

A Report to the Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries & Wildlife



L.D. 256 -- Resolve, To Direct the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to Explore Opportunities and Issues Surrounding Wild Turkey Hunting

The working group's findings, recommendations, and
recommended legislation

Submitted by:
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INTRODUCTION

For anyone who has travelled along Maine's roads recently, it is hard to imagine that not so long ago turkeys were virtually non-existent in the state. Once common in southern Maine - York, Cumberland, and Oxford Counties, and perhaps in reduced densities eastward along the coast to Mt. Desert Island - the wild turkey was eliminated from the State in the early 1880s. This was likely the result of intensive land clearing and unrestricted hunting.



Attempts to reintroduce wild turkeys to Maine failed in the 1940s and 1960s; the turkeys were game farm or pen-reared birds and were ill-equipped to survive on their own. Responding to requests from fish and game clubs and Maine sportsmen, and encouraged by successful reintroduction programs in neighboring states, the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (MDIFW or Department) began planning a wild turkey reintroduction program in earnest in the mid-1970s. The goals of the program were twofold: to establish wild turkeys in the coastal part of the state where they historically occurred, and to provide a new game bird for sportsmen.

As a result of the combined efforts of MDIFW, the Maine Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF), and sportsmen, more recent reintroduction attempts have been successful using wild-trapped birds from Vermont (1970s) and Connecticut in the late 1980's. A small number of trap-and-transfer efforts of resident birds occur annually in areas where the Department continues to try to increase the population.

Maine's wild turkey population continues to grow and expand into habitat beyond initial expectations; wild turkeys now occupy all of Maine's 16 counties. The current population may be as high as 50,000 birds. The population fluctuates based on spring weather and winter snows, which affect production, recruitment, and survival. The return of the wild turkey to Maine is a wildlife management success story.

Today, in areas where the Department has released wild turkeys and birds have expanded naturally, the wild turkey population provides both consumptive (hunting) and non-consumptive (bird feeding and bird watching) uses. There has been, and continues to be, demand for reintroductions of wild turkeys into additional areas of the state by sportsmen's groups and others. Decisions as to where trapped birds are to be released are generally left up to the Department with input from the Maine Chapter NWTF, landowners, and agricultural interests.

Interest in wild turkey hunting has grown significantly since the first spring gobbler season in 1986. Although interest in Maine's spring wild turkey hunt remains strong with the most recent season's permit sales at 16,600, there has been a steady decline from the 23,963 permits

issued in 2005. That year marked the first year that all spring wild turkey permit lottery applicants were issued a permit. With the elimination of the lottery system, permit sales decreased by 19% in 2006 and have been steadily declining since, with a 6.5% decrease in 2007, 3.0% in 2008, and a 5.6% decline in 2009. The initial decline of 19% in 2006 is thought to be related to the elimination of the lottery system where the excitement of a lottery was no longer a draw. When there was a lottery for the spring wild turkey hunting season, the cost to participate was \$5 (a nominal fee for a chance at being drawn for a permit). If drawn, a hunter could choose whether he or she wanted to purchase a permit. There were likely some hunters who applied for and were drawn to receive a permit, but for whatever reason decided not to purchase the permit. Currently, there is no lottery; the opportunity to hunt wild turkeys costs a Maine resident \$20.

The Department has adopted a conservative approach to harvest management to distribute hunting pressure, promote landowner relations, provide for hunter safety, and maintain a quality hunting experience. As a result of concerted Department efforts, Maine has become known for its high quality spring hunt, a hunt that biologists and sportsmen are proud of. As the turkey population has expanded, both numerically and geographically, so too has the opportunity to hunt them [Table 1]. Over the last several years, the Department has expanded turkey hunting opportunity by elimination of the spring turkey lottery and the A:B split spring season [Table 2]. In addition, the Department has expanded fall turkey hunting opportunity adding additional wildlife management districts, lengthening the season, and allowing the use of shotguns in selected areas [Table 3].

The spring 2010 wild turkey hunting season will include two significant changes adopted from proposed legislation initiated by the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine in the 124th legislature. The first change is a combined spring/fall permit available to residents for \$20.00 and nonresidents for \$54.00. Holders of these permits may obtain a second spring male turkey for an additional \$20.00. The second significant change allows resident junior hunters a spring/fall turkey permit and a second spring turkey permit at no cost. These are significant season changes that may expand participation in both the spring and fall hunts and were a compelling reason behind the working group's hunting recommendations discussed later in the report [see pages 32-33].



Table 1. Wild Turkey Management Accomplishments Highlighting Efforts to Increase Hunting Opportunity (1977 – present).

Year	Accomplishments
1977	Reintroduction of 41 wild turkeys from Vermont
1982	In-state trap and transfer activities began
1985	<i>Wild Turkey Assessment</i> written; goals and objectives established for 1985-2000
1985	In-state trap and transfer protocol established
1985-87	Wild turkey reproductive ecology study conducted by B. Treiterer, U. of Maine
1986	First spring wild turkey hunting season established, 500 permits available
1987	70 additional wild turkey transported from Connecticut to Maine
1988	Memorandum of Understanding between the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries (MDIFW) and the National Wild Turkey Federation signed
1989	U. of Maine survey of Maine turkey hunters conducted
1991	Began rule-making efforts to deal with pen-raised turkey issue
1992	Expanded spring hunting zone from York County to include Cumberland County
1995	Number of spring hunting permits increased from 500 to 750
1996	Number of spring hunting permits increased from 750 to 1,250; north/south hunting zones established
1997	Number of spring hunting permits increased from 1,250 to 1,750
1998	Number of spring hunting permits increased from 1,750 to 2,250
1999	Number of spring hunting permits increased from 2,250 to 3,000; hunting by Wildlife Management Districts (WMDs), spring hunting zone expanded
2000	Number of spring hunting permits increased from 3,000 to 4,000
2000	<i>Wild Turkey Assessment</i> updated
2000-01	Wild turkey management goals and objectives established by a public working group and adopted by the Commissioner's Fish and Wildlife Advisory Council for the period 2000-2015
2001	Number of spring hunting permits increased from 4,000 to 7,000; A and B spring seasons established
2002	Number of spring hunting permits increased from 7,000 to 9,000; 2 week fall archery season established (taking males and females both legal)

Year	Accomplishments
2002	MDIFW Nuisance Wildlife Policy adapted to specifically address wild turkeys
2003	Number of spring hunting permits increased from 9,000 to 12,000; electronic calls became legal; landowner permit program established
2004	Number of spring hunting permits increased from 12,000 to 15,600; 5-week spring season established; spring hunting zone expanded; Youth Hunt Day established
2005	Number of spring hunting permits = number of applicants (23,963)
2006	Unlimited spring hunt (lottery discontinued, permits available over-the-counter); spring hunting zone expanded; 4 week fall archery season in some WMDs
2006	Southern Aroostook County Wild Turkey Working Group established
2007	6-day fall shotgun wild turkey hunting season conducted in specific WMDs
2008-09	Wild turkey / blueberry depredation study conducted by J. Huebner, U. of Maine
2009	A/B spring hunting season structure discontinued (full 5 weeks open to all hunters); fall archery zone expanded
2010	Bag limits changed: 1 bird in the spring and 1 bird in the fall, additional spring bird \$20

