

DIFW Wild Turkey Working Group Meeting 2013

Prepared by Gerry Lavigne

On February 15, the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife held a meeting of its wild turkey stakeholder group. This group had previously assembled in 2010, and it was to have met in late summer 2012 to provide DIFW with recommendations for new legislation and/ or rule changes. With several legislative bills already pending, DIFW and the working group had a bit of catching-up to do.

In attendance were several DIFW biologists, including Judy Camuso (facilitator), Kelsey Sullivan (game bird specialist), Mark Caron (regional biologist), and game warden Rick LaFlamme. Adam Vashon represented USDA, Aphis Wildlife Services, and Jim Wescott represented the Nat. Wild Turkey Fed. Jon Olson attended for the Maine Farm Bureau, Mike Windsor represented Maine Audubon, Jeff Bellmore represented ME Prof. Guides Assoc., and Gerry Lavigne attended for SAM. Former Maine legislator Jane Eberle attended as an interested citizen.

Following re-introduction into Maine in the mid-1970s (and ongoing), wild turkeys now occupy all of Maine's 16 counties. They are most abundant in southern and central Maine, and are conservatively estimated to number in excess of 60,000 birds. Spring hunting seasons currently yield about 6,000 toms, while fall harvests range from 600 to 800 turkeys of either sex. Fall harvests currently are conservative; they average about 1/6 the biological allowable harvest. Spring harvests are biologically sustainable and participation is not limited.

Turkey populations have been increasing during the past five years. So too have damage and nuisance complaints among farmers, gardeners, and homeowners. DIFW is under pressure to increase turkey hunting opportunity, reduce some regional turkey populations, and alleviate damage caused by aggregations of turkeys.

The Working Group recommended leaving the spring hunt alone, as it has little biological potential to reduce populations or alleviate damage. We did opt for expanding the spring season to all WMDs with turkeys present. We rejected lengthening the daily hunt from its current noon closure to an all-day hunt during the spring season. Reasons included concerns for safety, landowner objections, and probable lack of increased hunter participation.

Turkey populations can be affected by fall harvest rates among hen turkeys. To reduce turkey populations where needed, the working group recommended increasing the number of WMDs that allow shotgun hunting for turkeys, and we recommended increasing the fall bag limit to two turkeys of either sex. In most WMDs with a shotgun season, season length would be increased to essentially the month of October. Bowhunting opportunity during the fall was not changed.

The Working Group discussed and recommended refinements in the Department's nuisance turkey policy. Recommendations centered around more pro-active interaction with affected farmers and landowners to address damage problems when they are occurring. Options for alleviating damage range from education and deterrent devices, to re-location and lethal removal.

The recommendations noted above were presented to DIFW Commissioner Chandler Woodcock for administrative review and possible action. If approved, changes in fall hunts for wild turkeys could become effective in 2013.