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Migratory Bird Hunting; Proposed 2017–18 Migratory Game Bird Hunting Regulations (Preliminary) With Requests for Indian Tribal Proposals; Notice of Meetings; Proposed Rule

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR**Fish and Wildlife Service****50 CFR Part 20**

[Docket No. FWS-HQ-MB-2016-0051; FF09M21200-156-FXMB1231099BPP0]

RIN 1018-BB40

Migratory Bird Hunting; Proposed 2017-18 Migratory Game Bird Hunting Regulations (Preliminary) With Requests for Indian Tribal Proposals; Notice of Meetings

AGENCY: Fish and Wildlife Service, Interior.

ACTION: Proposed rule; availability of supplemental information.

SUMMARY: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (hereinafter the Service or we) proposes to establish annual hunting regulations for certain migratory game birds for the 2017-18 hunting season. We annually prescribe outside limits (frameworks) within which States may select hunting seasons. This proposed rule provides the regulatory schedule, announces the Service Migratory Bird Regulations Committee (SRC) and Flyway Council meetings, describes the proposed regulatory alternatives for the 2017-18 duck hunting seasons, and requests proposals from Indian tribes that wish to establish special migratory game bird hunting regulations on Federal Indian reservations and ceded lands. Migratory game bird hunting seasons provide opportunities for recreation and sustenance; aid Federal, State, and tribal governments in the management of migratory game birds; and permit harvests at levels compatible with migratory game bird population status and habitat conditions.

DATES: *Comments:* Following subsequent **Federal Register** notices, the public will be given an opportunity to submit comments on this proposed rule and the subsequent proposed frameworks by January 15, 2017. Tribes must submit proposals and related comments on or before December 1, 2016.

Meetings: The SRC will conduct an open meeting on June 15, 2016, to identify and discuss preliminary issues concerning the 2017-18 migratory bird hunting regulations. The meeting will commence at approximately 11:00 a.m. EDT. The SRC will meet to consider and develop proposed regulations for the 2017-18 migratory game bird hunting seasons on October 25-26, 2016. Meetings on both days will commence at approximately 8:30 a.m.

ADDRESSES: You may submit comments on the proposals by one of the following methods:

- *Federal eRulemaking Portal:* <http://www.regulations.gov>. Follow the instructions for submitting comments on Docket No. FWS-HQ-MB-2016-0051.

- *U.S. mail or hand-delivery:* Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-HQ-MB-2016-0051; Division of Policy, Performance, and Management Programs; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, MS: BPHC; 5275 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA 22041.

We will not accept emailed or faxed comments. We will post all comments on <http://www.regulations.gov>. This generally means that your entire submission—including any personal identifying information—will be posted on the Web site. See the Public Comments section, below, for more information.

Meetings: The June 15, 2016, SRC meeting will be available to the public in the Rachel Carson conference room at 5275 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA 22041. The October 25-26, 2016, SRC meeting will be at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 5600 American Boulevard, Bloomington, MN 55437.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Ron W. Kokel at: Division of Migratory Bird Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, MS: MB, 5275 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA 22041; (703) 358-1714.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

New Process for the Annual Migratory Game Bird Hunting Regulations

As part of DOI's retrospective regulatory review, we developed a schedule for migratory game bird hunting regulations that is more efficient and provides hunting season dates much earlier than was possible under the old process. The new process makes planning much easier for the States and all parties interested in migratory bird hunting. Beginning last year with the development of the 2016-17 hunting seasons, we are using a new schedule for establishing our annual migratory game bird hunting regulations. We combine the previously used early- and late-season regulatory processes into a single process, and make decisions for harvest management based on predictions derived from long-term biological information and established harvest strategies to establish migratory bird hunting seasons much earlier than the system we used for many years. Under the new process, we develop proposed hunting season frameworks for a given year in the fall

of the prior year. We then finalize those frameworks a few months later, thereby enabling the State agencies to select and publish their season dates in early summer.

This proposed rule is the first in a series of rules for the establishment of the 2017-18 hunting seasons.

Background and Overview

Migratory game birds are those bird species so designated in conventions between the United States and several foreign nations for the protection and management of these birds. Under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (16 U.S.C. 703-712), the Secretary of the Interior is authorized to determine when "hunting, taking, capture, killing, possession, sale, purchase, shipment, transportation, carriage, or export of any * * * bird, or any part, nest, or egg" of migratory game birds can take place, and to adopt regulations for this purpose. These regulations are written after giving due regard to "the zones of temperature and to the distribution, abundance, economic value, breeding habits, and times and lines of migratory flight of such birds" and are updated annually (16 U.S.C. 704(a)). This responsibility has been delegated to the Service as the lead Federal agency for managing and conserving migratory birds in the United States. However, migratory game bird management is a cooperative effort of State, Tribal, and Federal governments.

The Service develops migratory game bird hunting regulations by establishing the frameworks, or outside limits, for season lengths, bag limits, and areas for migratory game bird hunting. Acknowledging regional differences in hunting conditions, the Service has administratively divided the Nation into four Flyways for the primary purpose of managing migratory game birds. Each Flyway (Atlantic, Mississippi, Central, and Pacific) has a Flyway Council, a formal organization generally composed of one member from each State and Province in that Flyway. The Flyway Councils, established through the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA), also assist in researching and providing migratory game bird management information for Federal, State, and Provincial governments, as well as private conservation entities and the general public.

The process for adopting migratory game bird hunting regulations, located at 50 CFR part 20, is constrained by three primary factors. Legal and administrative considerations dictate how long the rulemaking process will last. Most importantly, however, the

biological cycle of migratory game birds controls the timing of data-gathering activities and thus the dates on which these results are available for consideration and deliberation.

