

## WWG Meeting Summary Notes - April 1, 2026

**Chair – Shaun Oldenburger**

**Vice Chair – Luke Naylor**

**AFWA Staff – Dave Kustersky**

**Attendees – over 50 attendees including 12 states, 4 federal agencies and 6 NGO's**

### **US Fish & Wildlife Service Update (Will Meeks)**

- FWS acknowledged communication gaps with state and NGO partners and committed to improving trust and customer service under Director Nesvik's leadership.
- **NAWCA/NOFO:** The NOFO was released from OMB and expected out this week. Staggered grant deadlines: US standard grants (30-day window, early May deadline), Mexico (45-day window), Canada/US small grants (60-day window). Council staff meeting planned to ensure readiness for September MBCC meeting.
- **Hunting/Fishing on National Wildlife Refuges & Hatcheries:** Two-year window to open refuges and hatcheries to the fullest extent possible, aligning regulations with state standards. Roughly half of remaining openings expected to move through formal process within weeks. Partners encouraged to flag any misalignments.
- **Adaptive Harvest Management (AHM) Task Force:** After a slow start, the task force has turned a corner, developed means objectives, and is moving forward. Director Nesvik remains committed to the process. Tim McCoy (Nebraska Game & Parks) now serves as state co-chair alongside Jerome Ford, improving collaboration.
- **2026 Regulations Process:** Status assessment work for 2026 migratory bird hunting regs is complete; awaiting briefing with DOI Assistant Secretary. Proposed rule is with OIRA (Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs). A policy memo approach (three-year window) is being pursued to simplify the process, but currently only contemplates more restrictive changes — not more liberal ones. Public comment will be critical. Contingency options include a direct final rule or reverting to the 25-26 season framework if timelines aren't met.

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### **Canadian Wildlife Service Update (Vanessa Charlwood, Regional Director – Prairie Region)**

- New federal nature funding announced by the Prime Minister — a positive development after prior fee-based funding ended. \$3.8 B over 4 years.
- Budget pressures across departments; wildlife service relatively protected but expects a lean year.
- Waterfowl monitoring programs (Arctic goose banding, duck banding, HPAI surveillance) continuing as usual.

- Regulatory modernization underway in two packages, including emergency management tools, permitting updates, and fee increases.
  - Harvest regulatory year: considering new sandhill crane seasons in Quebec and Ontario (fall 2027 if approved); potential tundra swan and mourning duck seasons in Prairie Provinces and sandhill cranes in NWT/Nunavut (fall 2028 if approved).
  - HPAI positivity rate rose to nearly 29% this fiscal year, up from 13–15% in prior years.
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### **NAWMP Award Presentation (Dr. Mike Brasher)**

- National Bluewing Teal Award presented to **Greg Soulier**, recognizing his 37-year career in waterfowl conservation, including 18 years as science coordinator for the Upper Mississippi Great Lakes Joint Venture, nearly 100 publications, leadership in decision support tools, and establishment of the David R. Lukin Waterfowl & Wetland Graduate Student Fellowship through Ducks Unlimited.
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### **NAWMP 40th Anniversary / Communications Update (Joe Benedict)**

- Monday night celebration event kicked off the 40th anniversary, featuring a historical video and four speakers.
- Communication committee seeking ideas from partner organizations for events and social media celebrating NAWMP's anniversary.
- NAWMP.org redesign underway with DJ Case & Associates (also celebrating their 40th year). Goals include modernizing the site, creating a resource repository, and enabling partners to easily access and share consistent messaging.

### **NAWMP.org Redevelopment (John, DJ Case & Associates)**

- Currently in discovery/information architecture phase; targeting relaunch in May 2026.
  - Primary audience: federal, state, provincial, tribal agencies; joint ventures; conservation NGOs — not the general public.
  - Key goals: evolve from a static document archive to a living partnership hub; add a progress dashboard, partner contribution portal, multilingual content (English, French, Spanish), and a browsable version of the plan.
  - Input gathered from attendees on how they use NAWMP: as a foundation for NAWCA applications, step-down planning, strategic plans, academic use, and daily decision-making. Common theme — the plan is so embedded that partners sometimes take it for granted.
  - Working groups encouraged to contribute content reflecting their activities.
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### **Legislative & Budget Priorities (David Lind)**

- FY27 appropriations season underway; President's budget expected April 3rd.
  - FY26 NAWCA funded at \$49 million.
  - House Interior Appropriations testimony due April 24th; coalition letter being coordinated with Delta, DU, American Bird Conservancy, Audubon, and others.
  - Key funding requests: conservation/monitoring under OBM (~\$40M requested vs. ~\$25M current), permits (~\$13.5M vs. ~\$5M current), Duck Stamp Office budget doubling to ~\$1M.
  - Wetlands Access and Improvement Conservation Act passed and signed; PR interest reauthorized through 2033 after a brief lapse.
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### **Fall Flights Program (Andy Radeke, AFWA; Howie Singer, DU Canada; Stephen Carlyle, Manitoba Habitat Conservancy)**

