

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

about

RESIDENT CANADA GOOSE MANAGEMENT

What are resident Canada geese and how do they differ from other Canada geese?

Most of the 11 subspecies of Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*) are encountered in the lower 48 States only during the fall, winter and spring of the year and migrate to the arctic and sub-arctic regions of Canada and Alaska to nest. Some geese stay in the U.S. year around. The Service identifies “resident Canada geese” as those nesting within the lower 48 States in the months of March, April, May, or June, and reside within the lower 48 States in the months of April, May, June, July, and August. No evidence presently exists documenting inter-breeding between Canada geese nesting within the lower 48 States and those subspecies nesting in northern Canada and Alaska.

What is the status of resident Canada goose populations?

Over the most recent 3 years with complete estimates (2003–05), the total number of temperate-nesting Canada geese, or resident Canada geese, has averaged approximately 3.34 million in the United States and 1.37 million in Canada for a total spring population of 4.71 million. These estimates represent an increase in the average of approximately 150,000 geese in the United States (from 3.19 million) and 200,000 geese in Canada (from 1.17 million) from the 2000-02 average of 4.36 million. In fact, over the last six years, we estimate that U.S. populations have increased at an annual growth rate of 1.14 percent and Canada populations at 4.15 percent, resulting in an overall growth rate of 1.99 percent annually. The largest increases continue to be experienced in the States and Provinces of Atlantic Flyway, which increased from an average of 1.37 million for 2000-02 (1.15 million in the United States and 0.21 million in Canada) to 1.60 million for 2003-05 (1.32 million in the United States and 0.28 million in Canada).

Why have their populations grown so much?

The rapid increase of resident Canada goose populations has been attributed to a number of factors. Most resident Canada geese live in mild climates with relatively stable breeding habitat conditions. They’ve adapted well to living in habitats found in suburban and urban development and fly relatively short distances to winter compared with other Canada goose populations. This combination of factors contributes to consistently high annual production and survival. The virtual absence of predators and waterfowl hunting in urban areas also increases survival rates in those urban portions of the population. Given these characteristics, most resident Canada goose populations are continuing to increase in both rural and urban areas.

What kind of problems do they cause?

Large flocks of resident Canada geese can denude grassy areas, including parks, pastures, golf courses, lawns, and other landscaped areas where the grass is kept short and where there are ponds, lakes, and other bodies of water nearby. At airports, resident Canada geese have become a significant safety threat, resulting in dangerous takeoff and landing conditions, costly repairs, and fatal airplane accidents resulting from bird strikes. Excessive goose droppings are also a health concern,

and have contributed to the temporary closure of public beaches in several States by local health departments. Agricultural and natural resource damage, including depredation of grain crops, overgrazed pastures and degraded water quality, have increased as resident Canada goose populations have grown.

What is an EIS and why was its preparation necessary?

An EIS is required by the National Environmental Policy Act to assess the potential environmental impacts of any proposed major Federal action and to offer reasonable alternatives. Any decision to implement an alternative strategy to reduce, manage, and control resident Canada goose populations in the continental United States and to reduce related damages would constitute a major Federal action. Thus, an EIS is required to evaluate a range of alternative strategies designed to address the problem. The EIS documents this assessment and, together with supporting documents, considerations, data, and public comments, was used by the Service's Director in the preparation of the final rule. The final rule implements the preferred alternative in the EIS.

What would happen to resident Canada goose populations without management?

With no action, the Service estimates that the population of resident geese in most areas would continue to increase. As populations grow, environmental impacts and conflicts with people likely will increase. In the Atlantic Flyway, we estimate that the population will approach 1.25 million in 5 years and 1.37 million in 10 years. In the Mississippi Flyway, we estimate that the U.S. segment of the current population (1.3 million) will approach 1.5 million in 5 years and 1.8 million in 10 years. In the Central Flyway, we estimate that the numbers will approach 1.1 million by 2010. In the Pacific Flyway, we estimate that the population will approach 400,000 geese by 2010.

What action does the Service propose to address the problem?

The new regulations implement our "Integrated Damage Management and Population Control" FEIS preferred alternative. Under this alternative, State wildlife management agencies, private landowners, and airport managers will gain flexibility to deal with the problems caused by resident Canada goose populations. States could choose to implement specific strategies, such as depredation and control orders in agricultural areas, or at locations where public health may be an issue; expanded hunting opportunities; or other indirect and/or direct population-control strategies. Further, airport managers and private landowners could implement specific management of nests and eggs and other management options.

How would you briefly summarize the overall program?