For the regulatory cycle, Service biologists gather, analyze, and interpret biological survey data and provide this information to all those involved in the process through a series of published status reports and presentations to Flyway Councils and other interested parties. Because the Service is required to take abundance of migratory game birds and other factors into consideration, the Service undertakes a number of surveys throughout the year in conjunction with Service Regional Offices, the Canadian Wildlife Service, and State and Provincial wildlife-management agencies. To determine the appropriate frameworks for each species, we consider factors such as population size and trend, geographical distribution, annual breeding effort, the condition of breeding and wintering habitat, the number of hunters, and the anticipated harvest. After frameworks are established for season lengths, bag limits, and areas for migratory game bird hunting, States may select season dates, bag limits, and other regulatory options for the hunting seasons. States may always be more conservative in their selections than the Federal frameworks, but never more liberal.

Service Migratory Bird Regulations Committee Meetings

The SRC will meet October 25–26, 2016, to review information on the current status of migratory game birds and develop 2017–18 migratory game bird regulations recommendations for these species. In accordance with Departmental policy, these meetings are open to public observation. You may submit written comments to the Service on the matters discussed.

Announcement of Flyway Council Meetings

Service representatives will be present at the individual meetings of the four Flyway Councils this August, September and October. Although agendas are not yet available, these meetings usually commence at 8 a.m. on the days indicated.

Atlantic Flyway Council: October 6–7, Hyatt Regency, 225 East Coastline Drive, Jacksonville, FL.

Mississippi Flyway Council: August 25–26, Hyatt Regency, 311 South 4th Street, Louisville, KY.

Central Flyway Council: September 22–23, Sheraton Steamboat Resort, 2200 Village Inn Court, Steamboat Springs, CO.

Pacific Flyway Council: September 30, Sun Valley Resort, 1 Sun Valley Road, Sun Valley, ID.

Notice of Intent To Establish Open Seasons

This document announces our intent to establish open hunting seasons and daily bag and possession limits for certain designated groups or species of migratory game birds for 2017–18 in the contiguous United States, Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, under §§ 20.101 through 20.107, 20.109, and 20.110 of subpart K of 50 CFR part 20.

For the 2017–18 migratory game bird hunting season, we will propose regulations for certain designated members of the avian families Anatidae (ducks, geese, and swans); Columbidae (doves and pigeons); Gruidae (cranes); Rallidae (rails, coots, moorhens, and gallinules); and Scolopacidae (woodcock and snipe). We describe these proposals under **Proposed 2017–18 Migratory Game Bird Hunting Regulations (Preliminary)** in this document. We published definitions of waterfowl flyways and mourning dove management units, and a description of the data used in and the factors affecting the regulatory process, in the March 14, 1990, **Federal Register** (55 FR 9618).

Regulatory Schedule for 2017–18

This document is the first in a series of proposed, supplemental, and final rulemaking documents for migratory game bird hunting regulations. We will publish additional supplemental proposals for public comment in the **Federal Register** as population, habitat, harvest, and other information become available. Major steps in the 2017–18 regulatory cycle relating to open public meetings and **Federal Register** notifications are illustrated in the diagram at the end of this proposed rule. All publication dates of **Federal Register** documents are target dates.

All sections of this and subsequent documents outlining hunting frameworks and guidelines are organized under numbered headings. These headings are:

1. Ducks
 - A. General Harvest Strategy
 - B. Regulatory Alternatives
 - C. Zones and Split Seasons
 - D. Special Seasons/Species Management
 - i. September Teal Seasons
 - ii. September Teal/Wood Duck Seasons
 - iii. Black Ducks
 - iv. Canvasbacks
 - v. Pintails
 - vi. Scaup
 - vii. Mottled Ducks
 - viii. Wood Ducks
 - ix. Youth Hunt

- x. Mallard Management Units
- xi. Other
 2. Sea Ducks
 3. Mergansers
 4. Canada Geese
 - A. Special Early Seasons
 - B. Regular Seasons
 - C. Special Late Seasons
 5. White-Fronted Geese
 6. Brant
 7. Snow and Ross's (Light) Geese
 8. Swans
 9. Sandhill Cranes
 10. Coots
 11. Moorhens and Gallinules
 12. Rails
 13. Snipe
 14. Woodcock
 15. Band-tailed Pigeons
 16. Doves
 17. Alaska
 18. Hawaii
 19. Puerto Rico
 20. Virgin Islands
 21. Falconry
 22. Other

Later sections of this and subsequent documents will refer only to numbered items requiring your attention. Therefore, it is important to note that we will omit those items requiring no attention, and remaining numbered items will be discontinuous and appear incomplete.

The proposed regulatory alternatives for the 2017–18 duck hunting seasons are contained at the end of this document. We plan to publish final regulatory alternatives in late July. We plan to publish proposed season frameworks in mid-December 2016. We plan to publish final season frameworks in late February 2017.

Review of Public Comments

This proposed rulemaking contains the proposed regulatory alternatives for the 2017–18 duck hunting seasons. This proposed rulemaking also describes other recommended changes or specific preliminary proposals that vary from the 2016–17 regulations and issues requiring early discussion, action, or the attention of the States or tribes. We will publish responses to all proposals and written comments when we develop final frameworks for the 2017–18 season. We seek additional information and comments on this proposed rule.

Consolidation of Notices

For administrative purposes, this document consolidates the notice of intent to establish open migratory game bird hunting seasons and the request for tribal proposals with the preliminary proposals for the annual hunting regulations-development process. We will publish the remaining proposed and final rulemaking documents separately. For inquiries on tribal

guidelines and proposals, tribes should contact the following personnel:

Region 1 (Idaho, Oregon, Washington, Hawaii, and the Pacific Islands)—Nanette Seto, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 911 NE. 11th Avenue, Portland, OR 97232-4181; (503) 231-6164.

