Waterfowl Working Group Meeting Minutes

Sep 17, 2026

Attendance and housekeeping

- Shaun Oldenburger (Texas Parks and Wildlife Department) chaired the meeting as Waterfowl Working Group chair, with the vice chair Luke Naylor. Attendees represented US and Canadian state/provincial and federal wildlife agencies, Joint Ventures, and NGOs including Ducks Unlimited and Ducks Unlimited Canada; Mitch Hartley and other USFWS staff joined by phone.
- Materials distributed at the meeting included the 2026 Canadian NAWMP "Habitat Matters" report from Canadian partners, a Fall Flights annual report noting states surpassed $6 million in contributions to Canada for waterfowl and bird habitat for the first time, and a postcard/QR code promoting Mike Anderson's book on the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.

Legislative and budget priorities (Corey)

- The Farm Bill markup passed the Senate Ag committee on a 12–11 party-line vote; reaching 60 votes on the floor is expected to be difficult, though alternative legislative paths are being watched.
- A Habitat Enhancement Now Act, introduced in July 2025, would establish grant programs of up to $35 million each supporting waterfowl population habitat, breeding-habitat projects, nesting cover, nesting structures and pond restoration, including work in California. The bill has been referred to the House Natural Resources Committee with no further action to date.
- The Service released a Request for Information over the summer on Prairie Pothole Region wetland protections. An AFWA comment letter was submitted, urging the Service to consult with states and recognizing the conservation investment states have already made in the region. The comment period drew roughly 350,000 comments; the Service has indicated no further action at this time, though some members of Congress remain interested and further conversation is expected. Several states and agencies, including Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, also submitted their own comment letters.

What's new — US Fish and Wildlife Service (Matt Hogan)

- Leadership change: Jerome Ford, Assistant Director for Migratory Birds for roughly 15 years, is transitioning to lead the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, WV, with a transition window through late October/early November. No successor or timeline for filling the Assistant Director role has been announced; the position will run on an acting basis in the interim.
- The Service has shifted season-setting from a formal rulemaking process to a memo-based approach, letting states get regulatory frameworks earlier (targeting March instead of the prior close-to-September-1 deadline) without a full rulemaking cycle. This cycle, the Service voluntarily took public comment even though not required, then finalized the rule in late August. The new approach was also adjusted, after state feedback, to allow both more liberal

and more restrictive regulatory packages rather than one direction only. A related but separate change is underway to a new eagle permitting process that decentralizes some decisions to states, modeled on an approach used for other permit types.

What's new — Canadian Wildlife Service (Vanessa Charlwood)

- A new Assistant Deputy Minister started at the end of August. CWS work now also sits under Canada's new nature strategy, announced by the Prime Minister on March 31, 2026, with three pillars: (1) 30% by 2030 protected-area targets, (2) balancing infrastructure development ("Building Canada") with nature, and (3) valuing nature and mobilizing capital investment in conservation.
- Migratory bird regulation modernization continues on two tracks: a first package on permit-type flexibility is on track for consultation in fall 2027; a second, broader package on incidental take will take longer to develop. Increased or new permit fees are also under consideration.
- Hunting regulation changes for the coming season: Quebec and Ontario reduced the special snow goose conservation season and increased Canada goose bag limits given shared population pressure; Alberta made minor zone boundary adjustments. Under consideration but not yet approved: a Sandhill Crane hunt in the Northwest Territories, and mourning dove and tundra swan hunts in the Prairie provinces (potentially starting fall 2028), pending review of public comments and provincial input.
- Permitting is moving to a new digital regulatory services platform using GCKey login; some American hunters have had trouble using it, which CWS is now aware of and working on. CWS is also considering integrating the national harvest survey into the same platform, phasing out physical permits, and no longer printing hunting summaries.
- Most monitoring programs continued as normal in 2026 despite some budget-driven reductions early in the year; one Arctic breeding survey lost two sites due to limited helicopter and pilot availability (pilots were occupied with wildfire response). Avian influenza surveillance and outbreak response continue. Canada is moving more historical and telemetry data onto public open-data platforms, including a new initiative called "Quantifying Waterfowl Across Canada." Shaun separately highlighted the Arctic goose survey as an especially valuable, underused public dataset on Arctic-breeding birds.

