

# FEASIBILITY STATEMENTS FOR AMERICAN WOODCOCK GOALS & OBJECTIVES

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**Goal:** Increase the quality and quantity of American Woodcock habitat; increase the breeding population of American Woodcock; and increase the quantity and quality of American Woodcock hunting opportunity in Maine.

**Population Objective:** By 2017, increase the American Woodcock breeding population index (BPOP) to 3.5 males per singing ground survey route and then maintain the population at that level.

**Desirability:** Improved woodcock numbers would be desirable to both consumptive and nonconsumptive users of the woodcock resource. Management to increase and maintain the woodcock population also would benefit other important wildlife that use early successional forest habitats.

**Feasibility:** The woodcock breeding population in Maine is limited by the amount of suitable habitat, as well as adverse weather in Maine, and by habitat and catastrophic weather along migration stopovers and on the wintering grounds. Hunting within Maine is not a significant source of mortality. Increasing and maintaining Maine's woodcock breeding population would be possible through habitat improvement and maintenance throughout the breeding, migration, and wintering range of woodcock in the Eastern Management Region; however, MDIFW can exert little influence on most of these factors.

**Capability of Habitat:** The 2001 BPOP index in Maine was 2.59; it was 3.01 in 2000, and 3.09 in 1999. The last time Maine's BPOP equaled or exceeded 3.5 was in 1991 (3.60). The number of woodcock detected along survey routes largely depends on habitat conditions along the survey routes, and the size of the woodcock population within the region. According to recent predictions, the forest/agriculture/residential region likely will experience a net loss in habitat along survey routes as a result of development and maturation of forest; forest harvesting generally will improve habitat conditions, thereby partially offsetting some of the aforementioned habitat loss. The capability of habitat in Maine to support and maintain a BPOP index of 3.5 will depend on the degree of management for early seral stages preferred by woodcock. Habitat conditions and woodcock numbers along survey routes may not accurately reflect habitat conditions and population level across the larger landscape in Maine. Increasing the number of survey routes in the industrial

forest region would likely increase Maine's BPOP index; numbers of singing males detected along survey routes in this region tend to be higher than the statewide average, due to the higher intensity of forest management in this region and lower development pressure.

Possible Consequences: Management to increase and maintain the woodcock population also would benefit other important wildlife that use early successional forest habitats. Management to increase and maintain early successional forest habitat for woodcock may be at the expense of mature forest, and commercial and residential development opportunities. U.S.G.S. Patuxent Wildlife Research Center's field station in Orono is presently evaluating the ability of the woodcock singing male survey to accurately index the breeding population.

**Habitat Objective 1: By 2017, increase and then maintain the quantity and quality of American Woodcock habitat in the industrial forest region of Maine by 100% from 2002 levels<sup>1</sup>.**

Desirability: Increasing and maintaining the quantity and quality of American Woodcock habitat in the industrial forest region of Maine by 100% would be desirable to both consumptive and nonconsumptive users of the woodcock resource. Management to increase and maintain woodcock habitat also would benefit other important wildlife that use early successional forest habitats.

Feasibility: The carrying capacity of woodcock within Maine's industrial forest region depends on the composition and structure of those forests, which is influenced largely by forestry practices; due to the small proportion of publicly-owned land, management practices on public lands will be relatively insignificant. Forest practices in Maine will depend to a large extent on market demands, as well as forestry regulations; MDIFW staff have had little or no influence on the development of forestry regulations in recent times. Demand for pulpwood and sawlogs in the Northeast is projected to increase at least through 2010; however, the practice of clear-cutting, which is effective in regenerating woodcock habitat (e.g. early successional hardwoods), decreased in use by nearly 70% during 1990-1996. Increased demand for hardwood pulp, and forestry regulations that would allow for effective management of early-successional hardwoods would improve the feasibility of Habitat Objective 1.

Capability of Habitat: 1995 data indicate that approximately 13% of Maine's land area was in forest cover types deemed potentially suitable as woodcock habitat (all sizes of aspen/birch cover types, seedling/sapling class of elm/ash

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<sup>1</sup> Wildlife Management Districts in the industrialized forest region include WMDs 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14, 18, and 19.

cover types, and idle farmland). Potential for woodcock habitat improvement via forest management for early successional hardwoods exists both within these cover types and in other forest types (e.g., spruce/fir, maple/beech/birch).