Region 2 (Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas)—Greg Hughes, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 1306, Albuquerque, NM 87103; (505) 248-7885.

Region 3 (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin)—Tom Cooper, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 5600 American Blvd. West, Suite 990, Bloomington, MN 55437-1458; (612) 713-5101.

Region 4 (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands, South Carolina, and Tennessee)—Laurel Barnhill, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1875 Century Boulevard, Room 324, Atlanta, GA 30345; (404) 679-4000.

Region 5 (Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, and West Virginia)—Pam Toschik, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 300 Westgate Center Drive, Hadley, MA 01035-9589; (413) 253-8610.

Region 6 (Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming)—Casey Stemler, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 25486, Denver Federal Building, Denver, CO 80225; (303) 236-8145.

Region 7 (Alaska)—Pete Probasco, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1011 East Tudor Road, Anchorage, AK 99503; (907) 786-3423.

Region 8 (California and Nevada)—Eric Davis, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2800 Cottage Way, Sacramento, CA 95825-1846; (916) 414-6727.

Requests for Tribal Proposals

Background

Beginning with the 1985-86 hunting season, we have employed guidelines described in the June 4, 1985, **Federal Register** (50 FR 23467) to establish special migratory game bird hunting regulations on Federal Indian reservations (including off-reservation trust lands) and ceded lands. We developed these guidelines in response to tribal requests for our recognition of their reserved hunting rights, and for some tribes, recognition of their authority to regulate hunting by both tribal and nontribal members throughout their reservations. The guidelines include possibilities for:

(1) On-reservation hunting by both tribal and nontribal members, with

hunting by nontribal members on some reservations to take place within Federal frameworks, but on dates different from those selected by the surrounding State(s);

(2) On-reservation hunting by tribal members only, outside of usual Federal frameworks for season dates, season length, and daily bag and possession limits; and

(3) Off-reservation hunting by tribal members on ceded lands, outside of usual framework dates and season length, with some added flexibility in daily bag and possession limits.

In all cases, tribal regulations established under the guidelines must be consistent with the annual March 10 to September 1 closed season mandated by the 1916 Convention Between the United States and Great Britain (for Canada) for the Protection of Migratory Birds (Convention). The guidelines are applicable to those tribes that have reserved hunting rights on Federal Indian reservations (including off-reservation trust lands) and ceded lands. They also may be applied to the establishment of migratory game bird hunting regulations for nontribal members on all lands within the exterior boundaries of reservations where tribes have full wildlife-management authority over such hunting, or where the tribes and affected States otherwise have reached agreement over hunting by nontribal members on non-Indian lands.

Tribes usually have the authority to regulate migratory game bird hunting by nonmembers on Indian-owned reservation lands, subject to our approval. The question of jurisdiction is more complex on reservations that include lands owned by non-Indians, especially when the surrounding States have established or intend to establish regulations governing migratory bird hunting by non-Indians on these lands. In such cases, we encourage the tribes and States to reach agreement on regulations that would apply throughout the reservations. When appropriate, we will consult with a tribe and State with the aim of facilitating an accord. We also will consult jointly with tribal and State officials in the affected States where tribes may wish to establish special hunting regulations for tribal members on ceded lands. It is incumbent upon the tribe and/or the State to request consultation as a result of the proposal being published in the **Federal Register**. We will not presume to make a determination, without being advised by either a tribe or a State, that any issue is or is not worthy of formal consultation.

One of the guidelines provides for the continuation of tribal members' harvest of migratory game birds on reservations where such harvest is a customary practice. We do not oppose this harvest, provided it does not take place during the closed season required by the Convention, and it is not so large as to adversely affect the status of the migratory game bird resource. Since the inception of these guidelines, we have reached annual agreement with tribes for migratory game bird hunting by tribal members on their lands or on lands where they have reserved hunting rights. We will continue to consult with tribes that wish to reach a mutual agreement on hunting regulations for on-reservation hunting by tribal members.

Tribes should not view the guidelines as inflexible. We believe that they provide appropriate opportunity to accommodate the reserved hunting rights and management authority of Indian tribes while also ensuring that the migratory game bird resource receives necessary protection. The conservation of this important international resource is paramount. Use of the guidelines is not required if a tribe wishes to observe the hunting regulations established by the State(s) in which the reservation is located.

Details Needed in Tribal Proposals

Tribes that wish to use the guidelines to establish special hunting regulations for the 2017-18 migratory game bird hunting season should submit a proposal that includes:

- (1) The requested migratory game bird hunting season dates and other details regarding the proposed regulations;
- (2) Harvest anticipated under the proposed regulations; and
- (3) Tribal capabilities to enforce migratory game bird hunting regulations.

For those situations where it could be shown that failure to limit Tribal harvest could seriously impact the migratory game bird resource, we also request information on the methods employed to monitor harvest and any potential steps taken to limit level of harvest.

A tribe that desires the earliest possible opening of the migratory game bird season for nontribal members should specify this request in its proposal, rather than request a date that might not be within the final Federal frameworks. Similarly, unless a tribe wishes to set more restrictive regulations than Federal regulations will permit for nontribal members, the proposal should request the same daily bag and possession limits and season

length for migratory game birds that Federal regulations are likely to permit the States in the Flyway in which the reservation is located.

Tribal Proposal Procedures

We will publish details of tribal proposals for public review in later **Federal Register** documents. Because of the time required for review by us and the public, Indian tribes that desire special migratory game bird hunting regulations for the 2017–18 hunting season should submit their proposals no later than December 1, 2016. Tribes should direct inquiries regarding the guidelines and proposals to the appropriate Service Regional Office listed above under the caption

Consolidation of Notices. Tribes that request special migratory game bird hunting regulations for tribal members on ceded lands should send a courtesy copy of the proposal to officials in the affected State(s).