The new regulations consists of three main program components:

The first component consists of specific control and depredation orders (Airports, Nests and Eggs, Agricultural, and Public Health) designed to address resident Canada goose depredation, damage, and conflict management. These actions could be conducted by the appropriate State agency, Fish and Wildlife Service or other official agent (such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services), or in some cases, the affected public.

The second component provides expanded hunting methods and opportunities to increase the sport harvest of resident Canada geese above that which results from existing September special Canada goose seasons.

The third component authorizes the Director to implement a resident Canada goose population

control program, or management take (defined as a special management action that is needed to reduce certain wildlife populations when traditional management programs are unsuccessful in preventing overabundance of the population). The intent of the program would be to reduce resident Canada goose populations in order to protect personal property and agricultural crops, protect other interests from injury, resolve or prevent injury to people, property, agricultural crops, or other interests from resident Canada geese, and reduce or eliminate potential concerns about human health.

What is a Depredation or Control Order?

A depredation or control order is a Federal regulation that allows the take of birds without a Federal permit. Since migratory birds are Federally protected, all take normally requires a Federal permit.

How does the Service characterize the public comments?

Before the draft EIS was started, scoping meetings were held in February, 2000, at nine locations across the country. Attendance totaled approximately 1,250 and over 3,000 comments were received. A Draft EIS was released on March 1, 2002, with a 90-day public comment period. Attendance at the 11 public meetings totaled 429 and over 2,700 written comments were received. A subsequent comment period was opened on August 21, 2003, in relation to the proposed rule. The comment period closed October 20, 2003. Thus, outside of the scoping comments, public comments were accepted from the opening of the comment period on March 1, 2002, until October 20, 2003. Written comments specific to the draft EIS were received from 2,657 private individuals, 33 State wildlife resource agencies, 37 non-governmental organizations, 29 local governments, 5 Federal/State legislators, 4 Flyway Councils, 4 Federal agencies, 3 tribes, 3 businesses, and 2 State agricultural agencies. Of the 2,657 comments received from private individuals, 56 percent opposed the preferred alternative and supported only non-lethal control and management alternatives, while 40 percent supported either the proposed alternative or a general depredation order.

How does the new regulation address the protections afforded Canada geese by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA)?

The MBTA provides for the protection and conservation of migratory birds (including resident Canada geese), while at the same time providing opportunities for people to use the resource for sport, recreation, and scientific endeavors. The MBTA also provides considerable flexibility for dealing with situations where birds may come into conflict with human interests, such as those posed by the increasing numbers of resident Canada geese.

Why isn't the existing program adequate for dealing with resident Canada goose problems?

Normally, complex Federal and State responsibilities are involved with Canada goose control activities. All control activities, except those intended to either scare geese out of or preclude them from using a specific area (e.g., harassment, habitat management, or repellents), require a Federal permit issued by the Service. As the number of problems with resident Canada geese has continued to grow, the Service, together with its State and Federal partners, believes additional strategies are needed beyond those presently employed to reduce, manage, and control resident Canada goose populations in the continental United States and to reduce related damages. In this way, all agencies can provide the most responsible, cost-effective, biologically-sound, and efficient assistance available.

The Service has attempted to control and manage growing populations of resident Canada geese through existing annual hunting season frameworks (special and regular seasons), the issuance of

control permits on a case-by-case basis, and special Canada goose permits. While this approach has provided relief in some areas, it has not completely addressed the problem. We realize that more management flexibility is necessary to meet the needs of the public. Because of the unique locations where large numbers of these geese nest, feed, and reside, the Service believes that new and innovative approaches and strategies for dealing with bird/human conflicts are necessary.

How are the new regulations different from the special Canada goose permit? Doesn't the special Canada goose permit give States flexibility to manage resident Canada goose populations?

While the special Canada goose permit is more flexible than the permit-by-permit issuance system and has provided relief in some areas, it has not completely addressed the problem. When the Service established the new special permit several years ago, we stated the permit was a short-term approach. The new regulations and FEIS offer long-term approaches and strategies to meet the needs of the public.

Given the already large numbers of resident Canada geese, and the numbers that must be reduced, we believe the only way to possibly attain these goals is to give the States, and the affected public, more flexibility to address the problems caused by resident Canada goose populations. By addressing population reductions on the widest number of available fronts, we believe the combination of various damage management and population control strategies can successfully reduce numbers of resident Canada geese, especially in those priority areas identified by the States.

I am currently suffering damage and other economic losses due to resident Canada geese. How does the proposed action help me?

Depending on what management strategies your State elects to implement, your damage and losses could be significantly reduced. For example, if you are an agricultural producer, your State could choose to allow you to aggressively harass resident Canada geese that are causing problems on your property.

Why were the new regulations largely limited to situations between April 1 and August 31?

