has multiple meanings for some survey responses – opportunity in terms of special seasons, or opportunity in terms of public land. Public land and the importance of increasing public access is widely supported, while special seasons are not widely supported by those that responded to the questionnaire.

## Preferred season dates

Preferences were split across season dates. A slight majority of the responses to this question focused on season dates preferred September 25 to November 23, which is the same last 2020 in the North duck zone. Many comments on other questions refer to issues with the split, wishing it would be longer (or not at all). While no additional comments were requested for this survey point, data provided in responses to similar questions suggest some support for a later season, as hunters report delayed migration patterns and delayed ice cover on most years. Respondents identified that hunting opportunities exist well beyond season closure dates, especially species that migrate late.