

AFGA Proposed Approach to Waterfowl Hunting and Outfitting In Alberta

December 2015 Update

Based on input from our membership, the AFGA proposes that changes to Waterfowl Outfitting are necessary to ensure that resident hunting opportunities for waterfowl are not negatively impacted. The AFGA expects that changes to Alberta's current waterfowl outfitting system will be necessary to ensure that resident hunting opportunities for waterfowl are maintained or increased in all Wildlife Management Units (WMU). The objectives of this AFGA document are:

- (a) To identify the issues/concerns associated with waterfowl hunting and waterfowl outfitting in Alberta, and
- (b) To identify possible solutions to those issues/concerns.

History

Prior to approximately 1990, the majority of waterfowl hunting in Alberta was conducted by resident hunters and some unguided non-resident/nonresident aliens (NR / NRA). Resident waterfowl hunters had few problems accessing farm fields or water bodies on which to hunt, and were harvesting the majority of waterfowl taken.

In the mid-1990s, both resident and non-resident waterfowl outfitters and guides started to appear in greater and greater numbers; access and hunting opportunities started to become a challenge for resident hunters. At the present time it is nearly impossible for resident hunters, in some WMUs, to get access to hunt this public resource because exclusive access has been granted to outfitters by some landowners. Various reasons for this exist; some legitimate and some questionable, if not illegal.

The AFGA recognized this problem and in February of 2003 passed Wildlife Resolution W-18-2003 at the annual conference: "BE IT RESOLVED THAT ASRD look at the possibility of utilizing outfitting allotments to reduce the Non-Resident Aliens Harvest of Waterfowl to less than 10% of the total harvest waterfowl in Alberta; CARRIED."

Ongoing Issues

1. Access to Lands

The problem is access to private properties where waterfowl are present. It has been noted by many residents that numerous landowners who once welcomed them onto their properties have now restricted access. These properties continue to be hunted, but not by residents.

2. Illegal Activity

There are numerous complaints of guided NR / NRA hunters shooting limits of waterfowl both morning and evening. Also of concern to both residents and the legitimate outfitting industry is the presence of non-registered NRA guides and outfitters operating within the province. These issues appear to be ongoing and unresolved.

3. Waterfowl Outfitter Allocation Methods

The methods of assigning waterfowl outfitting allocations are of concern to resident hunters. Particularly, concerns arise with regard to assigning lands or areas that establish tenure and lease-like rights. Such rights may increase conflicts for land access.

The density of NR/NRA and resident hunters in the same WMU is of concern. In some areas, the density of guided (and unguided) non-resident hunters has reached a point that residents are unable to access lands to hunt. The carrying capacity needs to be identified and addressed.

Assigning outfitter allocations on the basis of resident hunter densities may require some historic information as the current number of waterfowl hunters, in some WMUs, is in decline.

Proposed Alternatives

1. A NRA tagging system to stop over-limiting.

Each non-resident alien license would come with a limit for each goose class (dark and light) and duck tags. These tags would be affixed to the wing in a similar manner that a tag is affixed to a big game animal. The tag would remain affixed until the bird was exported. When they are out of tags they are finished. This should encourage hunters to enjoy the hunt, taking the “body count” out of the picture. “Shooting by guides” will need to be expressly prohibited to ensure these extra birds are not added in. This will help ensure that when daily limits are filled in the morning an evening shoots will not be required.

An NR/NRA tagging system will also help address NRA guiding/outfitting, as well as over-limiting by unguided NR/NRA hunters who hunt for weeks/months in Alberta. This would discourage the practice of giving away (or illegally dumping) birds as doing so would not free-up another limit of birds.

One complication to a NR/NRA tagging system would be the current bag limit(s) for light geese. A separate NR/NRA limit will have to be established.

Providing Enforcement with this additional tool to ensure that current bag limits are respected by NR/NRA hunters should have no negative economic impact.

2. Season Closures

The waterfowl hunting seasons would run as currently set (Sept.1-Dec.16 or Sept.8-Dec.23). It would be open to resident hunters for the entire time however it could be closed to non-resident aliens after a certain date. Suggestions Follow:

In the Peace Country the geese usually leave the first big storm in late October. AFGA suggests the NRA season run Sept.1-Sept.30.

In Central Alberta the geese also leave the first big storm in late October. AFGA suggests the NRA season run Sept.15-Oct.15.

In southern Alberta hunter numbers do not currently appear to be an issue. AFGA suggests a Sept.15-Nov.30 NRA season.

We must be careful that we don't force the northern outfitter down south bringing the problems with them. The idea of only hunting in four attached WMU would prevent this however they could get around it by having a second company.

3. Allocations

If we are generous with allocations but tight with the season we will force a lot of hunters into a tight area.

Currently allocations are based on WMUs; with a maximum of 4 waterfowl allocations (Outfitters) per WMU, with an unlimited number of guides per outfitter. It remains unclear if the restriction of 4 allocations per WMU is in place and being enforced, and whether restricting the number to 4 is enough; in WMUs with high numbers of hunters and limited hunting areas, the number of outfitters may need to be reduced to 2.

While restricting the number of outfitters per WMU may bring the number of waterfowl outfitters down a small percentage, without restricting the total number of guides it is unlikely to make a difference in the total number of guided NRA's.

Three options exist to address the total number of NRA hunters. In addition to improving access for resident hunters, reducing the number of NRA hunters could also benefit the legitimate outfitting industry, as with limited supply it should be possible for outfitters to increase prices and have a viable business with fewer shoots.

1. Restrict the total number of NRA licenses. This could either take the form of requiring all NRA's to contract with a registered outfitter, with each outfitter allowed a limited number of migratory game bird licenses; or a limited portion of the total NRA licenses available could be allocated for over-the-counter sale. This would work much the same as big game allocations and may work quite well in controlling the number of hunts that would be allowed (this would likely require a change in legislation, as currently there are no limits to the number of NR / NRA hunters permitted to hunt in AB).

2. Restrict the number of guides that would be allowed to operate under each outfitter. AFGA suggests a maximum of 2 guides per outfitter in WMUs where conflict is ongoing. In other areas a limit of 4 guides per outfitter would help reduce the total number of fields required for NR/NRA guided hunters.
3. Restrict the number of hunter days per outfitter.

4. Non-Resident Alien Guides and Outfitters

Unregistered/illegal out of province outfitters setting up hunts, guiding and tying up fields here in Alberta in the fall must be stopped. This activity has a negative effect on not only resident hunting access, but also on the legitimate outfitting industry. NRA Outfitting is already prohibited by law; appropriate enforcement actions are required.

5. Enforcement

The AFGA continues to voice concern over the current state of funding for ESRD and Fish and Wildlife enforcement. Alberta's current policies that appear to rely on the "self-policing" of resource users are unsustainable. Adequate funding must be returned to our Environment and Resource managers, as well as enforcement.

Summary:

There has been growing pressure on resident hunters' ability to enjoy waterfowl hunting due to the usurping of access by waterfowl outfitters in some areas. This was addressed in 2003, but the steps that were taken have not resolved the issue from the perspective of many potential resident waterfowl hunters. The current situation, which is that over 30% of Alberta waterfowl harvest is by Non Resident Alien hunters, is unsustainable and contrary to policy, whereby resident recreational hunters have a higher priority for allocation of harvestable wildlife resources than commercial users. Steps must be taken to increase resident opportunity, as recruitment of newcomers to water fowling is currently difficult due to the lack of access and quality experiences.