Public Comments

The Department of the Interior's policy is, whenever practicable, to afford the public an opportunity to participate in the rulemaking process. Accordingly, we invite interested persons to submit written comments, suggestions, or recommendations regarding the proposed regulations. Before promulgation of final migratory game bird hunting regulations, we will take into consideration all comments we receive. Such comments, and any additional information we receive, may lead to final regulations that differ from these proposals.

You may submit your comments and materials concerning this proposed rule by one of the methods listed in the **ADDRESSES** section. We will not accept comments sent by email or fax or to an address not listed in the **ADDRESSES** section. Finally, we will not consider hand-delivered comments that we do not receive, or mailed comments that are not postmarked, by the date specified in the **DATES** section. We will post all comments in their entirety—including your personal identifying information—on <http://www.regulations.gov>. Before including your address, phone number, email address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment—including your personal identifying information—may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so. Comments and materials we

receive, as well as supporting documentation we used in preparing this proposed rule, will be available for public inspection on <http://www.regulations.gov>, or by appointment, during normal business hours, at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Migratory Bird Management, 5275 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA 22041.

For each series of proposed rulemakings, we will establish specific comment periods. We will consider, but may not respond in detail to, each comment. As in the past, we will summarize all comments we receive during the comment period and respond to them after the closing date in any final rules.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Consideration

The programmatic document, “Second Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement: Issuance of Annual Regulations Permitting the Sport Hunting of Migratory Birds (EIS 20130139),” filed with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on May 24, 2013, addresses NEPA compliance by the Service for issuance of the annual framework regulations for hunting of migratory game bird species. We published a notice of availability in the **Federal Register** on May 31, 2013 (78 FR 32686), and our Record of Decision on July 26, 2013 (78 FR 45376). We also address NEPA compliance for waterfowl hunting frameworks through the annual preparation of separate environmental assessments, the most recent being “Duck Hunting Regulations for 2016–17,” with its corresponding March 10, 2016, finding of no significant impact. In addition, an August 1985 environmental assessment entitled “Guidelines for Migratory Bird Hunting Regulations on Federal Indian Reservations and Ceded Lands” is available from the address indicated under the caption **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT**.

Endangered Species Act Consideration

Before issuance of the 2017–18 migratory game bird hunting regulations, we will comply with provisions of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531–1543; hereinafter the Act), to ensure that hunting is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any species designated as endangered or threatened or modify or destroy its critical habitat and is consistent with conservation programs for those species. Consultations under section 7 of the Act may cause us to change proposals in

this and future supplemental proposed rulemaking documents.

Regulatory Planning and Review (Executive Orders 12866 and 13563)

Executive Order (E.O.) 12866 provides that the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) will review all significant rules. OIRA has reviewed this rule and has determined that this rule is significant because it would have an annual effect of \$100 million or more on the economy.

E.O. 13563 reaffirms the principles of E.O. 12866 while calling for improvements in the nation's regulatory system to promote predictability, to reduce uncertainty, and to use the best, most innovative, and least burdensome tools for achieving regulatory ends. The executive order directs agencies to consider regulatory approaches that reduce burdens and maintain flexibility and freedom of choice for the public where these approaches are relevant, feasible, and consistent with regulatory objectives. E.O. 13563 emphasizes further that regulations must be based on the best available science and that the rulemaking process must allow for public participation and an open exchange of ideas. We have developed this rule in a manner consistent with these requirements.

An economic analysis was prepared for the 2013–14 season. This analysis was based on data from the 2011 National Hunting and Fishing Survey, the most recent year for which data are available (see discussion in **Regulatory Flexibility Act** section below). We will use this analysis again for the 2017–18 season. This analysis estimated consumer surplus for three alternatives for duck hunting (estimates for other species are not quantified due to lack of data). The alternatives are (1) issue restrictive regulations allowing fewer days than those issued during the 2012–13 season, (2) issue moderate regulations allowing more days than those in alternative 1, and (3) issue liberal regulations identical to the regulations in the 2012–13 season. For the 2013–14 season, we chose Alternative 3, with an estimated consumer surplus across all flyways of \$317.8–\$416.8 million. We also chose Alternative 3 for the 2009–10, the 2010–11, the 2011–12, the 2012–13, the 2014–15, the 2015–16, and the 2016–17 seasons. The 2013–14 analysis is part of the record for this rule and is available at <http://www.regulations.gov> at Docket No. FWS–HQ–MB–2016–0051.

Regulatory Flexibility Act

The annual migratory bird hunting regulations have a significant economic

impact on substantial numbers of small entities under the Regulatory Flexibility Act (5 U.S.C. 601 *et seq.*). We analyzed the economic impacts of the annual hunting regulations on small business entities in detail as part of the 1981 cost-benefit analysis. This analysis was revised annually from 1990–95. In 1995, the Service issued a Small Entity Flexibility Analysis (Analysis), which was subsequently updated in 1996, 1998, 2004, 2008, and 2013. The primary source of information about hunter expenditures for migratory game bird hunting is the National Hunting and Fishing Survey, which is conducted at 5-year intervals. The 2013 Analysis was based on the 2011 National Hunting and Fishing Survey and the U.S. Department of Commerce's County Business Patterns, from which it was estimated that migratory bird hunters would spend approximately \$1.5 billion at small businesses in 2013. Copies of the Analysis are available upon request from the Division of Migratory Bird Management (see **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT**) or from <http://www.regulations.gov> at Docket No. FWS–HQ–MB–2016–0051.

Clarity of the Rule

We are required by Executive Orders 12866 and 12988 and by the Presidential Memorandum of June 1, 1998, to write all rules in plain language. This means that each rule we publish must:

- (a) Be logically organized;
- (b) Use the active voice to address readers directly;
- (c) Use clear language rather than jargon;
- (d) Be divided into short sections and sentences; and
- (e) Use lists and tables wherever possible.

