



Open-lake duck hunt discussed 10.28.2010

By Josh Smith

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More than two-dozen people gathered in the Fort Atkinson High School library Wednesday to learn more about the possibility of allowing open-water duck hunting on large Wisconsin Lakes, including Lake Kosh-konong.

This was not a public hearing, as there is no state Department of Natural Resources-proposed rule to allow open-water duck hunting on Lake Koshkonong. Rather, it was a citizen-generated proposal currently focusing on 13 lakes in Wisconsin that are larger than 1,000 acres. These lakes were recommended by a special committee of duck hunters, DNR biologists, conservation wardens and representatives of lake associations.

The committee has proposed a 1,000-foot buffer for open-water duck hunting, meaning it would have to occur at least that distance from shore.

Wednesday's meeting offered an opportunity for residents of the Lake Koshkonong area to learn more about the proposal, share details about Lake Koshkonong with DNR representatives and voice opinions about open-water duck hunting.

Kent Van Horn, DNR migratory game bird ecologist, and Todd Schaller, law enforcement representative to the DNR Migratory Committee, outlined why open-water duck hunting is being considered for Lake Koshkonong.

They explained that Wisconsin has about 80,000 duck hunters. Current regulations allow them to hunt from a boat or a blind in most marshes, from lake edges where there is emergent vegetation to conceal them or from areas where they can stand on the lake bottom. These marsh and near-shore waterfowlers primarily harvest "puddle ducks" such as mallards, wood ducks and blue-winged and green-winged teal.

Most lake residents do not notice these hunters, they said, and there is little conflict.

However, other ducks migrate through Wisconsin, including "diving ducks" such as canvasback, redhead and lesser scaup. There is a small number of hunters in Wisconsin that target these species by hunting from "layout" boats, or other methods, in areas where open-water hunting is allowed. Layout boats ride low on the water - with the hunter in a partially reclined position - so that hunter and boat present a low and non-threatening profile.

Van Horn estimated that fewer than 10 percent of Wisconsin waterfowl hunters use this technique, generally later in the duck season, in November, when most diving ducks arrive.

"My expectation would be, when you offer something new, there will be a bunch of interest in the first couple of years," Van Horn said, adding that eventually, only passionate open-water hunters would remain.

Open-water duck hunting currently is limited to the Great Lakes, Lake Winnebago, Green Lake, Petenwell Flowage and some areas of the Mississippi River.

Janesville resident Don Bush, Jefferson County's fisheries biologist with the DNR, said he has participated in open-water hunting on Lake Michigan in the Sheboygan area for more than 20 years. He has kept detailed data since 1987, noting that he has harvested 2,586 birds or an average of two ducks per hunter per day.

"It's not a big killing sport like a lot of people might think," Bush said.

"It's very gear intensive," Bush added, noting a one-man boat costs approximately \$1,400. "Putting out a two-man boat requires at least four people, probably a 150 decoys, a chase boat, anchors and weights and ropes and everything else. We have the equipment because we've built it up over 20 years."

Bush said he was not taking a strong stance one way or another, but would like to see the issue make it to a public hearing or vote.

Ryan Ellifson, DNR warden for Jefferson County, agreed that it takes a lot of equipment to participate in open-water hunting, so it would be unlikely area residents would see a large volume of hunters on the lake.

"I think Don brings up a very good point: This isn't something someone is just going to be able to jump into," Ellifson said. "The people who are going to take this up are going to have to invest an awful lot of money."

"I know we are nervous about it and we don't want conflict ... but it is a different opportunity for some people to try a different kind of hunting," he continued. "I don't think we're going to get a big rush or influx of people."

The idea to expand open-water hunting has been moving through regular, long-established channels. In 2006, a citizen submitted the idea during the annual spring rule hearings and Conservation Congress

county meetings that occur simultaneously in each of Wisconsin's 72 counties. In 2007, the Conservation Congress asked people attending the hearings whether an ad hoc committee should be created to study the proposal, and the question received a positive vote in every county.

The Natural Resources Board then directed the Conservation Congress and the DNR to form a broad-based group to study the proposal.

The state's fiscal crisis and resulting staff reductions caused delays, but the committee was formed in late 2008 with more than 20 members and completed its work in 2009. The committee developed criteria and evaluated 130 of the largest lakes in Wisconsin. From these it recommended 13, including Lake Koshkonong, for further consideration.

The other 12 water bodies being considered are lakes Poygan, Butte des Morts, Wisconsin and Wisconsin, along with Beaver Dam, Castle Rock, Shawano, Puckaway, Trout, Fence, North Twin and Grindstone lakes. Lake Koshkonong is the third largest lake among those being considered at 10,595 acres. Koshkonong is also located the furthest south among the 13 lakes.

Because of its southern location, one citizen at Tuesday's meeting voiced concerns about out-of-state hunters, especially from Illinois, coming to Lake Koshkonong to open-water hunt.

While there would be no way to prevent this, it was noted, Illinois allows open-water duck hunting on its lakes, so an influx of hunters was not likely to be a potential issue.

Another Lake Koshkonong resident added his concern about putting pressure on species of ducks and disturbing non-targeted birds that migrate to the lake.

"We're putting additional pressure on species that doesn't need any more pressure. I think it's a bad idea to begin with," he said. "There's a lot of people here, who aren't duck hunters, who do appreciate seeing resting species and migratory birds of some kind on the lake."

Van Horn said there are several different species of ducks that would be targeted with open-water hunting. He said some populations are declining while others are doing quite well.

"Depending on the diving-duck species, some are up and some are down," Van Horn said.

Van Horn asked what other recreational events take place on Lake Koshkonong. Residents said many people fish, boat and kite sail on Lake Koshkonong, but they noted that the traffic declines significantly in late October when open-water duck hunting takes place.

"I don't know there is enough to close off the entire lake to another form of recreation," Ellifson said. "There's always going to be some kind of boat traffic on the lake."

"Where open-water duck hunting exists now, there is fall fishing, there are other activities and everyone gets along fine," Van Horn added.

Another resident asked how the 1,000-foot barrier would be enforced. Schaller said in his experience on Lake Winnebago is that hunters use global-positioning system (GPS) and other range-finding technology to make sure they are the appropriate distance from shore. He said hunters normally err on the side of caution and travel further than 1,000 feet.

"It really comes down to ethics and responsibility on both people's part," he said.

Tuesday's meeting was for information-gathering purposes only. Van Horn will report back to his committee with the information he gathered for more analysis.

"It will take a little work to take care of these issues," Van Horn said.

If a rule proposal is drafted, a public hearing would be held for people to vote on it.

A proposal is not likely before spring of 2012.