Possible Consequences: Management to increase and maintain the woodcock habitat also would benefit other important wildlife that use early successional forest habitats. Management to increase and maintain early successional forest habitat for woodcock may be at the expense of mature-forest products, habitat, and associated species. Department staff time for additional responsibilities in this area is limited.

**Habitat Objective 2: By 2017, increase and then maintain the quantity and quality of American Woodcock habitat on suitable, state-owned wildlife management areas by 100% from 2002 levels.**

Desirability: Increasing and maintaining the quantity and quality of American Woodcock habitat state-owned WMAs by 100% would be desirable to both consumptive and nonconsumptive users of the woodcock resource. Management to increase and maintain woodcock habitat also would benefit other important wildlife that use early successional forest habitats.

Feasibility: Increasing the area of land that is managed for woodcock by 100% from 2002 levels on state-owned WMAs would be feasible if the department's Forest Management Environmental Assessment is approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and if the department is able to devote sufficient staffing and funds toward management of early successional hardwoods on WMAs.

Capability of Habitat: The area of forest on state-owned wildlife management areas that currently (2002) is being managed specifically for woodcock is not known. However, it is probable that the area of patch cuts and alder regeneration on state WMAs could be doubled by 2017.

Possible Consequences: Management to increase and maintain woodcock habitat also would benefit other important wildlife that use early successional forest habitats. Land managed for early successional wildlife habitat could be used to demonstrate wildlife habitat management to a variety of consumptive and nonconsumptive wildlife users, including landowners who may consider managing their land for woodcock. Management to increase and maintain early successional forest habitat for woodcock may be at the expense of mature-forest products, habitat, and associated species. Department staff time for additional responsibilities in this area is limited.

**Habitat Objective 3: By 2017, increase and then maintain the quantity and quality of American Woodcock habitat in the forest/agriculture/residential region of Maine by 50% from 2002 levels<sup>2</sup>.**

Desirability: Increasing and maintaining the quantity and quality of American Woodcock habitat in the forest/agriculture/residential region of Maine by 50% would be desirable to both consumptive and nonconsumptive users of the woodcock resource. Management to increase and maintain woodcock habitat also would benefit other important wildlife that use early successional forest habitats.

Feasibility: The carrying capacity of woodcock within Maine's forest/agriculture/residential forest region depends on the composition and structure of those forests, which is influenced largely by forestry practices; due to the small proportion of publicly-owned land, management practices on public lands will be relatively insignificant. Forest practices in Maine will depend to a large extent on market demands, forestry regulations, and the desires of small landowners. Demand for pulpwood and sawlogs in the Northeast is projected to increase at least through 2010. However, the practice of clear-cutting, which is effective in regenerating woodcock habitat (e.g. early successional hardwoods), decreased in use by nearly 70% during 1990-1996; MDIFW staff have had little or no influence on the development of forestry regulations in recent times. Many small, non-industrial owners have no intention of harvesting timber, and many landowners are unaware of forest practices that would benefit wildlife. Increased demand for hardwood pulp, forestry regulations that would allow for effective management of early-successional hardwoods, and public education and landowner outreach about managing forests for early-successional wildlife would improve the feasibility of Habitat Objective 1. Public education and landowner outreach would require a redistribution of personnel time and additional financial resources to accomplish.

Capability of Habitat: 1995 data indicate that approximately 13% of Maine's land area was in forest cover types deemed potentially suitable as woodcock habitat (all sizes of aspen/birch cover types, seedling/sapling class of elm/ash cover types, and idle farmland). Potential for woodcock habitat improvement via forest management for early successional hardwoods exists both within these cover types and in other forest types (e.g., spruce/fir, maple/beech/birch).

Possible Consequences: Management to increase and maintain the woodcock habitat also would benefit other important wildlife that use early successional forest habitats. Management to increase and maintain early successional forest habitat for woodcock may be at the expense of mature-

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<sup>2</sup> Wildlife Management Districts in the forest/agriculture/residential region include WMDs 3, 6, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, and 30.

forest products, habitat, and associated species. Department staff time for additional responsibilities in this area is limited.

**Outreach Objective: By 2005, and in conjunction with partners, develop and implement a program to increase the awareness and understanding of American Woodcock, its habitat requirements, and its importance as a game species in Maine.**

Desirability and Feasibility: Heightened awareness and appreciation of American Woodcock, its habitat, and its importance as a game species in Maine are both feasible and desirable, but would require a redistribution of personnel time and additional financial resources to accomplish. Feasibility of this objective would be increased by adapting existing educational materials and resources for use in Maine, and by improving wildlife extension capabilities within Maine.

