

# Hunter Harvest Survey, Fast Track Request, Process Description

## Abstract

This project is expected to address information needs concerning waterfowl harvest by hunters and hunter satisfaction and opinions related to regulatory decisions for the open waters of Lake Michigan and Green Bay. We propose to assess harvest and hunter opinions by conducting in-person hunter surveys at 5-10 boat launches during the regular fall duck hunting season in 2020. Hunters will be surveyed to determine the species and number of species harvested from each location and to gather input on specific questions relevant to our partner organization, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR). Surveys will be conducted by USGS staff, University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point students, and volunteers. Results will inform and assist wildlife managers in determining future waterfowl hunting frameworks in Wisconsin.

## Problem Statement

Setting the waterfowl regulations for a state is a collaborative process between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state agencies, with input from tribal nations and the public. In short, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife, in order to manage an internationally shared resource, provides season and structure frameworks to the various flyways and states using Adaptive Harvest Management (AHM). Individual states can then fashion their season within the framework and structures offered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In making their regulatory decisions agencies must weigh both biological and societal values. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife service does this through a combined approach using the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) and AHM to guide their decision-making process. States also follow these plans but rely heavily on input from hunters to make decisions regarding zone structure and season frameworks.

Species-specific regulatory changes (e.g., how many northern pintails [*Anas acuta*] or black ducks [*Anas rubripes*] a hunter can harvest per day and possess) and within zone changes (e.g., split seasons) can be changed every year, but changes to zone boundaries themselves is only allowed every 5 years per the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS 2019). Zone and season structures have some flexibility but must fit into the frameworks offered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Zone structures should be designed to distribute hunting opportunities and harvests according to temporal, geographic, and demographic variability in waterfowl and other migratory game bird populations (USFWS 2019). The proposed rule for the 2021-2025 structure will also allow States the ability to split the allotted hunting days into separate

segments to take advantage of species-specific peaks in abundance or to satisfy hunters in different areas who want to hunt during the peak of waterfowl abundance in their area.

Since 2011, Wisconsin has opted for three zones with each zone having the capability to split the season into two segments; zone structure has remained the same during this time and consisted of a north, south and Mississippi River zone. During the last three years, the Mississippi River zone has not been substantially different than the south zone and more hunters seem to be taking advantage of the unique hunting opportunities offered on the open waters of Green Bay and Lake Michigan. Hunter survey results conducted by the WDNR and hunter comments suggest that hunters would prefer re-establishing the Mississippi River zone with the south zone and creating a new open water Green Bay and Lake Michigan zone. Because hunter participation on Green Bay and Lake Michigan is generally considered low, <8% of the hunting population, there is concern about adequately surveying hunter's using that resource.

Managers are concerned with determining the best season framework for the newly developed open water Green Bay and Lake Michigan zone. One question of interest is if hunters would prefer a split season. Under this structure the season would open for a period, close for a period, and then reopen for the remainder of the allotted hunting days. Split season structures are typically evaluated by hunter input and/or biological assessment (e.g., allowing for even harvest of early and late migratory waterfowl within a specific zone). We wish to address these concerns and others with this hunter survey.

Our research group has conducted hunter surveys at one launch (Seagull Marina) along Lake Michigan and had a 100% response rate from hunters when conducting the survey. Results from this survey provided detail to managers on harvest of long-tailed ducks on Lake Michigan and gathered input from hunters for a previous project titled '*Migration patterns, habitat use, prey items, and hunter harvest of long-tailed ducks (Clangula hyemalis) that overwinter on Lake Michigan*'. The proposed work looks to build on that effort by expanding the number of launches surveyed, increasing the length of the survey to the entirety of the regular duck season, and incorporate specific WDNR questions related to hunting regulations and hunter satisfaction.

## Literature Cited

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2019. Migratory Bird Hunting: Proposed 2020-21 Migratory Game Bird Hunting Regulations (Preliminary) With Requests for Indian Tribal Proposals; Notice of Meeting. URL: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/10/15/2019-22151/migratory-bird-hunting-proposed-2020-21-migratory-game-bird-hunting-regulations-preliminary-with>.