

Global warming endangers waterfowl, group warns

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Global warming could kill the sport of duck hunting forever.

That is the message from a recent study conducted by the National Wildlife Federation, along with help from members of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation. The study lists plenty of reasons for waterfowl hunters to be concerned for their sport because of the effects of global warming.

"The point the report makes is simple," said NWF's Land Tawney of Missoula, Mont. "If there's no water, there will be no wetlands, no ducks and no hunting."

Tawney, the NWF regional representative for the Dakotas, Montana and Idaho, recently visited South Dakota near the Brookings area to join in on a study on the effects of global warming on the Prairie Pothole Region. The PPR encompasses the Dakotas and is where approximately 80 percent of the ducks in North America are produced annually.

What the study found is alarming. Working on the study along with Tawney were SDWF members Chris Hesla of Pierre and Jeff Albrecht of Brookings, state waterfowl biologist Spencer Vaa of Brookings and South Dakota State professor Carter Johnson.

"Global warming is already becoming a problem in the Prairie Pothole Region, as well as across the globe," Tawney said. "If something isn't done about it and we don't start taking measures, up to 91 percent of the wetlands could be lost in the Prairie Pothole Region by 2080 due to global warming - from evaporation due to higher temperatures. Up to 69 percent of the ducks could be lost."

The findings of the study were compiled in a report prepared by NWF global warming specialist Patty Glick called *The Waterfowler's Guide to Global Warming*. The report points out that the extensive burning of coal, oil and natural gas has released excessive quantities of carbon dioxide and other gases into the atmosphere. The released gases act like a blanket, trapping heat that would otherwise escape through the atmosphere and causing the earth's average surface temperature to rise. The use of such fuels has grown enormously in the past 200 years, and as a result the carbon dioxide concentration in the earth's atmosphere has risen by more than 30 percent and is the highest it's been in the past 420,000 years.

The potential consequences of global warming to waterfowl are significant because of the strong relationship between the birds and water conditions. If precipitation patterns in parts of the PPR continue to remain like what they have been the past few years, those areas could take a big hit by dry conditions in the not so distant future, which would negatively impact waterfowl nesting success in the region.

In most North American flyways, migration patterns and habits have already started to reflect some change because of recent warmer weather patterns. Snow geese, along with a large percentage of Canada's duck population, have delayed their traditional migration periods in the Central Flyway by as much as a month or more in some areas the past few years because of warm temperatures through September and October north of the border. If global warming continues at the rate it's occurring, the report theorizes about the possibility of a time where waterfowl populations may cut their migrations short because they will no longer need to travel as far south as they traditionally have in the past to reach open water.

Fortunately, there is still time to act. The report gives three recommendations: enhance current waterfowl and habitat conservation efforts; incorporate global warming and associated climate change into long-term resource management and planning; and curb global warming pollution.

"There is no doubt in my mind that global warming is happening," Vaa said. "But global warming is such a long-term thing, it's really hard to make any predictions at this point as to what is going to happen. I don't know if anybody really can. With global warming, we're talking noticeable change in the very distant future. Right now I'm more concerned with what's happening with the Farm Bill.

"A lot of farmers are looking to cut their CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) contracts and go back to farming the land. If we lose a majority of those 1.4 million acres of CRP we have in South Dakota by 2007, that will have an immediate impact on not only waterfowl, but all wildlife. But without a doubt, we need to start looking closer at conservation measures which address global warming."

For more on the effects of global warming on North American waterfowl populations and what can be done to prevent further damage, go to www.nwf.org.

The National Wildlife Foundation contributed to this article.