NAWCA: looking to the future (Dave Kostersky, Ron Leathers, Matt Hogan, Mitch Hartley)

- **Background (Dave Kostersky).** NAWCA was signed in 1989, with funding beginning in 1991; it has been reauthorized seven times and amended five. Appropriations have fluctuated over 35 years but have held near $50 million in recent years. Pittman-Robertson interest funding hit roughly $100 million in 2026, the highest ever — making 2026 the best-funded year in the program's history. US program eligibility has stayed relatively stable since 1991. Canadian program eligibility has narrowed sharply: stewardship, management, science, and communications activities have largely been removed as eligible costs (with a small amount of management activity still allowed). Mexico's program has seen limited eligibility changes. Across all three countries, new solicitor opinions have tightened how eligibility is interpreted, disqualifying some costs that used to be allowed.

- Administratively, federal grant regulation changes and DOI review processes have significantly slowed the program: Notices of Funding Opportunity, awards, and modifications are now taking six months or longer, and some OMB-related steps (SAM registrations, etc.) have added six to eight months in backlogs. NAWCA Council and the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission (MBCC) remain functional and engaged, but Council turnover — tied to state director tenure averaging under three years — means new member appointments can take up to a year, which also disrupts staff continuity. MBCC meetings have become almost entirely focused on NAWCA proposals since little new land is being added to the refuge system.
- **Council perspective (Ron Leathers, NAWCA Council member and CEO of Pheasants Forever).** At the Council's annual retreat in Fargo about a month ago, a council member asked why it has become so hard to get a project through NAWCA. The resulting discussion pointed to eligibility and administrative barriers that have limited participation, especially among smaller and newer partners, narrowing the program's reach. The Council concluded it isn't the right venue to fully solve this — it has limited bandwidth and doesn't have visibility into why potential partners who don't currently use the program are staying away — so a broader community conversation is needed.
- **USFWS perspective (Matt Hogan).** As a regional director sitting on several Joint Venture boards, Matt described continued tension between full federal compliance and keeping the program usable on the ground. Joint Ventures have been meeting with Division of Bird Habitat Conservation (DBHC) staff to align proposals with current guidance, including a summer meeting and site visit to the Rainwater Basin in Nebraska; another such meeting is planned. He noted the shared goal of never letting demand for NAWCA funding fall below the money available, since that would invite Congressional scrutiny of the program's value.
- **Mitch Hartley (USFWS, joining remotely).** The USFWS Director has stood up roughly 62 teams to act on priorities raised by state associations (AFWA, NEAFWA, WAFWA, etc.); one is a NAWCA-focused team that includes Dave Kostersky, Jeb Williams, Kevin Reynolds, Samantha Brooks, and Justin Markey, meeting every other week. The team's recommendations to the Director are due in 2028, and today's discussion — along with the Fargo Council retreat — is meant to gather broader community input to feed those recommendations.
- Mitch also noted improvements that have been overshadowed by other slowdowns: a 2024 Council vote decoupled NAWCA award timing from the federal budget cycle (previously awards waited roughly nine months on average for a budget to pass); now in effect, this should speed awards by about five months on average, though the gain has been masked by new DOI review requirements and a financial-assistance-program consolidation that slowed processing this year. A National Compliance Coordinator hired about two years ago has been building programmatic ESA Section 7 biological opinions (one completed for the Western region, with the Great Lakes region next) and working toward programmatic Section 106/NHPA reviews with State Historic Preservation Offices — expected to speed compliance over time, even though the first programmatic opinion alone took over a year to put in place. USFWS is also pursuing an exemption from a DOI review process added under the prior administration.
- **Open discussion.** Howie Singer (Canada/DUC) described the loss of eligibility for habitat management and stewardship funding (ineligible since roughly 2026) as a major hit to ongoing Canadian conservation work, particularly in the Boreal Forest, where there are now essentially no NAWCA funding opportunities; evaluation and science funding for Joint Ventures is also no

longer eligible in Canada. He urged the group to weigh these Canadian eligibility gaps given how much of the continent's breeding waterfowl population depends on Canadian habitat.

