

USF&W to regulate subsistence goose hunts

by **Jim Benedetto**

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed to have regulations in place in time for next year's spring subsistence goose hunt in Alaska. Such regulations would replace the present voluntary restrictions as set down in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Goose Management Plan.

The regulations are necessary, say USF&W personnel, because of an unexplained and precipitous drop in several goose species since last year.

The statistics show that an already decimated population of emperor geese in the delta has dropped by about 28 percent since last year at this time.

George Sura, a spokesman for USF&W, said the birds may have perished, or perhaps simply eluded biologists charged with conducting this year's count. Whatever the reason for the drop, Fish and Wildlife officials

see no reason to take any chances.

The regulations being proposed would protect several species of geese that nest and molt in the delta, where they have been hunted by local residents for thousands of years.

The Yukon-Kuskokwim Goose Management Plan was agreed to by the Association of Village Council Presidents, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the respective wildlife agencies of several states over which the geese migrate.

That plan called for a voluntary prohibition against taking goose eggs during the nesting season and the geese themselves during their molting period.

The plan was challenged in federal court by the Alaska Outdoor Council, which argued that the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 prohibited the spring taking of migratory waterfowl.

But Judge von der Heydt ruled

against the Outdoor Council, and reaffirmed the right of Alaska Natives to take geese during any season when they were in need of food.

Under the Fish and Wildlife Improvement Act of 1978, however, USF&W can establish seasons for the "preservation and maintenance of stocks of migratory birds."

The most puzzling aspect of the drop in goose numbers is that biologists still don't know exactly why it happened. Initial analysis of the YKDGMP had been favorable, with Native subsistence hunters in most cases honoring the ban.

Judge von der Heydt, in his decision wrote, "the cooperative plan has been successful... There has been particularly strong support for the program from the Native community... this has led to a major decline in the subsistence harvest of each of the species in question."

In the May 19 issue of the Federal Register, USF&W says it will establish regulations before the spring subsistence hunt next year to govern the harvest of migratory birds throughout the state of Alaska. The notice notes that species in decline in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta will require "more restrictive and detailed regulations than other stocks of birds."

Sura said the regulations are in an early stage of development and are not yet available for review by members of the public. Public comment is being solicited, however, on such topics as the definition of nutritional and essential needs; how birds and eggs may be taken for subsistence use; who may participate in spring subsistence hunts; and how many birds and/or eggs could be harvested.

Comments can be sent to United States Fish and Wildlife Service, 1011 East Tudor Road, Anchorage, Alaska.