If you feel that we have not met these requirements, send us comments by one of the methods listed in the **ADDRESSES** section. To better help us revise the rule, your comments should be as specific as possible. For example, you should tell us the numbers of the sections or paragraphs that are unclearly written, which sections or sentences are too long, the sections where you feel lists or tables would be useful, etc.

Small Business Regulatory Enforcement Fairness Act

This proposed rule is a major rule under 5 U.S.C. 804(2), the Small Business Regulatory Enforcement Fairness Act. For the reasons outlined above, this rule would have an annual effect on the economy of \$100 million or more. However, because this rule would establish hunting seasons, we do

not plan to defer the effective date under the exemption contained in 5 U.S.C. 808(1).

Paperwork Reduction Act

This proposed rule does not contain any new information collection that requires approval under the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (44 U.S.C. 3501 *et seq.*). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number. OMB has reviewed and approved the information collection requirements associated with migratory bird surveys and assigned the following OMB control numbers:

- 1018–0019—North American Woodcock Singing Ground Survey (expires 5/31/2018).
- 1018–0023—Migratory Bird Surveys (expires 6/30/2017). Includes Migratory Bird Harvest Information Program, Migratory Bird Hunter Surveys, Sandhill Crane Survey, and Parts Collection Survey.

Unfunded Mandates Reform Act

We have determined and certify, in compliance with the requirements of the Unfunded Mandates Reform Act, 2 U.S.C. 1502 *et seq.*, that this proposed rulemaking would not impose a cost of \$100 million or more in any given year on local or State government or private entities. Therefore, this rule is not a “significant regulatory action” under the Unfunded Mandates Reform Act.

Civil Justice Reform—Executive Order 12988

The Department, in promulgating this proposed rule, has determined that this proposed rule will not unduly burden the judicial system and that it meets the requirements of sections 3(a) and 3(b)(2) of E.O. 12988.

Takings Implication Assessment

In accordance with E.O. 12630, this proposed rule, authorized by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, does not have significant takings implications and does not affect any constitutionally protected property rights. This rule would not result in the physical occupancy of property, the physical invasion of property, or the regulatory taking of any property. In fact, this rule would allow hunters to exercise otherwise unavailable privileges and, therefore, reduce restrictions on the use of private and public property.

Energy Effects—Executive Order 13211

E.O. 13211 requires agencies to prepare Statements of Energy Effects when undertaking certain actions.

While this proposed rule is a significant regulatory action under E.O. 12866, it is not expected to adversely affect energy supplies, distribution, or use. Therefore, this action is not a significant energy action and no Statement of Energy Effects is required.

Government-to-Government Relationship With Tribes

In accordance with the President's memorandum of April 29, 1994, “Government-to-Government Relations with Native American Tribal Governments” (59 FR 22951), E.O. 13175, and 512 DM 2, we have evaluated possible effects on Federally-recognized Indian tribes and have determined that there are no effects on Indian trust resources. However, in this proposed rule, we solicit proposals for special migratory bird hunting regulations for certain Tribes on Federal Indian reservations, off-reservation trust lands, and ceded lands for the 2017–18 migratory bird hunting season. The resulting proposals will be contained in a separate proposed rule. By virtue of these actions, we have consulted with Tribes affected by this rule.

Federalism Effects

Due to the migratory nature of certain species of birds, the Federal Government has been given responsibility over these species by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. We annually prescribe frameworks from which the States make selections regarding the hunting of migratory birds, and we employ guidelines to establish special regulations on Federal Indian reservations and ceded lands. This process preserves the ability of the States and tribes to determine which seasons meet their individual needs. Any State or Indian tribe may be more restrictive than the Federal frameworks at any time. The frameworks are developed in a cooperative process with the States and the Flyway Councils. This process allows States to participate in the development of frameworks from which they will make selections, thereby having an influence on their own regulations. These rules do not have a substantial direct effect on fiscal capacity, change the roles or responsibilities of Federal or State governments, or intrude on State policy or administration. Therefore, in accordance with E.O. 13132, these regulations do not have significant federalism effects and do not have sufficient federalism implications to warrant the preparation of a federalism summary impact statement.

List of Subjects in 50 CFR Part 20

Exports, Hunting, Imports, Reporting and recordkeeping requirements, Transportation, Wildlife.

Authority

The rules that eventually will be promulgated for the 2017–18 hunting season are authorized under 16 U.S.C. 703–711, 16 U.S.C. 712, and 16 U.S.C. 742 a–j.

Dated: May 19, 2016.

Karen Hyun,

Deputy Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks.

Proposed 2017–18 Migratory Game Bird Hunting Regulations (Preliminary)

Pending current information on populations, harvest, and habitat conditions, and receipt of recommendations from the four Flyway Councils, we may defer specific regulatory proposals. No changes from the 2016–17 frameworks are being proposed at this time. Other issues requiring early discussion, action, or the attention of the States or tribes are contained below:

1. Ducks

Categories used to discuss issues related to duck harvest management are: (A) General Harvest Strategy, (B) Regulatory Alternatives, (C) Zones and Split Seasons, and (D) Special Seasons/Species Management. Only those containing substantial recommendations are discussed below.

A. General Harvest Strategy

We propose to continue using adaptive harvest management (AHM) to help determine appropriate duck-hunting regulations for the 2017–18 season. AHM permits sound resource decisions in the face of uncertain regulatory impacts and provides a mechanism for reducing that uncertainty over time. We use AHM to evaluate four alternative regulatory levels for duck hunting based on the population status of mallards. (We enact other hunting regulations for species of special concern, such as canvasbacks, scaup, and pintails).