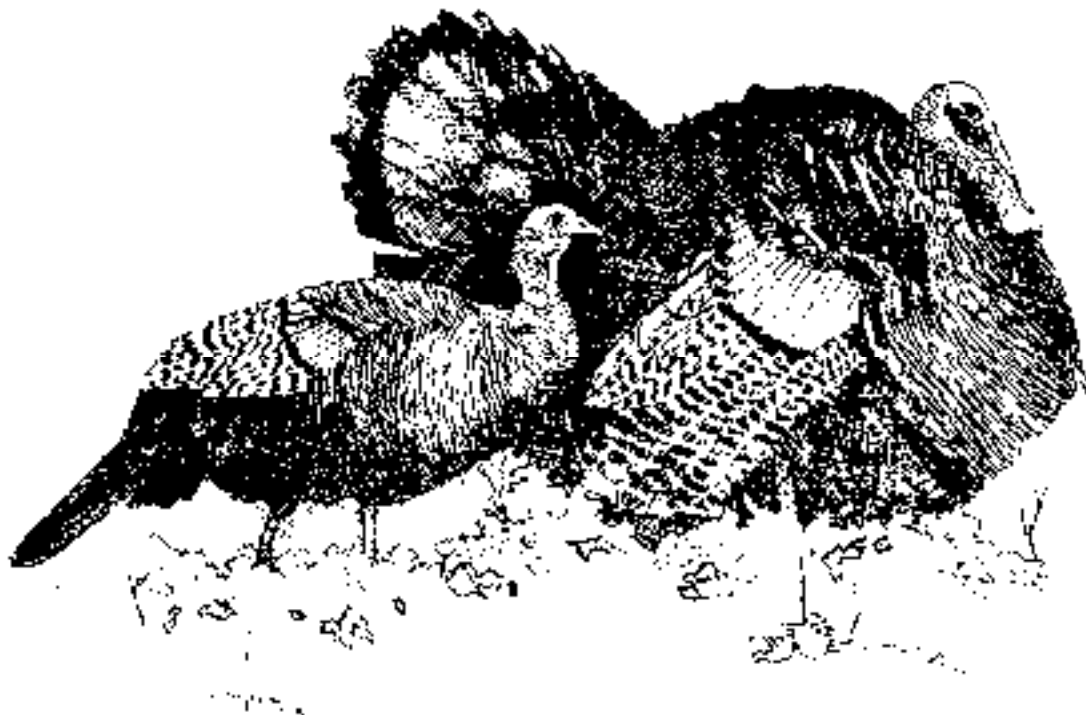


Table 2. Spring Wild Turkey Hunting Effort, Harvests, and Hunting Zones.

Year	Number of Applicants	Number of Permits	Harvest	Status, Regulation, and Seasons
Pre 1955	0	0	0	No regulations
1955-59	0	0	0	No open season
1960	0	0	0	Season provision repealed in 1959
1961-71	0	0	0	No regulations
1972-84	0	0	0	Commissioner given regulatory authority – No open season
1985	0	0	0	Commissioner given authority to institute a spring hunting season
1986	605	500	9	8 May to 24 May, York County
1987	536	500	8	8 May to 23 May, York County
1988	355	355	16	9 May to 28 May, York County
1989	464	463	19	8 May to 27 May, York County
1990	500	499	15	8 May to 28 May, York County
1991	508	500	21	8 May to 28 May, York County
1992	886	500	53	4 May to 30 May, York & Cumberland Counties
1993	1,079	500	46	3 May to 31 May, York & Cumberland Counties
1994	1,185	500	62	2 May to 30 May, York & Cumberland Counties
1995	1,712	750	117	1 May to 29 May, York & Cumberland Counties
1996	3,952	1,250	288	1 May to 31 May, North & South Hunting Zones
1997	5,091	1,750	417	1 May to 31 May, North & South Hunting Zones
1998	6,449	2,250	594	1 May to 30 May, North & South Hunting Zones
1999	9,294	3,000	890	3 May to 31 May, 1 Zone: WMDs 15-17, 20-26
2000	14,909	4,000	1,559	1 May to 31 May, 1 Zone: WMDs 15-17, 20-26
2001	18,685	7,000	2,544	Season A: May 1-5 and May 21-28 Season B: May 7-19 1 Zone: WMDs 12,15-17, 20-27

Year	Number of Applicants	Number of Permits	Harvest	Status, Regulation, and Seasons
2002	25,954	9,000	3,391	Season A: April 29-May 4 and May 20-June 1 Season B: May 6-18 and May 27-June 11 Zone: WMDs 12, 15-18, 20-27 2-week fall archery season established
2003	26,505	12,000	3,994	Season A: April 28-May 3 and May 19-31 Season B: May 5-17 and May 26-31 1 Zone: WMDs 12, 15-18, 20-27
2004	24,039	15,600	4,839	Season A: May 3-8 and May 24-June 5 Season B: May 10-22 and May 31-June 5 Youth Hunt: May 1 1 Zone: WMDs 12,13,15-18, 20-27
2005	23,963	23,963	6,236	Season A: May 2-7 and May 23-June 4 Season B: May 9-21 and May 30-June 4 Youth Hunt: April 30 1 Zone: WMDs 12-18, 20-27 All lottery participants given a permit
2006	N/A	19,393	5,931	Season A: May 1-6 and May 22-June 3 Season B: May 8-20 and May 29-June 3 Youth Hunt: April 29 1 Zone: WMDs 10-18, 20-26 Lottery discontinued, permits available over-the-counter
2007	N/A	18,132	5,984	Season A: April 30-May 5 and May 21-June 2 Season B: May 7-19 and May 28-June 2 Youth Hunt: April 28 1 Zone: WMDs 7, 10-18, 20-26 Permits available over-the-counter
2008	N/A	17,587	6,348	Season A: April 28-May 3 and May 19-May 31 Season B: May 5-17 and May 26-May 31 Youth Hunt: April 26 1 Zone: WMDs 7, 10-18, 20-26 Permits available over-the-counter
2009	N/A	16,600	5,766 Preliminary	May 4-June 6 (5 weeks open to all hunters) Youth Hunt: May 2 1 Zone: WMDs 7, 10-18, 20-26 Permits available over-the-counter

Table 3. Fall (Either Sex) Wild Turkey Hunting Effort, Harvests, and Hunting Zones.

Year	Number of Permits	Harvest	Status, Regulation, and Seasons
2002	2,022	151	October 21 through November 1 Archery only 1 Zone: WMDs 15, 16, 20-26
2003	2,882	246	October 20 through October 31 Archery only 1 Zone: WMDs 15, 16, 20-26
2004	2,923	204	October 18 through October 29 Archery only 1 Zone: WMDs 15, 16, 20-26
2005	2,913	157	October 17 through October 28 Archery only 1 Zone: WMDs 15, 16, 20-26
2006	2,639	198	Zone 1: WMDs 15-17, 20, 24-26; Oct 7-Oct 21 Zone 2: WMDs 21-23; Sept 28-Oct 27 Archery only
2007	5,357	1,843	Zone 1 (archery only): WMDs 15-17, 20, 24-26; Oct 6-Oct 20 Zone 2 (archery only): WMDs 21-23; Sept 27-Oct 26 Zone 3 (archery and shotgun): WMDs 15-17, 20-25; October 13-Oct 19
2008	4,966	685	Zone 1 (archery only): WMDs 15-17, 20, 24-26, Oct 11-Oct 25 Zone 2 (archery only): WMDs 21-23, Oct 2-Oct 31 Zone 3 (archery and shotgun): WMDs 15-17, 20-25, Oct 18-24
2009	3,300	Not Available Yet	Zone 1 (archery only): WMDs 15-17, 20, 24-26, Oct 10-Oct 24 Zone 2 (archery only): WMDs 21-23, Oct 1-Oct 30 Zone 3 (archery and shotgun): WMDs 15-17, 20-25, Oct 17-23

While many consider the return of the wild turkey to Maine a resounding success, some in the agricultural community are experiencing economic losses and other effects of an existing and expanding turkey population. The desire to reduce nuisance turkey complaints was the impetus behind an amended version of LD 256, 'Resolve, To Direct the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to Explore Opportunities and Issues Surrounding Wild Turkey Hunting.'

BACKGROUND



Wild Turkey Management Planning: In 1985 MDIFW prepared its first *Wild Turkey Assessment*, an exhaustive review and analysis of all that was known about wild turkeys in Maine. The assessment outlined the history of wild turkey management in the state and the current status of the population, habitat, and biological knowledge. The assessment was used by a public stakeholder group having diverse interests in wild turkeys as a guide to develop a goal and objectives that would direct wild turkey management for

the period 1985-2000. The goal was a broad statement of management direction, but the objectives established timelines and were specific and measurable.

