

Pennsylvania Chapter NWTf Statement on 2010 Fall Turkey Season Changes

Our chapter members support wildlife management decisions based on sound science following recommendations of individual species management plans prepared by Game Commission biologists. The recent work on gobbler harvest rates and the new study originally designed to determine fall harvest rates are examples of the dedication of the Pennsylvania Game Commission to collecting good data and developing management strategies based on science. Our members appreciate the professionalism of the commission employees with whom we interact and the outstanding working relationship we have with the agency.

The background and experience of the wildlife biologists working on various projects within the commission is widely recognized and respected outside of the agency. Agency regulation proposals are grounded in good science as every regulation affecting our wildlife resources should be. That said we must express our disappointment in the process that resulted in substantial changes to the fall turkey hunting season and undermined the design of a study meant to produce the type of data required to better manage wild turkeys and provide a foundation for future decision making.

When an agency and its biological staff does not support a proposal made by the commissioners and when one of the agency's leading supporting organizations representing a large block of hunters opposes regulation proposals on the basis of science commissioners should proceed with caution or step back and re-evaluate.

The concern over declining fall turkey hunter numbers expressed by the commissioners who voted in favor of the fall regulation change is valid and we appreciate the interest of the commissioners in this issue. However the commissioners may not be aware that the decline in fall hunting interest is not unique to Pennsylvania. Fall turkey hunting participation has declined in all the traditional fall hunting states (Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia). The reasons for the decline have little to do with season dates and holidays. Rather they reflect social changes that have occurred within this group of hunters. Turkey hunters have shifted gears. Interest in spring hunting has replaced fall hunting interest. Surveys repeatedly show that the average turkey hunter prefers to hunt gobblers in the spring and pursue other opportunities such as muzzleloader and archery deer hunting in the fall. Furthermore, turkey hunters today are savvy about turkey population management. They understand that a conservative approach to fall hunting opportunity will provide for more quality hunting in the spring and that is their desire. Therefore changing season dates and providing additional holiday hunting options are not likely to reverse the decline.

Prior to initiating a change in season structure it is wise to conduct surveys to determine hunter preferences. The Game Commission has done this consistently in determining support for all day spring hunting and other options for increasing recreational opportunity for turkey hunters. That work set the stage for acceptance of lengthening the spring season and the proposal to allow all day hunting in part of the spring season. Our members understood and supported those changes because there was a scientific basis for them. No such groundwork was done for the fall regulation change. Not once did the commissioners indicate that they had hard data predicting that these changes would reverse the decline in fall turkey hunting popularity. As far as our members are concerned no turkey hunters were requesting any change in season dates. Our members were content with the seasons as they were structured previously and were willing to allow good science to determine whether additional recreational opportunity could be provided in the fall. It is for that reason that our chapter was willing to invest financially in the hen survival and harvest rate study.

Our chapter members remain opposed to the changes in fall turkey hunting seasons proposed in January and passed at the April commission meeting. The primary reasons for our chapter position on the changes are listed below:

- The impact of the loss of hunting opportunity for a large number of turkey hunters (4 hunting days including one Saturday were lost in both the two week and three week WMUs)
- Adding the Thanksgiving holiday and the following two days cannot make up for the loss of 4 days of recreational opportunity
- Our belief that fall turkey hunting has great potential to recruit and maintain young hunters
- The recent initiation of the fall harvest rate and hen survival study, a study called for in the Management Plan for Wild Turkeys in Pennsylvania since 1999 and designed to develop good data on which to base future fall harvest strategy decisions
- The reduced ability to accurately assess the impact of traditional fall season length on fall harvest rates (sample sizes for the study were designed specifically to examine harvest rates in traditional seasons structured as they have been since 1981 with season lengths of 13 or 19 days)
- The study design has been compromised. Therefore the ability of the Game Commission to provide additional fall turkey hunting opportunity could be impacted affecting hunter recruitment and retention potential in the future
- The initiation of staggered opening days that could shift hunting pressure into three week WMUs with open public land and lead to subsequent harvest increases
- Concern about over-harvest based on late November snow and increased use of rifles for taking turkeys

One of the most disconcerting things about the recent decision was some of the comments made during the meeting. Comments such as “If this doesn’t work we can change it next year” and “Our biologists are good, they can simply tweak the research proposal” were noted by many in the audience. These comments represent precisely the type of annual “flip-flop” biologists and species management plans recommend against.

Commissioners appear to be willing to risk over-harvest under the impression that it can be corrected for in the future. The cumulative impacts of wild turkey recruitment, spring weather, mast crop availability and snow cover could easily lead to a fall harvest greater than the 10 percent limit recommended in much of the literature. The impact of over-harvest might not be apparent for several years until the population is far below desired levels leading to reduced hunting opportunity in future years.

The commissioners made a decision unsupported by science that this change would not have a negative impact on turkey numbers and would result in increased hunter interest. We are entering a markedly changed season structure that is not comparable to anything in the past with blinders on. Our members are disappointed with the decision and the process. We strongly request that the commissioners more carefully review science in considering future decisions. The Management Plan for Wild Turkeys in Pennsylvania clearly sets forth goals and objectives for managing recreational opportunity and the wild turkey resource.

Included within the plan are guidelines for setting fall seasons and recommendations for further research to provide biologists with better tools for predicting the impact of regulation changes.

Our members urge the commissioners to become familiar with the plan and to follow it closely. The plan has resulted in additional recreational opportunity for turkey hunters while providing adequate protection for the resource. In addition, the fall season structure in place for nearly thirty years allowed wild turkeys to flourish producing not only record turkey numbers but record harvests and increased opportunity.

We have always been pleased with our relationship with the Game Commission and with the commissioners. Our members appreciate the changes designed to make May 31 the closing date for spring gobbler season. The chapter supports the extension of hunting hours for the last two weeks of the spring season though more discussion on the closing time would have been preferred. While we still strongly disagree with the decisions regarding fall hunting and recommend that they be rescinded we will continue to work with the commissioners and are open to discussions concerning this and other issues affecting our wild turkey resource.