- Shaun Oldenburger described removing NAWCA as a funding source for Texas's long-running Gulf Coast private-lands wetlands program because of persistent difficulty with "to-be-determined" (TBD) tracts in private-land deals, and urged the group to spend significant time resolving the TBD tract issue, since most future waterfowl conservation gains depend on private-lands work and landowner turnover is accelerating.
- Ron Leathers proposed forming a smaller working group of subject-matter representatives (agencies, Joint Ventures) rather than relying on the full Council, to dig into these issues in depth, and suggested convening in person around mid-2027 given how close the 2028 recommendation deadline is. The group broadly agreed a smaller, cross-cutting group — grantees, state agencies, Joint Venture staff — should hold workshops or webinars to surface issues and paths to solutions, rather than standing up another large formal council; the exact name (task force, working group, etc.) will be checked with agency directors. Shaun recommended also engaging the state Flyway Councils, which are a more structured existing forum — Central Flyway Council has already had a productive NAWCA discussion. Dave Kostersky will coordinate with Jeb Williams and others to design an engagement process (a solicitation of interest and a workshop series, virtual or in person), fully integrated with USFWS rather than run as a separate effort.
- Other input: a reminder to build in the full US/Canada/Mexico context rather than a US-centric view; a suggestion (Ross Melinchuk) suggested organizing engagement regionally, building on existing regional and Flyway Council meetings, rather than one or two large national convenings; and a reminder (Luke Naylor) to actively bring in smaller and newer partners rather than just the organizations that already know how to navigate the program — Canada currently has only about four active grantees, with one new applicant this year.
- **Action:** the group agreed to formally ask the Bird Conservation Committee (meeting later that afternoon) to support forming a group focused on modernizing NAWCA eligibility, administration, and the private-lands/TBD tract issue, framed as a broader bird-conservation community priority rather than a Waterfowl Working Group-only item.

National Flyway Council and flyway updates (Shaun Oldenburger)

- The National Flyway Council has little to report; it typically meets in spring and recent discussion has been mostly non-waterfowl business. Flyway Council meeting timing has shifted now that harvest strategy information is available to states earlier: Pacific Flyway Council was meeting the same week as this meeting, Central Flyway Council met the week before, and Mississippi and Atlantic Flyway Councils meet after this meeting. Central Flyway Council's discussion centered mainly on the Harvest Management Task Force (below), along with NAWCA, private-lands programs, and federal funding processes. Atlantic and other flyway reps in the room had little additional to add at this time.

Adaptive Harvest Management (AHM) Task Force update (Shaun)

- The AHM Task Force was formed in 2025, co-chaired by Tim McCoy (representing the states, a director in Nebraska) and Jerome Ford (USFWS, whose role is in transition — see USFWS update

above). Members include Will Meeks (USFWS) and two representatives from each of the four flyways, including Shaun (Central) and Luke (Mississippi). A separate Harvest Management Working Group, staffed heavily by USFWS Division of Migratory Bird Management technical staff (including Scott Boomer), provides the underlying modeling and analysis; the Task Force handles policy decisions.

- AHM has been in place since 1995 and has already evolved significantly: the Atlantic Flyway decoupled from the mid-continent mallard model years ago in favor of a multi-stock model built around goldeneye, ring-necked duck, wood duck, and green-winged teal; the Pacific Flyway uses a Western mallard model tied to breeding populations in California, Oregon, and Alaska; the Central and Mississippi Flyways remain tied to the mid-continent mallard model.
- The Task Force's mission is to develop a revised, science-based approach to duck harvest management. The group agreed on three fundamental objectives: sustainable duck populations, maintaining the hunting tradition, and maximizing efficiency in monitoring, analysis, and decision-making — notably, "maximize harvest" is not one of them, a deliberate shift from earlier eras. Season length, bag limits, and every other regulatory lever are on the table.
- The core idea under development is moving away from managing many individual species-specific harvest strategies toward a **guild approach**: grouping species into "high harvest capacity" and "low harvest capacity" guilds (recognized as a continuum rather than a strict line) and using representative species rather than modeling every species individually, similar to aggregate-species approaches used in coastal fisheries management. Alternatives evaluated so far include status quo, a guild approach with optimized decisions across both guilds, a guild approach with reduced monitoring, and guild approaches allowing multi-year regulatory decisions.
- Open questions the Task Force is putting to the flyways: whether guild composition should differ by flyway (widely expected that it will), which species belong in which guild and on what biological criteria, and how an aggregate bag limit could be structured while still protecting low-harvest-capacity species. One illustrative example discussed — explicitly not a proposal — was an aggregate limit (e.g., 5 birds) with species sub-caps (e.g., no more than 3 each of mallard, wood duck, pintail, redhead, canvasback, and scaup). Simplifying the current "liberal/moderate/restrictive/closed" terminology is also under discussion, along with how to communicate any changes clearly to hunters; this will likely need dedicated communications support.
- **Timeline:** August 2026 — establish model/management guilds and conceptual models via flyway council discussions (underway now). November 2026–January 2027 — build and fit high/low capacity population models. February–March 2027 — develop control models with flyway input and regulatory alternatives. Spring 2027 — run trade-off analysis of competing management portfolios; formal trade-off analysis results expected. April–June 2027 — synthesize results. The group expects a progress update in March 2027. Task Force and Working Group meetings are now monthly (up from roughly annual). This is described as the largest change to US duck harvest management since 1995; realistic implementation is likely several years out, optimistically around 2029–2030.