In 1999, the Department refined its *Wild Turkey Assessment* [Appendix 1A] and convened another Wild Turkey Working Group to develop goals and objectives that would guide wild turkey management for the period 2000–2015. Goals and objectives were developed within the following broad sideboards: wild turkey may not be put in jeopardy of extirpation, and they may not be managed in a manner that degrades habitat. The group considered wild turkey management issues for several months and recommended a management goal and a series of objectives that were adopted by the Department's Fish and Wildlife Advisory Council in May 2001. The following goal and five objectives have directed MDIFW's management actions since [Appendix 1D].

Goal: Increase the size and distribution of the wild turkey population within all suitable habitats in Maine.

Objective 1: By 2010, increase the size and distribution of the wild turkey population within all suitable habitats in Maine via trap and transfer activities and habitat improvements.

Objective 2: By 2010, provide unlimited spring hunting opportunity (everyone who applies for a permit receives a permit) as long as the wild turkey population can support it and 2001 hunt quality is maintained. (*The working group defined quality hunting as hearing, seeing, working, and hopefully harvesting a turkey without interference from others.*)

Objective 3: By 2002, develop a component to the Department's Nuisance Wildlife Policy that addresses wild turkeys.

Objective 4: By 2003, implement a limited fall hunting season in areas where the wild turkey population can support it, and without adversely affecting Objective 2.

Objective 5: Develop a cooperative habitat improvement program between landowners, the Maine Chapter National Wild Turkey Federation, and the Department.

Based on the wild turkey management goal and objectives established by the public working group, the Department prepared the *Wild Turkey Management System*, which outlines how it will determine if it is meeting management objectives and what management actions it will take if the objectives are not being met [Appendix 1G].

CREATION OF THE 2009 WILD TURKEY WORKING GROUP

In response to an increasing turkey population and concerns about the perceived increase in the number of nuisance turkey complaints particularly among agricultural interests, the 124th Legislature passed an amended version of LD 256 to read 'Resolve, To Direct the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to Explore Opportunities and Issues Surrounding Wild Turkey Hunting' [Appendices 2A and 2B].

Sec. 1 Study opportunities and issues regarding wild turkeys. Resolved: That the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife shall work with interested parties to explore the opportunities and issues surrounding the wild turkey hunt in the State and the problem of nuisance wild turkeys in farming areas, including, but not limited to, electronic tagging or registration, telephone registration and expanded hunting opportunities to reduce the agricultural damage caused by wild turkeys; and be it further

Sec. 2 Report. Resolved: That the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife shall report the findings and recommendations based on the study in section 1 to the Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife by January 5, 2010. The Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife may submit legislation to the Second Regular Session of the 124th Legislature regarding matters presented in that report.

The 2009 Wild Turkey Working Group consisted of 17 members [Appendix 2D]:

Brad Allen	MDIFW Bird Group Leader
Jeff Bellmore	Maine Professional Guides Association
Mark Caron	MDIFW Regional Wildlife Biologist, Region F
Mike Dann	Small Woodland Owners Association of Maine
Frank Dunbar	MDIFW's Fish and Wildlife Advisory Council
Chris Dyer	Maine Warden Service
Bob Humphrey	Outdoor Writer, Turkey Hunter
Patricia Kontur	Maine Wild Blueberry Commission
Galen Larrabee	Dairy Farmer
Doug Little	NWTF Regional Biologist (New York and New England)
Jon Olson	Maine Farm Bureau
Jerome Richard	Maine Bowhunters Association

Kirk Shively	Wildlife Disease Biologist, USDA APHIS, Wildlife Services
Brian Smith	NWTF, Maine Chapter President
George Smith	Executive Director, Sportsman's Alliance of Maine
Kelsey Sullivan	MDIFW, Wildlife Biologist, Bird Group
Jim Wescott	NWTF State Chapter Board Member, turkey hunter

Maine Audubon was invited to participate but did not.

With the unanimous agreement of the Working Group, Sandy Ritchie, Habitat Conservation and Special Projects Biologist, Inland Fisheries & Wildlife, facilitated Working Group meetings and Mark Ostermann, Data Management Leader, Inland Fisheries & Wildlife provided technical support to the group during the electronic tagging discussions. A summary of each working group meeting and a list of those who attended can be found in Appendices 3-5.

The report that follows constitutes the working group's findings and recommendations [see pages 30-33].

SUMMARY OF WILD TURKEY WORKING GROUP MEETINGS

The working group met three times during August and September 2009, investing more than 15 hours in discussing wild turkey issues and opportunities and developing a series of recommended strategies to address human / wild turkey conflicts and expand hunting opportunity.

Prior to the first meeting the Department distributed a number of background materials for the Working Group to review. These were not discussed in any great detail; rather they were provided as background and reference material [Appendix 1].

- *Wild Turkey Assessment* prepared by Phillip Bozenhard in 1985 and updated by R. Bradford Allen in 2000.
- *Wild Turkey Management Issues and Concerns* raised by the 2000 Wild Turkey Working Group.
- *Wild Turkey Management Goal and Objectives 2000-2015* developed by the 2000 Wild Turkey Working Group and adopted by the MDIFW Commissioner and Fish and Wildlife Advisory Council in May 2001.
- *Feasibility Statements for the Wild Turkey Goals and Objectives* prepared by Andrew Weik, April 2001.
- *Problems and Strategies for Wild Turkey Management in Maine* prepared by Andrew Weik, April 2001.

To fully appreciate and understand the Working Group's recommended strategies, a brief overview of each meeting is presented below [see also Appendices 3-5].



Meeting #1 – August 5, 2009

The first meeting of the 2009 Wild Turkey Working Group was devoted to a discussion of the Department's Species Planning Process, status of wild turkeys in Maine, review of the legislative resolve, and identification of wild turkey issues associated with dairy farming and the blueberry industry.

1. Welcome / Introductions / Review Agenda

Sandy Ritchie had a family emergency and was unavailable to attend the first meeting. Mark Stadler, Wildlife Division Director, facilitated the meeting in Sandy's absence. Mark welcomed members of the Wild Turkey Working Group (Working Group) and thanked them for participating. Working Group members, Department staff, and guests introduced themselves.

Mark asked "Is the group a good cross section of interested parties?" The group indicated that it was although the Warden Service representative had a prior commitment.

2. Ground Rules

Mark led the group in developing the following ground rules:

- One conversation at a time / be as concise as possible
- Maximize participation / respect others' perspectives / seek to address all perspectives
- Decision making by consensus
- All have the responsibility to move the process forward

3. Background and Charge

Mark discussed the requirements of L.D. 256. He indicated that they appeared to revolve around three broad areas, which are:

A. Wild Turkey Hunting in Maine:

- 1) Issues
- 2) Opportunities

B. Agricultural Issues Concerning Wild Turkeys

- 1) The Problem of Nuisance Wild Turkeys in Farming Areas: Identification of the Problem. Once we have identified and described the problem, then consider the...
- 2) Expanded Hunting Opportunities to Reduce the Agricultural Damage Caused by Wild Turkeys

C. Electronic Tagging / Registration; Telephone Registration

The working group concurred with this categorization. It decided to begin its deliberations by undertaking a review and discussion of B 1) The Problem of Nuisance Wild Turkeys in Farming Areas: Identification of the problem.

4. Species Planning, the Status of Wild Turkeys in Maine, and Animal Damage Control

Mark Stadler presented an overview of the Department's Species Planning Process, including the development of: a Species Assessment, management goals and objectives for a 15 year planning period by a public working group, and Species Management Systems [Appendix 3B].

He reiterated the point that how the fall hunt affects the quality of the spring hunt is an important issue to remember and will be critical to future discussions. Doug Little (NWTF) indicated that the use of spring harvest data to increase or reduce fall hunting opportunity (as Maine does) is a widely accepted practice used in other states. He stated there are instances where some states are considering reducing fall hunting opportunity because of reduced spring hunt quality.