- 33 states participated in Fall Flights in FY25/26; 15 states contributed at matching level, 5 reached goal, 7 reached the 50% milestone ahead of the 2026 target.
- DU Canada reported 1 million acres of cumulative perpetual protection secured, plus 140,000 acres conserved/restored in FY 25. State dollars leveraging nearly \$5.50 of on-the-ground conservation in Canada.
- Conservation work highlighted across BC, Prairie provinces, Ontario, Quebec, and Atlantic provinces.
- Prairie soil moisture and precipitation conditions looking reasonably good heading into spring.
- Manitoba Habitat Conservancy also celebrating its 40th anniversary; nearly 1,900 acres secured in 2025 with \$2.2M USD leveraged from ~\$500K in state investments.
- NAWCA delivery was briefly paused but is resuming; match ratios maintained through Delta partnership funding.

### **USGS Cooperative Fish & Wildlife Research Unit Update Presenter: (Lisa Webb, Regional Supervisor, USGS Cooperative Fish & Wildlife Research Unit Program)**

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#### **Overview of USGS Structure**

- USGS Ecosystem Mission Area has three components: Ecosystem Science Centres, Climate Adaptation Science Centres (added 2010–2011), and Cooperative Fish & Wildlife Research Units (founded 1932, now 90+ years old).
  - Broad migratory bird portfolio covering migration ecology, conservation genetics, habitat response, and structured decision making.
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**NAWMP-Themed Science Highlights (Past 5 Years)** *Lisa selected 6 studies from 150+ USGS publications over the past 5 years, organized around NAWMP themes of resilient waterfowl populations, sufficient habitat, and people.*

### **People:**

- **Hunter Preference Study** (Fort Collins Science Centre & Minnesota Co-op Unit, Dave Fulton): Waterfowl hunters grouped into 4 categories based on preferences for harvest, access, travel distance, birds seen, and competition levels. Key finding: hunters experience diminishing returns after their first harvested bird. Hunter satisfaction tied to both waterfowl and wetland availability, reinforcing the importance of wetland conservation at local and continental scales.
- **Optimal Duck Season Study** (New York Co-op Unit, Angela Fuller): Developed a structured decision-making framework with NY Dept. of Environmental Conservation to better identify hunter values rather than just preferred dates. Integrated SDM with spatial-temporal duck abundance models. Result: optimal season dates now being implemented across four NY zones on a five-year trial basis.

### **Habitat:**

- **Gulf Coast Sea Level Rise Study** (Kansas Co-op Unit, Dave Focus & partners): Modeled mottled duck habitat under projected sea level rise and urbanization over the next 90 years. Findings: coastal marsh habitat quantity and quality both expected to decline; inland marsh migration will be constrained by urban development. Study identified priority conservation areas most likely to maintain high-quality mottled duck habitat.
- **Cover Crop Nesting Study** (South Dakota Co-op Unit): Evaluated fall-seeded cover crops vs. perennial cover for grassland-nesting waterfowl in the Prairie Pothole Region. Birds nested in cover crop fields but at lower rates and with lower nest success, with 70% of nests vulnerable to planting operations. Recommendation: adjusting planting schedules could meaningfully improve habitat suitability.

### **Populations:**

- **Great Lakes Mallard Dynamics** (Louisiana Co-op Unit & partners including Upper Mississippi/Great Lakes Joint Venture, Wisconsin/Michigan/Minnesota DNRs): Non-hunting mortality — not harvest — is the primary driver of long-term population decline. Productivity has decreased over 40 years, linked to CRP grassland loss and urbanization. Adult and juvenile survival has declined since 2000. Key implication: improving nesting habitat quality and reducing non-hunting mortality offer the greatest potential for population recovery.
- **Pacific Flyway Spectacled Eider Study** (Alaska Science Centre & partners including FWS): Used 9 datasets and 50 years of data to build integrated population models for two subpopulations (Wrangell Island and Western Arctic). Per capita productivity and immigration — not harvest — were the primary drivers of short-term population change. Snowmelt timing was the key environmental driver of productivity. Implications point

toward incorporating climate-driven variation and density-dependent processes into future management strategies.

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### **Workforce & Training**

- NAWMP's 2018 update emphasizes need for professionals trained in both biological and social sciences to address increasingly complex conservation challenges.
  - Co-op Units are tasked with graduate education and training of natural resource professionals.
  - In 2025: 700+ students affiliated with the program nationally, including 300+ master's students, nearly 200 PhD students, and 91 postdocs.
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### **CO-OP Unit Staffing Status**

- Currently at approximately 30% vacancy rate across units.
- 81 person-units currently operational.
- Science Centres facing similar vacancy rates.
- Concern noted that in small units (e.g., 3-person units), a 30% vacancy has an outsized impact.