Capability of Habitat: Not applicable.

Possible Consequences: Department staff time for additional responsibilities in this area is limited.

**Hunting Objective 1: By 2003, work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to obtain additional hunting days to compensate for lost hunting opportunity as a result of Maine's prohibition on Sunday hunting.**

Desirability and Feasibility: Season frameworks for hunting migratory birds are set by the USFWS, in consultation with state wildlife agencies via the Flyway Councils. Any member state of a Flyway Council may propose changes in season frameworks through the appropriate committee of the Council's technical section. Compensatory days for woodcock hunting have not been recommended by the Atlantic Flyway Technical Section, however, additional days are granted for waterfowl hunting to compensate for days lost in states that prohibit hunting on Sundays.

Capability of Habitat: Not applicable.

Possible Consequences: Granting of compensatory days for Sundays would result in an additional 4-5 days of hunting under the current framework, and 6-7 additional hunting days under the 1996 framework (Hunting Objective 2). In 1995, the Migratory Shore and Upland Gamebird Committee of the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies estimated that allowing compensatory days for Sunday hunting closure for a 45 day/3 bird bag season would not effect Maine's woodcock kill, and would increase the overall flyway kill only 4.9%.

**Hunting Objective 2: By 2005, work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to restore the 1996 woodcock season framework of 45 hunting days, a 3 bird daily bag limit, and an October 1 season opening.**

Desirability and Feasibility: The public working group indicated that the 1996 season framework for woodcock hunting would be very desirable. Season frameworks for hunting migratory birds are set by the USFWS, in consultation with state wildlife agencies via the Flyway Councils. Any member state of a Flyway Council may propose changes in season frameworks through the appropriate committee of the Council's technical section. In 1997, in an effort to reduce the harvest of woodcock out of concern for the longterm decline in the Eastern Region breeding population index, the USFWS shortened the season from 45 to 30 days, and changed the opening date from October 1 to October 6 (the Central Region currently has a 45 day season, 3 bird daily bag, and framework opening date of the Saturday nearest September 22; population trends over the last 10 years have been similar in both regions). Since then, research in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Pennsylvania has demonstrated no effect of hunting on survival of woodcock. In March 2002, the Atlantic Flyway Technical Section recommended the season framework opening date for woodcock hunting be changed from October 6 back to October 1; USFWS will decide on this recommendation during the summer of 2002.

Capability of Habitat: Not applicable.

Possible Consequences: Satisfaction among woodcock hunters will improve due to the restoration of hunting opportunity. Total harvest of woodcock in Maine and other states in the Eastern Region will likely rise, however the increase in hunter kill of woodcock among northern states is not likely to affect the breeding population. The cumulative effects of the expected increase in kill throughout the region are not known, but are not expected to be significant, as the number of woodcock hunters in the region has dropped substantially since 1996.

**Hunting Objective 3: By 2003, establish a baseline of hunter satisfaction and by 2007, ensure that at least 75% of hunters surveyed rate their woodcock hunting experience in Maine as good or better.**

Desirability and Feasibility: Establishing a baseline of hunter satisfaction is both desirable and feasible. Researchers at the University of Maine (Teisl et al. 1992) conducted a survey of upland bird hunters, and determined that 47% of residents and 68% of nonresidents categorized the 1988 upland bird-hunting season as "good" or better. A survey of upland bird hunters in 2002

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or 2003, for the purpose of establishing a baseline of hunter satisfaction, should follow similar methods as the 1988 survey so that results will be directly comparable. Additionally, the survey should be designed to enable identification of factors that affect hunter satisfaction so that the department may manage these factors to improve hunter satisfaction. Ensuring a satisfaction level (i.e. "good" or better) of 75% is desirable, but its feasibility will depend on many factors, some of which (e.g., weather during hunt, inclement weather during nesting/brood rearing that affects recruitment to the fall population, posting of land) are not under the department's direct control; hunter satisfaction will undoubtedly vary among years due to stochastic factors.

Capability of Habitat: Not applicable for establishing baseline hunter satisfaction. Habitat quantity, quality, distribution, and availability to hunters will affect hunter satisfaction, however, the precise relationship between current levels of these habitat attributes and the level of hunter satisfaction is not well understood.

Possible Consequences: Information regarding statewide woodcock harvests, and similar information on grouse hunter satisfaction and grouse harvests could be gathered during the same survey. Department staff time and funding for additional responsibilities in this area are limited.