Atlantic, Mississippi, Central, and Pacific Flyways

The prescribed regulatory alternative for the Atlantic, Mississippi, Central, and Pacific Flyways is based on the status of mallards that contributes primarily to each Flyway. In the Atlantic Flyway, we set hunting regulations based on the population status of mallards breeding in eastern North America (Federal survey strata

51–54 and 56, and State surveys in the Northeast and the mid-Atlantic region). In the Central and Mississippi Flyways, we set hunting regulations based on the status and dynamics of mid-continent mallards. Mid-continent mallards are those breeding in central North America (Federal survey strata 13–18, 20–50, and 75–77, and State surveys in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan). In the Pacific Flyway, we set hunting regulations based on the status and dynamics of western mallards. Western mallards are those breeding in Alaska and the northern Yukon Territory (as based on Federal surveys in strata 1–12), and in California and Oregon (as based on State-conducted surveys).

For the 2017–18 season, we recommend continuing to use independent optimization to determine the optimal regulatory choice for each mallard stock. This means that we would develop regulations for eastern mallards, mid-continent mallards and western mallards independently, based upon the breeding stock that contributes primarily to each Flyway. We detailed implementation of this AHM decision framework for western and mid-continent mallards in the July 24, 2008, **Federal Register** (73 FR 43290) and for eastern mallards in the July 20, 2012, **Federal Register** (77 FR 42920).

Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) Changes to the AHM Process

Beginning with the 2016–17 season, migratory bird hunting regulations are based on predictions from models derived from long-term biological information or the most recently collected monitoring data, and established harvest strategies. Since 1995, the Service and Flyway Councils have applied the principles of adaptive management to inform harvest management decisions in the face of uncertainty while trying to learn about system (bird populations) responses to harvest regulations and environmental changes. Prior to the timing and process changes necessary for implementation of SEIS 2013, the annual AHM process began with the observation of the system's status each spring followed by an updating of model weights and the derivation of an optimal harvest policy that was then used to inform a regulatory decision (*i.e.*, breeding population estimates were used with a policy matrix to determine optimal regulatory decisions). The system then evolves over time in response to the decision and natural variation in population dynamics. The following spring, the monitoring programs observe the status of the system and the iterative

decision-making process continues forward in time. However, with the changes in decision timing specified by the SEIS, the post-survey AHM process will not be possible because monitoring information describing the system will not be available at the time the decision must be made. As a result, the optimization framework used to derive the current harvest policy can no longer calculate current and future harvest values as a function of the current system and model weights. To address this issue, we adjusted the optimization procedures to calculate harvest values conditional on the last observation of the system and regulatory decision.

Results and analysis of our work is contained in a technical report that provides a summary of revised methods and assessment results based on updated AHM protocols developed in response to the preferred alternative specified in the SEIS. The report describes necessary changes to optimization procedures and decision processes for the implementation of AHM for midcontinent, eastern and western mallards, northern pintails, and scaup decision frameworks.

Results indicate that the necessary adjustments to the optimization procedures and AHM protocols to account for changes in decision timing are not expected to result in major changes to expected management performance for mallard, pintail, and scaup AHM. In general, pre-survey (or pre-SEIS necessary changes) harvest policies were similar to harvest policies based on new post-survey (or post-SEIS necessary changes) AHM protocols. We found some subtle differences in the degree to which strategies prescribed regulatory changes in the pre-survey policies with a reduction in the number of cells indicating moderate regulations. In addition, pre-survey policies became more liberal when the previous regulatory decisions were more conservative. These patterns were consistent for each AHM decision-making framework. Overall, a comparison of simulation results of the pre- and post-survey protocols did not suggest substantive changes in the frequency of regulations or in the expected average population size. These results suggest that the additional form of uncertainty that the change in decision timing introduces is not expected to limit our expected harvest management performance with the adoption of the pre-survey AHM protocols.

A complete copy of the AHM report can be found on <http://www.regulations.gov> or at <http://www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/pdf/>

management/AHM/
SEIS&AHMReportFinal.pdf.

Final 2017–18 AHM Protocol

We will detail the final AHM protocol for the 2017–18 season in the supplemental proposed rule, which we will publish in late July (see **Schedule of Biological Information Availability, Regulations Meetings and Federal Register Publications for the 2017–18 Seasons** at the end of this proposed rule for further information). We will propose a specific regulatory alternative for each of the Flyways to use for their 2017–18 seasons after information becomes available in late August 2016.

B. Regulatory Alternatives

The basic structure of the current regulatory alternatives for AHM was adopted in 1997. In 2002, based upon recommendations from the Flyway Councils, we extended framework dates in the “moderate” and “liberal” regulatory alternatives by changing the opening date from the Saturday nearest October 1 to the Saturday nearest September 24, and by changing the closing date from the Sunday nearest January 20 to the last Sunday in January. These extended dates were made available with no associated penalty in season length or bag limits. At that time we stated our desire to keep these changes in place for 3 years to allow for a reasonable opportunity to monitor the impacts of framework-date extensions on harvest distribution and rates of harvest before considering any subsequent use (67 FR 12501; March 19, 2002).

For 2017–18, we propose to utilize the same regulatory alternatives that are in effect for the 2016–17 season (see accompanying table for specifics of the regulatory alternatives). Alternatives are specified for each Flyway and are designated as “RES” for the restrictive, “MOD” for the moderate, and “LIB” for the liberal alternative.