Kelsey Sullivan provided a presentation on the Status of Wild Turkeys in Maine and emphasized where we are in terms of populations status, goal and objectives, and harvests [Appendix 3C].

Mark described MDIFW's Animal Damage Control (ADC) policy and nuisance issues specific to wild turkeys and provided opportunity for discussion [Appendix 3D]. The question was asked of farmers in general "How long have the birds bothered them"? Mr. Larrabee indicated that it really depends on the winter (snow conditions). If you get one storm of 18 inches, they come around quickly. If snows are intermittent, the birds generally forage in the woods.

5. The Problem with Nuisance Wild Turkeys in Farming Areas: Identification of the Problem

Dairy Farming

Galen Larrabee, representing the Maine dairy industry, provided the working group with his assessment of the affect of turkeys on his dairy operation. He indicated that problems with turkeys on his farm began in the late 1990s, and he has had as many as 160 turkeys living on his farm during winters. He also noted that farmers using haylege bunkers face different problems than those using wrapped bales. Below is a summary of the problems Mr. Larrabee identified; in addition, he and other members of the working group provided comments and possible solutions to the problems listed.



Problem

Dairy farmers don't receive any of the economic benefits from wild turkey presence in Maine but must absorb costs associated with wild turkey conflicts.

Turkeys frequent dairy farms for food when wild food gets scarce. As long as turkeys

Potential Strategies / Comments

- Education and outreach to dairy farmers, the public, and IFW.
- IFW allowing farmers to address problems as conflicts arise.
- IFW outreach to dairy farmers w/ problems.
- Recognize the contribution of farmers.
- Carry excess food out back for turkeys to peck thru.

Problem

can scavenge in the woods they are not a problem.

Farmers don't like turkeys in corn or haylage bunkers because they eat a lot.

Turkey feces in feed: effect on palatability and milk productivity?

Destruction of wrapped bales; food spoiled; serious problem

Potential Strategies / Comments

- Leave several rows of silage corn.
- Place excess silage corn away from dairy operations.
- Keep turkeys out of feed bunkers non-lethal (preferred) and lethal means if necessary.
- Several hundred samples of turkey defecation in silage and barnyards were collected and tested in New Hampshire. No incidence of Salmonella was found.
- USDA-Wildlife Services Maine will be collecting samples and swabbing birds looking for Campylobacter and other fecal borne pathogens with regards to abortion in cattle and sheep.
- Study of starling feces in feed and declining milk production – starlings may be a bigger issue than turkeys.
- Better storage sites for wrapped bales away from depredation and damage.
- Some studies suggest other wildlife might be causing the damage rather than turkeys. Need camera evidence because mitigation will be different if we don't determine who is causing the problem.
- APHIS Wildlife Services recommends that studies be conducted to investigate the issue of damage to wrapped bales and silage bags to determine the role that turkeys may or may not play in the damage. Kirk Shively indicated Wildlife Services is well qualified to undertake a study.

Mr. Larrabee concluded his remarks stating he has worked with MDIFW since 2000 to prevent and resolve issues with wild turkeys on his farm. He indicated there is much better cooperation between the Department and dairy farmers today than in the past, but there is room for improvement and additional tools. He believes most farmers want to coexist with

wild turkeys, are learning to live with them, and prefer not to shoot them. When asked if turkeys were a huge problem and MDIFW's Animal Damage Control program ineffective, Mr. Larrabee stated that may have been the case 8-10 years ago, but it would be an overstatement today. He has a good relationship with the Department and encouraged MDIFW and dairy farmers to continue to work cooperatively and for the Department to direct assistance to farmers who request it.

Wild Turkeys and Wild Blueberry Agriculture

Wild blueberry growers have expressed concerns that wild turkeys commonly use their farms and may cause significant crop damage. The wild turkey's conspicuous and gregarious diurnal behavior makes them highly visible, which can result in farmers attributing crop damage from other wildlife species to wild turkeys.

Until now, impacts of wild turkeys on wild blueberry agriculture have not been studied. Janice Huebner, M.S. candidate at the University of Maine Department of Plant, Soil, and Environmental Sciences completed her study titled "**Wild Turkey Foraging Behavior and Crop Depredation on Wild Blueberry Farms in Maine**" in December 2009 in an effort to understand the impact of wild turkey foraging and activity on wild blueberry farms. Because Ms. Huebner's work is germane to the deliberations of the Wild Turkey Working Group, we provided a direct copy of the abstract of the thesis below as well as other results, annotated conclusions, and management recommendations (with literature citations removed) taken directly from the thesis. These points further highlight some of the more important findings in Janice Huebner's work.

Thesis Abstract

*A highly successful reintroduction program has restored wild turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*) to Maine in large numbers and wild blueberry (low sweet blueberry [*Vaccinium angustifolium*]) growers have increasingly expressed concern about wild turkeys inhabiting their farms. The objectives of the present study were to determine the concerns and perceptions of wild blueberry growers about wild turkeys, describe wild turkey activity and diet while using blueberry fields, and estimate blueberry crop loss. In 2008 I sent a mail-in questionnaire about wild turkey and wildlife damage to all wild blueberry growers in Maine. I studied wild turkey activity on four wild blueberry farms in Knox County, ME from mid-May through July 2008 and 2009. I used an activity budget to describe behavior, and used fecal analysis and video recording to document food items consumed. To estimate crop loss from wildlife I compared proportion of blueberry loss rates between open or enclosed plots. I modeled blueberry crop loss by wild turkey using results from the present study and the literature. Forty-two percent of growers responded ($n = 225$) to the questionnaire, and most (76%) reported no or few benefits from wild turkeys on their farms. Most (60%) growers were concerned with damage from wild turkeys. Deer (66%) was the species most commonly indicated as causing damage. Growers were most concerned with wild turkeys eating blueberries (54%) and knocking blueberries off stems (44%). In general, concerns were shared by respondents in regions of the state both with and without high wild turkey densities. Wild turkeys were present on blueberry fields 29% of total survey time (820 hours). Wild turkeys used blueberry farms and spent greater proportions of survey time on fields during the pre-fruiting compared to the fruiting season (2008: $P = 0.01$, 2009: $P < 0.001$).*

Overall, wild turkeys spent approximately 50% of time in foraging behaviors. On two sites, feeding behaviors were not different between seasons (Marrs Hill: $P = 0.468$, Clarry Hill: $P = 0.861$) or field types (Marrs Hill: $P = 0.256$), but there were yearly differences (Marrs Hill: $P = 0.005$, Clarry Hill: $P < 0.001$). Before blueberries ripened, other foods such as weedy vegetation comprised most (90%) of the foods used while in blueberry fields. During the fruiting season, wild blueberries were 46% of the food items used. In both years the rate of blueberry loss on plants did not differ between open and enclosed plots (2008: $P = 0.693$, 2009: $P = 0.498$). Based on mean estimates for model inputs from the present study and the observed mean flock size ($n = 4$), the “average” scenario for our study sites resulted in a loss of 18.7 kg (\$33.39) of wild blueberries by wild turkeys. This loss represented 0.05% of the total crop for a 20 ha field. Experimental (enclosure) and modeling results were consistent. My results indicate that wild blueberry crop losses by wild turkeys are relatively low. Better information on actual crop loss will be helpful to both wild blueberry growers and wildlife managers.

Below are other results, annotated conclusions and management recommendations (with literature citations removed) taken directly from the thesis. These points further highlight some of the more important findings in Janice Huebner’s work.

Perceptions of Wild Blueberry Growers to Wild Turkey Damage in Maine: Many wild blueberry growers are concerned that wild turkeys cause damage to their crop and despite the difference in wild turkey numbers between the regions, these concerns were generally consistent in both the mid-coast counties and Washington County. Growers likely perceive wild turkeys as causing damage because they are highly visible on blueberry farms, and growers do not have reliable information on the amount of crop loss caused by wild turkeys and other wildlife. Crop losses to wild turkeys and wildlife needs to be quantified.

