

PUBLIC SCOPING PROCESS
ON THE POSSIBILITY OF LIMITED HUNTING ON
SANDHILL CRANES IN EASTERN IDAHO, AND OTHER MANAGEMENT OPTIONS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

- Eastern Idaho grain and seed potato farmers are experiencing crop damage caused by sandhill cranes. The damage occurs from the Ashton/St. Anthony area to the Soda Springs area. These farmers have requested relief from this damage which occurs every year.
- The cranes causing the damage are from the Rocky Mountain Population of Greater Sandhill Cranes which nest in Alberta, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and Utah and winter in New Mexico and Mexico. The population currently numbers about 16,000 birds. Recent drought conditions and low recruitment of young into the population have reduced crane numbers from a peak of about 22,000 over the past 5-6 years. Good water conditions and average production are expected this spring and summer which will increase the population by about 6% to 16,960 birds.
- Sandhill cranes are the management responsibility of the federal government. The agency responsible is the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), which manages all migratory birds.
- Crop damage begins in the early spring in some areas where the cranes pull up young grain seedlings. More serious damage occurs in late summer and early fall where the cranes peck holes in seed potatoes and feed on maturing, or nearly mature, grain. Spring and late summer crop damage is caused by small family groups of cranes or groups of nonbreeders. Late summer and early fall damage is caused by concentrations of local birds and birds migrating through the state. Peak numbers of cranes usually occur during the first 10-12 days of September, when around 6,000 birds are in eastern Idaho.
- Responding to crop damage complaints from farmers is the responsibility of the Animal Damage Control Branch (ADC) of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture. ADC provides farmers with a variety of services to help reduce damage. These include exploding canons, scarecrows, and hazing to redistribute birds. The FWS at its Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge near Soda Springs plants about 60 acres of lure crops (grain) to help bait cranes away from private property. The lure crop lasts from one to several weeks; when all or nearly all of it is eaten by the cranes, they move to private crops. At times and on a limited basis the Idaho Department of Fish and Game assists ADC and the FWS, but the major responsibility of controlling damage rests with the other agencies.

- The FWS permits hunting of Greater Sandhill Cranes in those states which produce or winter them. Annually the FWS offers hunts to the states of Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. To date, with the exception of Idaho, all of the states have chosen to hunt cranes as a means of reducing crop damage and providing hunter opportunity. Hunting in these states has been very effective in reducing crop damage after September 1, which is the earliest hunting may occur on migratory birds as a result of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act signed between Canada and the U. S. By federal regulations, all hunts must be on a controlled basis (limited number of permits), and the harvest must be monitored by the state agency to determine the number of birds taken, sex and age composition of the harvest, and if any cranes of other species or races are also taken. Federal regulations also require that states collect three years of biological information on its cranes in potential hunt areas before it will authorize hunts. This information includes the time the cranes are present, numbers of cranes present, and proportion of young to adults in the population. The FWS has collected this information for three eastern Idaho areas: Teton Basin, Blackfoot Reservoir area, and the Grays Lake area. Current biological information does not exist for other areas. Consequently, the FWS would authorize hunting in 1995 only in the three areas listed above. Hunting could not occur in other areas until possibly 1997 at the earliest.
- The FWS regulates the harvest of cranes in the hunt states by authorizing a harvest quota for the entire population which is then allocated among the states based on the proportion of the population which each state supports either during summer or winter. Since Idaho supports the greatest share of the population in the spring/summer/early fall, its allocation is about 20% of the harvest quota. For 1995 this would be 115 cranes. If Idaho chooses not to hunt cranes, the allocation would be divided among the other hunt states. In past years Idaho's allocation has gone primarily to New Mexico. It is important to note that if Idaho's allocation of cranes is not harvested in Idaho, they will be harvested in other states.
- If Idaho wishes to hunt cranes in 1995, it must act fairly quickly and comply with the following timeline: Commission approval during the May 11-12 meeting or shortly thereafter; notification to the FWS and other hunt states in mid-May; official FWS approval of hunts in mid-June; design hunts in June and early July; make controlled hunt applications available to hunters in mid-July; controlled hunt drawing in early August; first hunts open on September 1.

- Other management options that would help to reduce crop damage, other than limited hunting, include a more intensive effort using scare-away devices, planting more lure crops, and issuing kill permits to either landowners or ADC personnel to remove a small number of offending cranes.

MANAGEMENT OPTIONS:

- Some potential management options include the following:

OPTION A: Authorize limited (controlled) hunts in the three areas where biological information is available and as required by the FWS--Teton Basin, Blackfoot Reservoir area, Grays Lake area, and phase in hunting in other crop damage areas as soon as biological information can be gathered. Limited hunts would be effective in reducing crop damage beginning September 1, but they could not be used earlier in the year. Under this option, ADC would continue to service damage complaints during spring and summer months; the FWS could possibly be persuaded to plant more lure crops in the Grays Lake area.

OPTION B: No change from the current situation. Allow ADC to handle damage complaints as best they can with available resources.

OPTION C: No change from the current situation except the Idaho Department of Fish and Game would play a greater role in servicing damage complaints. This would require that Department personnel and resources be diverted from other projects and programs. As in Option A, the FWS may be persuaded to increase its acres of lure crops in the Grays Lake area.

OPTION D: Issue kill permits to either landowners or ADC personnel to remove a small number (less than 30) offending cranes. These permits must be issued by the FWS, Enforcement Branch, Portland, Oregon. However, the FWS's current policy is that it will not issue kill permits in states where the State Fish and Game Management Agency has the option to hold hunts. If the FWS could be convinced to issue kill permits, their use could reduce crop damage during all months and hunts would probably not be necessary. As in Options A and C, the FWS could possibly be persuaded to

plant more lure crops.

OPTION E: A combination of limited hunts and kill permits. Hunts could be used in the three areas where biological information is available to justify them, and kill permits could be used in other areas where hunts cannot be justified or where crop damage occurs prior to September 1. The hunts would be effective in reducing crop damage beginning September 1, and the kill permits would be effective in reducing damage prior to September 1. However, the FWS has shown no interest in issuing kill permits. As in Options A, C, and D, the FWS could possibly be persuaded to plant more lure crops.

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