C. Zones and Split Seasons

Zones and split seasons are “special regulations” designed to distribute hunting opportunities and harvests according to temporal, geographic, and demographic variability in waterfowl and other migratory game bird populations. For ducks, States have been allowed the option of dividing their allotted hunting days into two (or in some cases three) segments to take advantage of species-specific peaks of abundance or to satisfy hunters in different areas who want to hunt during the peak of waterfowl abundance in their area. However, the split-season option does not fully satisfy many States

who wish to provide a more equitable distribution of harvest opportunities. Therefore, we also have allowed the establishment of independent seasons in up to four zones within States for the purpose of providing more equitable distribution of harvest opportunity for hunters throughout the State.

In 1978, we prepared an environmental assessment (EA) on the use of zones to set duck hunting regulations. A primary tenet of the 1978 EA was that zoning would be for the primary purpose of providing equitable distribution of duck hunting opportunities within a State or region and not for the purpose of increasing total annual waterfowl harvest in the zoned areas. In fact, target harvest levels were to be adjusted downward if they exceeded traditional levels as a result of zoning. Subsequent to the 1978 EA, we conducted a review of the use of zones and split seasons in 1990. In 2011, we prepared a new EA analyzing some specific proposed changes to the zone and split-season guidelines. The current guidelines were then finalized in 2011 (76 FR 53536; August 26, 2011).

Currently, every 5 years, States are afforded the opportunity to change the zoning and split-season configuration within which they set their annual duck hunting regulations. The next regularly scheduled open season for changes to zone and split-season configurations was in 2016, for use during the 2016–20 period. However, as we discussed in the September 23, 2014, **Federal Register** (79 FR 56864), the April 13, 2015, **Federal Register** (80 FR 19852), and the August 6, 2015, **Federal Register** (80 FR 47388), we implemented significant changes to the annual regulatory process as outlined in the 2013 SEIS. As a result, the previously identified May 1, 2016, due date for zone and split-season configuration changes that was developed under the old regulatory process was too late for those States wishing to change zone and split-season configurations for implementation in the 2016–17 season. Under the new regulatory schedule implemented last year, we published the proposed rule for all migratory bird seasons the following fall in early December. A final rule tentatively would be published about 75 days after the proposed rule (but no later than April 1). This new schedule precluded inclusion of some States’ new zone descriptions in the 2016–17 proposed rule as had been done in past open seasons. Thus, we utilized a two-phase approach. For those States able to change zone and split-season configurations in time for the 2016–17 season, we included new configuration

and zone descriptions in the 2016–17 hunting regulations. States that do not send in new zone and split-season configuration changes at that time had until the previously identified May 1, 2016, deadline. Those changes will be implemented in the 2017–18 hunting season. The next scheduled open season would remain in 2021 for the 2021–25 seasons, and all States will then resume on the same 5-year schedule regardless of how long their previous zone-split configuration was in place.

For the current open season, the guidelines for duck zone and split-season configurations will be as follows:

Guidelines for Duck Zones and Split Seasons

The following zone and split-season guidelines apply only for the regular duck season:

(1) A zone is a geographic area or portion of a State, with a contiguous boundary, for which independent dates may be selected for the regular duck season.

(2) Consideration of changes for management-unit boundaries is not subject to the guidelines and provisions governing the use of zones and split seasons for ducks.

(3) Only minor (less than a county in size) boundary changes will be allowed for any grandfathered arrangement, and changes are limited to the open season.

(4) Once a zone and split option is selected during an open season, it must remain in place for the following 5 years.

Any State may continue the configuration used in the previous 5-year period. If changes are made, the zone and split-season configuration must conform to one of the following options:

(1) No more than four zones with no splits,

(2) Split seasons (no more than 3 segments) with no zones, or

(3) No more than three zones with the option for 2-way (2-segment) split seasons in one, two, or all zones.

Grandfathered Zone and Split Arrangements

When we first implemented the zone and split guidelines in 1991, several States had completed experiments with zone and split arrangements different from our original options. We offered those States a one-time opportunity to continue (“grandfather”) those arrangements, with the stipulation that only minor changes could be made to zone boundaries. If any of those States now wish to change their zone and split arrangement:

(1) The new arrangement must conform to one of the 3 options identified above; and

(2) The State cannot go back to the grandfathered arrangement that it previously had in place.

Management Units

We will continue to utilize the specific limitations previously established regarding the use of zones and split seasons in special management units, including the High Plains Mallard Management Unit. We note that the original justification and objectives established for the High Plains Mallard Management Unit provided for additional days of hunting opportunity at the end of the regular duck season. In order to maintain the integrity of the management unit, current guidelines prohibit simultaneous zoning and/or 3-way split seasons within a management unit and the remainder of the State. Removal of this limitation would allow additional proliferation of zone and split configurations and compromise the original objectives of the management unit.

D. Special Seasons/Species Management

iv. Canvasbacks

From 1994–2015, we followed a canvasback harvest strategy whereby if canvasback population status and production are sufficient to permit a harvest of one canvasback per day nationwide for the entire length of the regular duck season, while still attaining an objective of 500,000 birds the following spring, the season on canvasbacks should be opened. A partial season would be allowed if the estimated allowable harvest was below that associated with a 1-bird daily bag limit for the entire season. If neither of these conditions can be met, the harvest strategy calls for a closed season on canvasbacks nationwide. In 2008 (73 FR 43290; July 24, 2008), we announced our decision to modify the canvasback harvest strategy to incorporate the option for a 2-bird daily bag limit for canvasbacks when the predicted

breeding population the subsequent year exceeds 725,000 birds.

Since the existing harvest strategy relies on information that will not yet be available at the time we need to establish proposed frameworks under the new regulatory process, the canvasback harvest management strategy is not usable for the 2016–17 season and beyond. At this time we do not have a new harvest strategy to propose for use in the future. Thus, as we did for the 2016–17 season, we will review the most recent information on canvasback populations, habitat conditions, and harvests with the goal of compiling the best information available for use in making a harvest management decision. We will share these results with the Flyways during their fall meetings, with the intention of adopting a decision-making approach in October for the 2017–18 seasons. Over the next year, we will continue to work with the Flyway technical committees and councils to develop a new biologically based process for informing harvest management decisions for use in subsequent years.