Additionally, many growers had other important concerns for which little information is available, such as wild turkeys eating blueberry buds in the autumn and depositing feces on plants. This information will also be beneficial to agencies outside Maine weighing the costs and benefits of wild turkey introductions where wild blueberry agriculture is regionally significant.

Wild Turkey Foraging Behavior and Crop Loss on Wild Blueberry Farms in Maine: Wild turkey activity on farms unexpectedly decreased from pre-fruiting season to the fruiting season in both 2008 and 2009, despite the high abundance of wild blueberries that came available. Wild turkeys also spent roughly equal proportions of time in prune fields and fruit fields during the fruit season [at one study site] in 2008 and 2009. Several factors may explain the lack of a positive relationship between fruit availability and wild turkey use of wild blueberry fields. Wild blueberry farms likely only comprise a portion of total wild turkey habitat [home ranges in spring and summer between 105 ha-833 ha], and wild turkeys exhibit seasonal preferences for habitats types. In the spring (pre-fruiting season), wild blueberry fields may have been used more for breeding activities. While hens with broods may prefer field habitats, my anecdotal observations suggest wild blueberry fields provided very little cover from predation and young poults had difficulty maneuvering through dense blueberry stems. I observed little use of fields by hens with broods. A second contributing factor is that preferred food sources may have been abundant in adjacent habitats during the fruiting seasons, which resulted in wild turkeys spending less time on blueberry fields. However, complicating factors include fruit field types that had greater amounts of weedy vegetation because herbicide 41 applications were only applied to prune fields. Also, fruit

fields often received early July insecticide applications which may have deterred wild turkeys from eating treated blueberries or decreased in insect abundance.

Management Implications: Most wild blueberry growers in Maine are concerned about damage from wild turkeys to their crop. These concerns are not unfounded because wild turkeys are active on farms and do eat blueberries. Yet, crop loss from wild turkey is relatively low for most growers. However, in rare cases, small blueberry farms (<5 ha) with high wild turkey populations may consider the amount and value of blueberry loss unacceptable. For growers using or considering the use of hazing and scare devices targeted specifically at wild turkeys, it is likely not worth the cost. An effort should be made to distribute information on crop loss estimates to wild blueberry growers. For the majority of wild blueberry growers, wild turkey damage is not a source of significant damage. Cumulative damage from other wildlife may be more of concern for Maine’s blueberry growers. This information will be especially helpful to inform growers in eastern Maine where wild turkeys are expanding and increasing and to inform organizations that are weighing the costs and benefits of wild turkey introduction.

Patricia Kontur, representing the Maine blueberry industry, outlined the problems that blueberry growers contend with; in addition, she and other members of the working group provided comments and possible solutions regarding the problems discussed.

Problem	Potential Strategies / Comments
Blueberry growers don’t receive any of the economic benefits from wild turkey presence in Maine but must absorb costs associated with wild turkey conflicts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education and outreach to blueberry growers, the public, and IFW. • IFW allowing blueberry growers to address conflicts. • IFW outreach to blueberry growers with problems. • Recognize the contribution of blueberry growers.
Wild turkey foraging damages berries; feces in berries. From the grower’s perspective as soon as turkeys walk into the field damage increases with each day.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wild turkeys eat bugs thereby providing a potential benefit of blueberry pest control. • What do blueberry growers use to scare off/get rid of wild turkeys? A discussion ensued about scare tactics, deterrents, limited utility, and that birds get conditioned to these. Consider rotating deterrents on the landscape and allowing periodic lethal take. • Need to seek a balance between the

Problem

Wild turkey foraging damages berries; feces in berries. From the grower's perspective as soon as turkeys walk into the field damage increases with each day.

Potential Strategies / Comments

numbers of wild turkeys in blueberry fields and the financial loss associated with their presence.

- Like dairy farming, education and outreach to blueberry growers will be helpful to assess the problem and develop a better understanding of the complete picture (i.e. Janice Huebner, University of Maine graduate student studying wild turkey/blueberry interactions).
- Janice Huebner's study will hopefully shed light on the degree of turkey damage (direct and indirect) and what role other species play in damage to blueberry fields (bears, deer, raccoons)

Time expired before turkey damage to other berry crops, farm stand and back yard gardens, and apple orchards could be fully vetted. These topics were deferred to the next meeting.

The minutes of the first meeting and all of the documents provided to the working group are found in Appendix 3.



Meeting #2 – August 25, 2009

The second meeting of the 2009 Wild Turkey Working Group was devoted to a continued discussion of wild turkey conflicts in agricultural areas and identification of hunting issues and opportunities.

1. The Problem of Nuisance Wild Turkeys in Farming Areas: Identification of the Problem

Dairy and blueberry problems were discussed at the first meeting. Problems associated with other berry crops and farm stand produce were addressed at the second meeting.

Problem

Potential Strategies / Comments

Strawberries

To protect strawberry plants in the late fall farmers cover them with straw; in some cases after spreading the straw, wild turkeys scratch up the straw damaging the plants and agricultural cloth.

- Need to determine the number of wild turkeys being killed in relation to nuisance (whether by permit or not).
- Use fencing, repellants (mylar tape, cracker shells, fish scent sprays).
- A 3-D coyote goose repeller sold in Forestry Suppliers is very effective though it needs to be moved around in the fields.
- Timing of the hunting seasons is not effective to take out enough wild turkeys and to reduce the wild turkey numbers. Hunting generally doesn't occur when damage is occurring. MDIFW stated that hunting has never been used or promoted to control the wild turkey population.

Raspberries

During the fruiting cycle, wild turkeys are in the berry patches searching for insects and inadvertently knocking raspberries off the plants when they flap their wings. This damage can increase product loss and cost.

It's a numbers game. For example, 10 birds are tolerable but when you get higher

- Strategies for small fruits and vegetables are all similar (fencing, various repellants, education and outreach, etc.).
- Smaller operations may have a more difficult time financing nuisance control strategies than larger operations.

Problem

numbers (i.e. 100 birds) the problem becomes a major issue.

Potential Strategies / Comments

- Education and outreach is important for all nuisance categories (berries, dairy, orchards, etc.). Need to think “out of the box” about delivering the information.
- The Living with Wildlife link on IFW website will be available shortly. This site will describe methods for preventing or resolving conflicts with wildlife and who to turn to for help if needed.
- Websites are good but we also need to provide landowners with the opportunity to talk to a “real person” and not feel they are being put off.

Small Farms and Back Yard Gardens

Problems are similar to those of berry growers.

- Some strategies are similar – small operations may have a more difficult time financing control strategies.

Apple orchards

Wild turkeys eat apple drops and knock apples off the trees. They also cause limb damage and damage to buds in the spring.

- Some strategies are similar – small operations may have a more difficult time financing control strategies.

Turkey Problems in General

Trapping and transferring wild turkeys – growers would like to know where birds are relocated.

- MDIFW always seeks landowner permission when birds are released, but the regional offices should be encouraged to think beyond the actual release site as to where birds could move to.
- Post releases sites on IF&W’s website.
- IFW should be more proactive in distributing a “plan” for wild turkey releases.
- Need a landowner relations coordinator. Can we tap into Hunter Education instructors as an education

Problem

GAP – Good Agriculture Practices (Food Safety for agricultural fields) - GAP is a USDA certification program to allow growers to market food to the retail outlets while ensuring safety (i.e., home growers selling fresh pack to supermarkets).

Growers are looking to USDA to find out what is required to comply with the program. GAP identifies 200 items in total and 2 items speak to wildlife.

1. Monitor wildlife activities on the property.
2. Take measures to reduce the amount of wild animals entering the property.

It is an urban vs. rural problem.

A general discussion of nuisance wild turkey issues ensued. According to Warden Chris Dyer, 111 calls related to problem wild turkeys were reported between January 1 and August 24, 2009 and recorded in the Warden Service's Records Management System. The calls ran the gamut from wild turkeys bothering bird feeders, to a dead wild turkey in a driveway, to farming complaints. One grower commented that reports are probably under representative of the number of ongoing problems, citing most farmers don't report problems with wild turkeys, they simply deal with them.