Harvest Information Program (HIP) update (Shaun)

- The HIP working group (separate from the AHM Task Force) met the day before. It approved a set of best management practices for states' HIP data collection and vendor processes, developed jointly with USFWS staff (credit to Stephen Chandler and Tom Cooper). The BMPs are moving through BCC approval this same day and will then go to the Directors for final approval. The goal is more consistent harvest survey data and fewer errors in what states submit to USFWS. Shaun offered to share the BMP document with anyone interested.

NAWMP communications and website update (Joe Benedict)

- After about nine months of work led by Dean Smith (retiring) with input from Joint Ventures and communications partners, the redesigned NAWMP.org website is live in English, French, and Spanish (Spanish via AI-assisted translation). The new site is organized around the Plan itself (goals, population objectives, integration), a Resources section with 40 years of implementation history and past webinars, and a Partnership section linking to Joint Ventures. One highlighted statistic: NAWMP delivery through Joint Ventures has involved over 7,000 partners since the Plan's inception — a scale of partnership that the NFHP for fish conservation has explicitly modeled itself on.
- Dean Smith is retiring; his communications contract runs through the end of calendar year 2026. Dave Kostersky will become the new chair of the NAWMP Communications Committee and Joe will continue to liaise between the Plan Committee and communications committee going forward. The site's maintenance contract, with vendor DJ Case & Associates, expires September 30, 2026, with no successor funding secured yet; DJ Case has provided a modest cost estimate to continue, and the group is looking to partners to help fund ongoing maintenance.
- A related project, ten short videos are being created by the Communications Committee, is in production through the end of the calendar year, led by video specialist Tanner Banas (Manitoba Habitat Conservancy) with script support from Fuse Consulting; the videos will be distributed to partners for promotional use. The work is framed as delivering on the NAWMP Communications Plan's goal of restoring the Plan's visibility and momentum, which in turn is seen as supporting a healthy NAWCA program.

Action items and next steps

- Send a formal request to the Bird Conservation Committee (meeting that afternoon) asking it to support forming a group focused on modernizing NAWCA — eligibility, administration, and private-lands/TBD tract issues — framed as a broader bird-conservation-community priority, not just a Waterfowl Working Group item.
- Dave Kostersky to coordinate with Jeb Williams and others to design an engagement process for that NAWCA conversation (a solicitation of interest plus workshops, virtual or in person), fully integrated with USFWS; final name/terminology for the effort to be checked with agency directors.
- Favor a regional approach to that engagement, building on Flyway Council and other existing regional meetings, and make sure US, Canadian, and Mexican partners are all represented.
- AHM Task Force: expect a progress update to this group in March 2027; formal trade-off analysis targeted for spring 2027.

- HIP best management practices are moving through BCC approval this week, headed next to the USFWS Directors for final sign-off.
- NAWMP website: partners are asked to help identify funding to cover the site's maintenance contract, which lapses September 30, 2026.
- For the next Waterfowl Working Group meeting, send topic suggestions to Shaun, Dave Kostersky, or Luke ahead of time to keep the session interactive rather than one-way reporting.