

**STATEMENT OF H. DALE HALL, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
DUCKS UNLIMITED, INC.**

BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

**CONCERNING:
H.R. 6013, MIGRATORY BIRD FRAMEWORK AND HUNTING OPPORTUNITIES
FOR VETERANS ACT
JULY 17, 2018**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Grijalva, members of the committee, my name is Dale Hall and I am the chief executive officer for Ducks Unlimited. Before assuming that role in 2010, I worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for 31 years, including serving as its director from 2005 to 2009.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify on behalf of Ducks Unlimited and thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for the invitation to be here today, regarding the Migratory Bird Framework and Hunting Opportunities for Veterans Act. This bill proposes to establish January 31st of each year as the Federal closing date for duck hunting season, establish special duck hunting days for youths, veterans, and active military personnel, and prohibit the Secretary of the Interior from decreasing the length of the hunting season or bag limits.

With more than one million members and supporters, many of whom are sportsmen and women, Ducks Unlimited represents a significant conservation voice for waterfowl and the landscapes that support them. Ducks Unlimited has been a strong proponent of waterfowl conservation for more than 80 years. Our mission is to conserve, restore and manage wetlands and associated habitats for North America's waterfowl and for the vast economic and natural infrastructure benefits these resources provide to other wildlife and the people who enjoy and value them. We work in Canada, Mexico and every state in the United States. Since 1937, Ducks Unlimited has conserved more than 14 million acres of habitat important to waterfowl, other wildlife and people.

Our work is science-based. We use reliable information from the disciplines of wetland ecology, waterfowl biology, hydrology, civil engineering, and landscape ecology to plan, implement and access waterfowl and wetland conservation actions. Our partnerships are essential for conservation, and we support legislation and policy that advances wetland conservation and related economic, natural infrastructure and wildlife and fish populations on behalf of Americans. Our work is on the ground. We collaborate with federal, state and local agencies, organizations, corporations, farmers and ranchers in the most important landscapes used throughout migratory birds' lifecycles, including breeding, migration and wintering habitats. Our work benefits people. Our habitat projects occur on public and private lands across the United States and support hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities for millions of Americans, regardless of race, gender, age or economic opportunity.

To amend the Migratory Bird Treaty Act to establish January 31 of each year as the Federal closing date for duck hunting season

For many years, states and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) have cooperated to develop regulations to appropriately and successfully manage waterfowl and other migratory bird populations to enable sustainable hunting opportunities. This cooperative effort seeks to thoughtfully balance applicable science and the desires of the states' sportsmen and women.

Ducks Unlimited firmly believes that individual states should have flexibility to set dates that are within the season framework, established through the annual dialogue between the Flyway Councils and the USFWS Regulations Committee, and that the latest season closing date should be no later than January 31, thereby remaining consistent with the long-standing system of Adaptive Harvest Management. Given that available science suggests current rates of harvest do not significantly impact waterfowl populations, DU is comfortable and supportive of this proposal that would allow states to choose January 31 as a closing date of the hunting season for ducks, mergansers and coots. To be clear, this proposed change to the framework will not require any state to change its season dates. It simply provides greater flexibility for states to tailor their waterfowl hunting seasons to the preferences of their hunters and to coincide with peak abundance of waterfowl. For example, while some states may choose to hunt ducks to January 31st, other states may choose to close their duck hunting season on the last Sunday in January or sooner (as provided in current regulations). This simple change will provide flexibility to states to accommodate the desires of hunters, while ensuring that hunting seasons continue to have minimal negative biological consequences to waterfowl populations as many species of waterfowl begin their migration north to breeding areas in the late winter.

To establish special duck hunting days for youths, veterans, and active military personnel, and for other purposes.

The North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP), is a longstanding trilateral agreement between the United States, Canada and Mexico. This plan, which serves as a roadmap for DU's continental conservation work, highlights the role of people in sustaining waterfowl populations for future generations. Simply put, waterfowl hunters invest significant funding to support these resources. To maintain and build support for waterfowl and wetlands, the waterfowl management community (states, DU and USFWS) is investing significant funds to recruit, retain and reactivate waterfowl hunters. This important effort, termed "R3" will help sustain these vital resources for years to come. One of the best ways to do this is to provide additional opportunities for people to get into the field. We believe that this bill is intended to support this effort by making it easier for our veterans and active military to get into the fields, marshes and woods with their children, friends and loved ones. However, DU believes that the authority to designate these special seasons and days continue to be vested with the state fish and wildlife agencies.

We respectfully ask that the committee clarify the language to allow the states, through the established Flyway Council system, to expand and define special hunting opportunities for these

heroes in a way that makes the most sense in each state. I believe this approach will promote states' authority in a way to address the desires of many sportsmen and women and help maintain the number of hunters engaged in our rich waterfowl hunting heritage, while simultaneously keeping the NAWMP commitments to sustaining waterfowl populations and habitats.

Season Length and Bag Limits

As mentioned earlier in my comments, the current model of setting waterfowl hunting regulations has been adopted over many decades of collaboration between the states and federal government. This model is admittedly very complex, but managing sustainable harvest of a wildlife population that spans international and state borders requires intensive scientific data collection and analysis, collaboration and communication. This collaborative science-based approach of Adaptive Harvest Management must remain intact to successfully manage duck populations and harvest.

The current language in Section 2, subsection 3 of the bill states that the Secretary cannot decrease the length of the hunting season or bag limit compared to the length of the hunting season and bag limit for the 2017–2018 hunting season, in all four waterfowl flyways. The current Adaptive Harvest Management model, coupled with the cooperative federal-state dialogue within the flyway council process, allows for any appropriate species-specific adjustments. By requiring retrospective bag limits and season dates, as this section would, harvest management flexibility could be jeopardized. For example, if conditions on the waterfowl breeding grounds decline to the point where waterfowl populations are severely impacted (e.g., during a drought) the language would not allow for the flexibility to ensure that waterfowl hunting remains sustainable. We look forward to continuing to work with this committee to clarify the intent of this section.

To be clear, Ducks Unlimited does not have a role in the state-federal waterfowl regulations process. We do, however, firmly support the continued use of science-based information when making decisions on waterfowl season length and bag limits, such as the current Adaptive Harvest Management framework. If implemented, the language as written, could prevent our state and federal partners from adapting or changing bag limits and hunting seasons to best reflect the needs of both waterfowl and people.

Conclusion

Once again, I deeply appreciate the opportunity to provide our perspective on this important legislation. We support states having the flexibility to end the waterfowl season on January 31st or earlier, and we support states having the flexibility to designate special hunting opportunities for our military and veterans. These two aspects of the bill will help continue the rich heritage of hunting and conservation of our treasured waterfowl and wetland resources for years to come. Therefore, we encourage the committee to closely collaborate with stakeholders to make changes that would reflect the continued use of the science-based Adaptive Harvest Management model.

I look forward to working with your committee and our partners as the Migratory Bird Framework and Hunting Opportunities for Veterans Act moves forward, and to continue to support the wildlife and the millions of people who enjoy, or make their livings, in the outdoors.

Mr. Chairman, I sincerely thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and I will be pleased to answer any questions you may have.