Migratory Canada goose populations interact and overlap with resident Canada goose populations during the fall and winter and therefore could be impacted by management actions and programs targeted at reducing resident Canada goose populations during this time. To avoid impacting non-resident Canada goose populations most aspects of the new regulations are restricted to the period April 1 through August 31 each year. The new regulations do allow the take of Canada goose nests and eggs during the entire month of March, since any nesting Canada geese nesting in the U.S. would clearly be resident birds.

What effect will the new regulations have on resident Canada goose populations?

Resident Canada goose number are so abundant (3.34 million) that even with these control measures, we estimate they will number approximately 2.1 million a decade from now. These measures may even benefit the populations by reducing them to levels that are in better balance with available food and habitat.

What impact will the new regulations have on existing sport-hunting opportunities?

Regular hunting seasons would be largely unaffected under the new regulations. Most goose population reductions would occur in areas previously closed to, or with limited, hunting. Alternatively,

special hunting opportunities for resident Canada geese and potential harvest would be significantly increased. States could opt to increase and expand special hunting opportunities for resident Canada geese through newly-available hunting methods. The new regulations authorize the use of additional hunting methods, such as electronic calls, unplugged shotguns, and expanded shooting hours (one-half hour after sunset). All of these expanded hunting methods and opportunities would be conducted outside any other open waterfowl season.

Would these new, expanded hunting provisions make a difference?

The expanded hunting provisions have the potential to better maintain resident goose populations at sustainable levels. We believe a more conservative estimate of the percentage increase in harvest attributable to the use of additional hunting methods within the hunting season frameworks would be 25 percent, this increase in special season harvest would still result in the harvest of an additional 130,000 Canada geese each year.

What about “Management Take” and how does this differ from existing special hunting seasons?

Management take is defined as a special management action that is needed to reduce certain wildlife populations when traditional management programs are unsuccessful in preventing overabundance of the population. If authorized by the Director, it is intended to reduce and stabilize resident Canada goose populations by allowing States to use hunters to harvest resident Canada geese, by way of shooting, during the August 1 through August 31 period. Because this component takes place outside of the existing hunting seasons established by the Migratory Bird Treaty (September 1 to March 10), it is not a hunting season. Participating authorized States would be required to designate all participants operating under the program and keep records of all their activities. The Service will annually assess the program’s impact and will suspend the program once population reduction is no longer necessary.

Would “Management Take” really make a difference?

Like the other program components, each strategy plays a part in the overall goal of population reduction and damage management. Thus, while management take may not be implemented in areas, take of geese under this component contributes to overall goals of population reduction. We believe that the potential take of geese under this component, along with that realized by the expanded hunting methods, could be as much as 25 to 50 percent of the existing special season harvest of 520,000 birds.

What assurances are there that States would not overharvest these birds and harm the population?

In addition to required annual breeding surveys, we would annually assess the impact and effectiveness of the program to ensure compatibility with long-term conservation of Canada geese. If at any time evidence is presented that demonstrates particular resident Canada goose population no longer threatens its surrounding environment, we will initiate action to suspend the program and/or regular-season regulation changes for that population. Suspension of regulations for a particular population would be made following a public review process.

Why don’t the new regulations apply to States in the Pacific Flyway?

We dropped participation and applicability of States in the Pacific Flyway from some program components in the final rule, although not all components. The Pacific Flyway Council and States

have consistently commented that they do not wish to participate in any new regulations and that they do not have the same resident Canada goose problems that the rest of the country, in particular the eastern and Great Lakes regions of the United States, currently is experiencing. From a population status information standpoint, evidence warranting inclusion in the proposed alternative was somewhat ambiguous in the Pacific Flyway, other than specific localized instances. The Pacific Flyway generally lacks good resident goose breeding and population surveys, numbers of geese are not as significant as other parts of the country, and the problems/issues/conflicts are more isolated and localized. Thus, we dropped the States of the Pacific Flyway from all components except the Nest and Egg Depredation Order, the Public Health Control Order, and the Airport Control Order. Based on comments and our analysis, we believe the agricultural depredation issue in the Pacific Flyway is primarily a migrant Canada goose issue, not a resident Canada goose issue.

Aren't non-lethal control techniques effective in reducing conflicts between resident Canada geese and people?

Habitat modification and other harassment tactics do not always work satisfactorily. Lethal methods are sometimes necessary to increase the effectiveness of a management program. While it is unlikely that all resident Canada goose/human conflicts can be eliminated in all urban settings, implementation of a range of lethal and non-lethal resident Canada goose management activities may greatly reduce such conflicts.

Would non-lethal control measures still be permitted under the new regulations?

Yes, the new regulations do not limit affected parties from employing non-lethal control techniques.