Working Group members agreed it was important to compile USDA's reports with MDIFW's to get as accurate a picture of the problem as possible and to try to assess how many birds were being removed by lethal means.

2. Wild Turkey Hunting Issues and Opportunities

The remainder of the meeting was devoted to a brainstorming session of various hunting issues and opportunities. Sandy Ritchie told the working group the field was wide open and encouraged members to raise any issue, comment, or opportunity they wanted the broader working group to consider. The following is a summary of topics discussed.

Turkey demand could exceed supply in some areas of the state – some working group members expressed concern that a series of wet springs and poor poult production in

Potential Strategies / Comments

and outreach vehicle?

- Continue with trap and transfer efforts.
- Need to monitor GAP to ensure "reasonableness" in dealing with wildlife.
- Inform regional biologists about GAP.
- Need to coordinate where trapped wild turkeys are released especially if they are released near GAP areas.
- Need to determine how to get the message out in a better fashion - a compiled package covering all species and information and the steps to go through to resolve conflicts.

conjunction with hunters gaining experience and expertise during the fall hunt could result in an increased harvest of hens and begin affecting population growth.

Fall season triggers – the Department uses the metric of spring harvest of wild turkey gobblers/mi² of forested habitat as a means to assess the wild turkey population within a Wildlife Management District (WMD). The Wild Turkey Management System calls for specific values of gobblers harvested/mi² forested habitat to be met in the spring before opening a WMD to fall hunting. Three variations of a fall harvest, when met, can trigger a fall season opening. A WMD that realizes:

- 0.5 gobblers/square mile of forested would open up a 2 week bow hunt.
- 0.75 gobblers/square mile of forested habitat would open a 2 week bow season, as well as a 1 week shotgun season.
- 1.0 gobblers/square mile of forested habitat would open a 4 week bow season, as well as a 1 week shotgun season.

Season and weaponry changes – a list of suggested changes is presented below.

- Provide similar seasons for bow hunters and shotgun hunters. [Some members were concerned about the potential for an increased harvest of hens by lengthening the shotgun season.]
- Expand the youth hunt during the spring and fall seasons.
- Reduce the spring season from 5 weeks to 4 weeks.
- Allow the use of crossbows.
- Institute an early spring bow only season [mid April for 2 weeks] – Bob Humphrey thought an early spring bow season might increase nonresident participation in wild turkey hunting as it has in other states. Others believed an early season wouldn't attract hunters; they preferred to focus on a season where hunters could see success. Jerome Richard of the Maine Bowhunters Association did not support an early spring bow only season.
- May 1st vs. an earlier April spring season opening – Doug Little, Northeast Regional Biologist with NWTF reported that May 1st is the ideal start date. Based on radio telemetry studies, May 1st is the peak onset of incubation when hens are closely tied to the nests. An earlier season opening increases the mistaken identity and illegal



take of hens in the harvest and “educates” gobblers that won’t respond to calling anyway.

- Extend the spring noon closure to all day hunting - Brad Allen provided the group with a number of reasons why all day spring wild turkey hunting is not advised.
 - All day hunting diminishes the tradition of spring wild turkey hunting which is an early morning hunt.
 - All day hunting may diminish the current quality of the spring hunt, risking the high level of success and credibility our wild turkey program enjoys.
 - Extending hunting hours has the potential to decrease the acreage open to hunting as landowners may not welcome all day hunting on their land.
 - Research has shown that additional hunting pressure from all day hunting will depress turkey gobbling activity.
 - Further, the wild turkey is the only game bird that wildlife agencies allow to be hunted during the nesting phase of its reproductive cycle. Caution should be exercised to ensure that hunting is as benign as possible.
 - All day hunting increases the potential for disturbance to nesting hens and nest abandonment.
 - All day hunting would likely increase the male harvest and enhances the opportunity for illegal hen losses when nesting hens leave their nests and feed in the afternoon.
 - All day hunting might increase more “road hunting” and stalking turkey spotted in fields in the afternoon. This raises safety and ethical concerns.
 - No other state in the northeast has all day hunting. Conditions are likely very different in the southern states that do have all day spring hunts. The most obvious difference is that our turkeys experience severe winter conditions.
 - Lastly, the hunting community has not expressed a strong desire for all day hunting.

Making too many season changes too quickly makes it difficult to measure cause and effect in regards to hunt quality – it was suggested that once a major change is made to a season framework (increasing bag limits, providing additional weaponry opportunity), MDIFW should not make an additional change for a period of 3 years. This timeframe is intended to allow the Department to review and evaluate harvest and survey trend data to assess the effect of the change on the population or the quality of the hunt.

Need to preserve the quality of the spring hunt – MDIFW needs to monitor the effect of increased opportunity in the fall in relation to the quality of the hunt in the spring. Maine’s spring hunt is its premier hunt; preserving its quality is of utmost importance. A quality hunt

means more than harvesting a bird; it also includes seeing, hearing, and working a bird without interference from others.

How can we attract more people to the sport of turkey hunting – we don't seem to be attracting more residents to the sport despite expanded seasons, a greater area open to hunting, increased bag limits, and reasonable permit fees. The opportunity to attract residents is limited; the opportunity to attract nonresidents is better and should be promoted.

Landowner issues – the fall season occurs when farmers are harvesting their fall crops. Farmers are concerned about expanding shotgun opportunity in the fall. They want to ensure a safe and quality hunting experience while minimizing interference with their farming activities.

3. Proposed Spring Season Framework

The Working Group agreed to the following structure for the spring season:

- Season opening – maintain current opening (around May 1)
- Season length - 5 weeks, no split seasons
- Daily closure – noon time, though the group was divided on a ½ day vs. full day hunting (3 supported an all day season, 11 were opposed, Doug Little representing the NWTF abstained from voting).

Once major changes are made to a season framework (i.e., increasing bag limits, expanding weaponry), the group recommended not making additional changes for a period of 3 years to allow the Department to review and evaluate harvest and survey trend data.

The minutes of the second meeting and all of the documents provided to the working group are found in Appendix 4.



Meeting #3 – September 15, 2009

The third meeting of the 2009 Wild Turkey Working Group was devoted to a continued discussion of hunting issues and opportunities, including the use of crossbows; electronic tagging; identification of strategies to address conflicts with turkeys; and a review and affirmation of wild turkey goals and objectives developed by the 2000 Wild Turkey Working Group. A summary of items discussed is provided below.

1. Hunting Issues and Opportunities

At the previous meeting the Working Group discussed a spring season framework. A fall season structure and the use of crossbows were the focus of the third meeting.

An objective of the 2000 Wild Turkey Working Group was to implement a limited fall hunting season by 2003 in areas where the Wild Turkey population could support it and without adversely affecting the quality of the spring hunt. The Department implemented its first fall season (a two-week archery only season in selected WMDs) in 2002. Since the inaugural fall season, the Department has expanded fall turkey hunting opportunity adding additional wildlife management districts, lengthening the season, and allowing the use of shotguns. Hens comprise about 60% of Maine's fall turkey harvest.

When determining a fall season the Department considers:

- Season triggers - spring harvest of wild turkey gobblers/mi² of forested habitat (see page 22)
- Productivity estimates from August brood surveys
- MDIFW regional biologists' perspectives

Doug Little provided a regional and national perspective of fall turkey seasons. Most states use a 2-3 year spring harvest trend to determine fall opportunity; Maine uses 1 year data and is the only state to do so. When setting fall seasons, Maine has been liberal despite being at the northern limit of wild turkey range where year to year changes can be exacerbated. We are also one of the more recent states to implement a fall gun season. States with longer fall gun seasons have longer histories of fall hunting and are not on the northern limit of the range. Arkansas, a state with a long history of turkeys and turkey hunting, is proposing an emergency closure of their fall season after several years of poor production.