16. Doves

As we discussed in the April 13 (80 FR 19852), July 21 (80 FR 43266), and August 6 (80 FR 47388), 2015, **Federal Registers**, 2016 was the next open season for changes to dove zone and split configurations for the 2016–20 period. The current guidelines were approved in 2006 (see July 28, 2006, **Federal Register**, 71 FR 43008), for the use of zones and split seasons for doves with implementation beginning in the 2007–08 season. While the initial period was for 4 years (2007–10), we further stated that beginning in 2011, zoning would conform to a 5-year period.

As discussed above under **C. Zones and Split Seasons** for ducks, because of unintentional and unanticipated issues with changing the regulatory schedule for the 2016–17 season, we decided that a two-phase approach was appropriate. For those States able to change zone and split-season configurations in time for the 2016–17 season, we included that new configuration and zone descriptions in the 2016–17 hunting

seasons. For those States unable to do so last year, we will accept zone and split-season configuration changes until the previously identified May 1, 2016, deadline. We will implement these changes in the 2017–18 hunting season. The next normally scheduled open season will be in 2021 for the 2021–25 seasons.

For the current open season, the guidelines for dove zone and split-season configurations will be as follows:

Guidelines for Dove Zones and Split Seasons in the Eastern and Central Mourning Dove Management Units

(1) A zone is a geographic area or portion of a State, with a contiguous boundary, for which independent seasons may be selected for dove hunting.

(2) States may select a zone and split option during an open season. The option must remain in place for the following 5 years except that States may make a one-time change and revert to their previous zone and split configuration in any year of the 5-year period. Formal approval will not be required, but States must notify the Service before making the change.

(3) Zoning periods for dove hunting will conform to those years used for ducks, e.g., 2016–20.

(4) The zone and split configuration consists of two zones with the option for 3-way (3-segment) split seasons in one or both zones. As a grandfathered arrangement, Texas will have three zones with the option for 2-way (2-segment) split seasons in one, two, or all three zones.

(5) States that do not wish to zone for dove hunting may split their seasons into no more than 3 segments.

For the 2016–20 period, any State may continue the configuration used in 2011–15. If changes are made, the zone and split-season configuration must conform to one of the options listed above. If Texas uses a new configuration for the entirety of the 5-year period, it cannot go back to the grandfathered arrangement that it previously had in place.

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PROPOSED REGULATORY ALTERNATIVES FOR DUCK HUNTING DURING THE 2017-18 SEASON

	ATLANTIC FLYWAY			MISSISSIPPI FLYWAY			CENTRAL FLYWAY (a)			PACIFIC FLYWAY (b)(c)		
	RES	MOD	LIB	RES	MOD	LIB	RES	MOD	LIB	RES	MOD	LIB
Beginning Shooting Time	1/2 hr. before sunrise	1/2 hr. before sunrise	1/2 hr. before sunrise	1/2 hr. before sunrise	1/2 hr. before sunrise	1/2 hr. before sunrise	1/2 hr. before sunrise	1/2 hr. before sunrise	1/2 hr. before sunrise	1/2 hr. before sunrise	1/2 hr. before sunrise	1/2 hr. before sunrise
Ending Shooting Time	Sunset	Sunset	Sunset	Sunset	Sunset	Sunset	Sunset	Sunset	Sunset	Sunset	Sunset	Sunset
Opening Date	Oct. 1	Sat. nearest Sept. 24	Sat. nearest Sept. 24	Sat. nearest Oct. 1	Sat. nearest Sept. 24	Sat. nearest Sept. 24	Sat. nearest Oct. 1	Sat. nearest Sept. 24	Sat. nearest Sept. 24	Sat. nearest Oct. 1	Sat. nearest Sept. 24	Sat. nearest Sept. 24
Closing Date	Jan. 20	Last Sunday in Jan.	Last Sunday in Jan.	Sun. nearest Jan. 20	Last Sunday in Jan.	Last Sunday in Jan.	Sun. nearest Jan. 20	Last Sunday in Jan.	Last Sunday in Jan.	Sun. nearest Jan. 20	Last Sunday in Jan.	Last Sunday in Jan.
Season Length (in days)	30	45	60	30	45	60	39	60	74	60	86	107
Daily Bag	3	6	6	3	6	6	3	6	6	4	7	7
Species/Sex Limits within the Overall Daily Bag Limit												
Mallard (Total/Female)	3/1	4/2	4/2	2/1	4/1	4/2	3/1	5/1	5/2	3/1	5/2	7/2

- (a) In the High Plains Mallard Management Unit, all regulations would be the same as the remainder of the Central Flyway, with the exception of season length. Additional days would be allowed under the various alternatives as follows: restrictive - 12, moderate and liberal - 23. Under all alternatives, additional days must be on or after the Saturday nearest December 10.
- (b) In the Columbia Basin Mallard Management Unit, all regulations would be the same as the remainder of the Pacific Flyway, with the exception of season length. Under all alternatives except the liberal alternative, an additional 7 days would be allowed.
- (c) In Alaska, framework dates, bag limits, and season length would be different from the remainder of the Pacific Flyway. The bag limit (depending on the area) would be 5-8 under the restrictive alternative, and 7-10 under the moderate and liberal alternatives. Under all alternatives, season length would be 107 days and framework dates would be Sep. 1 - Jan. 26.

SCHEDULE OF BIOLOGICAL INFORMATION AVAILABILITY, REGULATIONS MEETINGS AND FEDERAL REGISTER PUBLICATIONS FOR THE 2017-18 SEASONS