Most states manage their fall hunts to assure that even with the harshest of winters and the wettest of springs, the fall harvest will not negatively impact the population and the spring hunt. Given season timing and the need to publish hunting regulations in advance of a season, it is very difficult for states to respond to poor winters and wet springs by reducing the fall season framework. Hunters want to have some expectation as to what a season will be.

Working Group members urged caution when expanding and evaluating seasons to ensure we maintain the safety net of the fall season triggers. Some wondered whether a 2-bird take in the spring (allowable beginning in 2010 with an additional fee) will require a change to the

season triggers, and others expressed concern that as hunters continue to become more experienced we could achieve our fall season triggers quicker thereby expanding fall hunting opportunity sooner than biologically warranted. To date the Department has been conservative in its approach to harvest management and has not seen the need to limit the fall hen harvest because it is likely less than 8%-10% of the hen population.

The group briefly discussed using recreational turkey hunting to reduce the turkey population and, as a result, reduce the number of nuisance wild turkey complaints. They agreed that there are more direct and focused ways to address wild turkey conflicts rather than recreational hunting, particularly if that hunting might jeopardize the quality of Maine's spring turkey hunt and diminish hunter satisfaction. Provisions for dealing with nuisance wildlife exist in law, and the Department's Animal Damage Control Policy has provisions to address and remedy nuisance wild turkey complaints.

The Working Group agreed to the following structure for the fall season:

- Maintain the current [2009] fall season structure for 2010.
- Don't consider any changes until at least 2011. [Note: as a result of Working Group recommendations on pages 32-33, no season changes will be considered until 2013.]
- Use 3-year trend data when establishing future seasons to allow the Department adequate time to review and evaluate harvest trend data.
- Investigate the opportunity to expand the fall shotgun season beginning no earlier than 2011. [Note: as a result of Working Group recommendations on pages 32-33, no season changes will be considered until 2013.] If fall shotgun opportunity is expanded, we may need to reconsider fall season triggers, which by most states' standards are already very liberal.

2. Use of Crossbows

The group considered arguments for and against the use of crossbows while turkey hunting. [Appendices 5B-5D]. Doug Little surveyed all state wild turkey program leaders on the use of crossbows and received 32 responses. Crossbows are legal in 13 states and illegal in 19. Of the 6 New England states surveyed, crossbows are illegal for spring and fall wild turkey hunting in Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island [Connecticut and Vermont did not respond].

In states where crossbows are allowed, less than 2% – 9% of the harvest is attributable to crossbows. The Maine Chapter of the NWTf opposes the use of crossbows at this time because it would be another variable on top of other season changes. The Maine Bowhunters Association [MBA] opposes the use of crossbows, especially during the fall turkey season because it overlaps the archery season on deer and MBA fears it could lead to the illegal harvest of deer by crossbow users.

The Working Group agreed that MDIFW should investigate the use of crossbows beginning with the 2011 turkey seasons and suggested the Department use its 2010 Spring Turkey Hunter Questionnaire as one way to gauge hunter interest in the use of crossbows while turkey hunting. [Note: as a result of Working Group recommendations on pages 32-33, no

season changes will be considered until 2013.] Agricultural interests urged caution, expressing concern for lost arrows in farmers hay fields and the potential of ingestion of arrow heads by livestock. [Using crossbows to hunt wild turkey would require legislation.]

3. Strategies to Address Farmers' Conflicts with Wild Turkeys

The Working Group discussed a number of potential strategies to address farmers' conflicts with turkeys.

- Use of repellants – fencing, mylar tape, cracker shells, coyote decoys, etc.
- Directed efforts at lethal removal of offending turkeys.
- Trapping and relocating wild turkeys.
- Education and outreach efforts.
- Directing recreational hunters into problem areas – ultimately the group decided not to recommend this strategy because landowners are getting plenty of requests from hunters to hunt on their properties.
- Trap, euthanize, and donate turkeys to soup kitchens – ultimately the group decided not to recommend this strategy.
- Allow the use of depredation permits by “agents” of the busy farmer (friends, family, ADC agents) – this strategy was strongly discouraged by Warden Service because it makes a hunt out of a nuisance problem and opens up a “can of worms”.
- Payment to farmers for damage.

4. Electronic Tagging

The Sportsman Alliance of Maine continues to advocate for website and telephone options for tagging wild turkeys.

The group briefly discussed the advantages and disadvantages of moving forward with electronic registration of wild turkeys. The Department has met several times to discuss electronic tagging and has identified advantages and disadvantages of 1) maintaining the current registration process, 2) implementing self-registration where the hunter would register the animal online or by phone, or 3) implementing a tagging station online registration process [Appendix 5E].



The consensus of the Working Group was not to proceed with electronic tagging at this time. The group expressed concerns about non compliance and data reliability. They were also worried about adding another layer of change and responsibility to the tagging stations in light of the registration fee increase passed in the last legislative session and the dissension it has caused. [Registration fees for big game were increased from \$1 to \$5 with the additional \$4 earmarked to MDIFW to support two data entry positions]. A final concern expressed by Warden Chris Dyer was overburdening the Kennebec County court system. If the electronic server is located in Augusta, all tagging violations would potentially have to go through the Kennebec County court system.

5. Affirmation of 2000 Wild Turkey Working Group's Goal and Objectives

The remainder of the meeting was devoted to a review of the Wild Turkey Goal and Objectives for the period 2000-2015 developed by the 2000 Wild Turkey Working Group and adopted by the Department's Fish and Wildlife Advisory Council on May 1, 2001. They are as follows:

Goal: Increase the size and distribution of the Wild Turkey population within all suitable habitats in Maine.

The 2009 Wild Turkey Working Group affirmed this goal.

Objective 1: By 2010, increase the size and distribution of the Wild Turkey population within all suitable habitats in Maine via trap and transfer activities and habitat improvements.

The 2009 Wild Turkey Working Group affirmed this objective.

Objective 2: By 2010, provide unlimited spring hunting opportunity (everyone who applies for a permit receives a permit) as long as the Wild Turkey population can support it and 2001 hunt quality is maintained. (The working group defined quality hunting as hearing, seeing, working, and hopefully harvesting a turkey without interference from others.)

We achieved an unlimited spring hunt in 2005 when all applicants were given a permit. The 2009 Wild Turkey Working Group affirmed continuing to provide unlimited spring hunting opportunity as long as the turkey population can support it and spring hunt quality is maintained.

Objective 3: By 2002, develop a component to the Department's Nuisance Wildlife Policy that addresses Wild Turkeys.

A component to the Department's Nuisance Wildlife Policy that addresses wild turkeys is found in Title 12: Chapter 921; section 12401, pages 910-916 and in the Department's Administrative Policy Regarding Human/Wildlife Conflicts (Policy J1.6, last revised 7/31/2008).

Objective 4: By 2003, implement a limited fall hunting season in areas where the Wild Turkey population can support it, and without adversely affecting Objective 2.

The Department implemented Maine's first limited fall hunting season in 2002. The 2009 Wild Turkey Working Group affirmed continuing to provide a limited fall hunting season in areas where the population can support it and without adversely affecting spring hunt quality.

Objective 5: Develop a cooperative habitat improvement program between landowners, the Maine Chapter National Wild Turkey Federation, and the Department.

The 2009 Wild Turkey Working Group recommended modifying this objective to read as follows: Develop a cooperative turkey management program between landowners; the Maine Chapter National Wild Turkey Federation; sportsmen (i.e. SAM), landowner (i.e. SWOAM), and agricultural (Farm Bureau) groups; and the Department.

The group also proposed two additional recommendations that were not fully articulated into measurable objectives.

Objective 6: *Reduce landowner / turkey conflicts.*

Objective 7: *Evaluate all of the turkey seasons and bag limits and investigate options for additional hunting opportunity.*

The minutes of the third meeting and all of the documents provided to the working group are found in Appendix 5.

Following the meeting, MDIFW developed a draft report outlining the deliberations and recommendations of the Wild Turkey Working Group and forwarded the draft to Working Group members for review and the opportunity to provide any additional comments or thoughts. The Department requested that it receive these by December 9, 2009 but accepted all comments that came in, even after the deadline. Working Group comments are presented in Appendix 6.



WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to the Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife for Expanding Wild Turkey Hunting in Maine and Alleviating Farmers' Conflicts with Wild Turkeys.

Developed by the 2009 Wild Turkey Working Group



Recommended Strategies to Address Farmers' Conflicts with Turkeys

The Working Group unanimously makes the following recommendations to address farmers' conflicts with Wild Turkeys:

1. MDIFW should post *Living with Wildlife* on the Department's website informing landowners how to prevent and reduce problems caused by wild turkeys and where to turn for additional assistance if needed.
2. MDIFW and the Maine chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation should:
 - a. develop extension materials addressing how farmers can respond to conflicts with wild turkeys and
 - b. disseminate these through agricultural and landowner groups, publications, and trade shows (i.e., Maine Farm Bureau, Maine Organic Farmers and Growers Association, commodity groups, Small Woodland Owners Association of Maine, etc.).

3. As part of its efforts to respond to landowner / wild turkey conflicts and to augment the pool of Animal Damage Control agents currently registered in its ADC program, MDIFW should enroll qualified members of the Maine Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation and other sportsmen's groups, and other interested individuals, as Animal Damage Control agents, who will provide their services at no charge to the landowner. Response to landowner / wild turkey conflicts will follow the stepped-down approach (prevention and extension, regulation, non-lethal control, and lethal control) described in the Department's *Administrative Policy Regarding Human/Wildlife Conflicts (Policy J1.6, last revised 7/31/2008)*.

To be successful, participants must commit to:

- a. participate in the program and be available to farmers;
 - b. cooperate and coordinate with Department biologists and game wardens; and
 - c. comply with standards and protocols outlined in the Department's ADC policy.
4. MDIFW and the Maine Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation should pursue funding from the National Wild Turkey Federation's Superfund, and other sources, to purchase and maintain a supply of materials (fencing, mylar tape, cracker shells, coyote decoys, etc.) necessary for appropriate and timely response to landowner / wild turkey conflicts.
 5. Availability of volunteers [Maine Chapter NWTF members and other sportsmen's groups and interested individuals] to address issues a landowner may have will depend on the location and time of the complaint. MDIFW, the Maine Chapter NWTF, and other interested parties should develop a process that assures farmers that their complaints will be addressed as promptly as possible. [See 3 above.]
 6. MDIFW should:
 - a. emphasize, within the Department, the value and utility of wild turkey trapping and relocation;
 - b. continue its current wild turkey trapping and relocation efforts; and
 - c. publicize wild turkey release sites on the Department's website.

[Efforts beyond current levels will require additional staff and funding.]

7. MDIFW, with assistance from other interested stakeholders including, but not limited to the Maine Chapter National Wild Turkey Federation, Sportsman's Alliance of Maine, Small Woodland Owners Association of Maine, and the Maine Farm Bureau should develop and implement a cooperative turkey management program.

The Working Group discussed using recreational wild turkey hunting as a means to reduce the turkey population and, as a result, reduce the number of nuisance wild turkey complaints. They agreed that there are more direct and focused ways to address wild turkey conflicts rather than recreational hunting, particularly if that hunting might jeopardize the quality of Maine's spring wild turkey hunt and diminish hunter satisfaction.

Recommendations to Expand Wild Turkey Hunting Opportunity in Maine

Maine's spring hunt is its premier hunt; preserving its quality is of utmost importance.

The general wild turkey hunting recommendations are intended to protect and enhance spring gobbler hunting opportunities and, as appropriate, provide additional recreational hunting by allowing limited fall hunting. The emphasis is on quality spring gobbler hunting. Expanded fall hunting should be carefully considered because fall seasons, where the harvest of hens is legal, may negatively influence the population's growth rate more than spring hunting seasons.

The Working Group unanimously makes the following recommendations concerning wild turkey hunting opportunities in Maine.

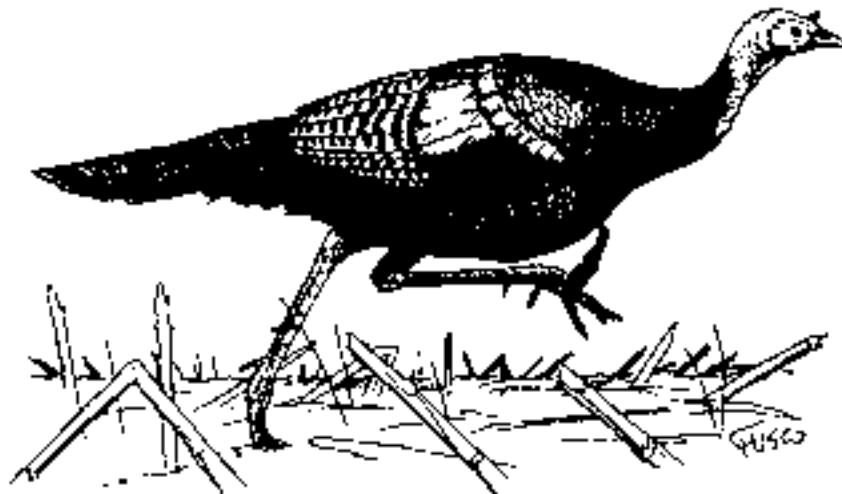
1. MDIFW should continue to provide unlimited spring hunting opportunity, as long as the turkey population can support it and spring hunt quality is maintained. A quality hunt means more than harvesting a bird; it also includes seeing, hearing, and working a bird without interference from others. Whether or not hunt quality is maintained is measured by the interference information collected with the Department's Spring Wild Turkey Hunter Questionnaire.
2. MDIFW should continue to evaluate population, harvest, and survey data to investigate providing additional hunting opportunity during the fall season, as long as the population is not negatively affected and spring hunt quality is maintained.
3. Once a major change is made to a season framework (increasing bag limits, providing additional weaponry opportunity), MDIFW should not make an additional change for a period of 3 years. This timeframe is intended to allow the Department to review and evaluate harvest and survey trend data to assess the effect of the change on the population or the quality of the hunt.
4. MDIFW should structure the spring wild turkey season as follows.
 - Maintain the current spring season opening (around May 1)
 - Season length - 5 weeks, no split seasons.
 - Daily closure – noon time.
5. MDIFW should structure the fall wild turkey season as follows.
 - Maintain the current (2009) fall season structure; only consider season changes after 2013.
 - Investigate the opportunity to expand the fall shotgun season beginning no earlier than 2013. If fall shotgun opportunity is expanded, MDIFW should review the metrics it uses for determining fall seasons.
6. MDIFW should investigate the use of crossbows beginning with the 2013 turkey seasons. [Using crossbows to hunt wild turkey would require legislation.]

7. MDIFW and the Maine Chapter NWTF should promote opportunities to attract more people to the sport of wild turkey hunting, especially among nonresidents. [Resident interest seems to have stabilized despite expanded seasons, greater areas open to hunting, increased bag limits, and reasonable permit fees.] [Efforts beyond current levels would require additional staff and funding.]

Recommendation Concerning Electronic Registration of Wild Turkeys

The consensus of the Working Group was not to proceed with electronic tagging for the following reasons:

- concerns about non-compliance and data reliability;
- apprehension about adding another layer of change and responsibility to the tagging stations in light of the big game registration fee increase passed in the last legislative session and the dissension it has caused¹; and
- concerns expressed by Warden Service about overburdening the Kennebec County Court system. If the electronic server is located in Augusta, all tagging violations would potentially have to go through the Kennebec County court system. [This will require Warden Service consultation with the Attorneys General Office and with district attorneys in Maine's 16 counties.]



¹ Registration fees for big game were increased from \$1 to \$5 with the additional \$4 earmarked to MDIFW to support two data entry positions.