

Is Hunting Waterfowl in Flooded Corn Fair Chase?

David Hart - February 27, 2019



Photo Credit: Charles Laughton

A bill introduced in the Idaho legislature would have banned flooding corn and other crops for the purpose of hunting waterfowl. House Bill 528, introduced by Representative Mike Moyle, never made it out of the Natural Resources Committee, but it reignited a simmering debate among waterfowler: Is planting and then flooding corn for the purpose of attracting ducks and geese unfair?

It's not only unfair, says Louisiana hunter Josh Goins, it is little more than legalized baiting. The 38-year-old DeQuincy resident was stunned when he witnessed acre upon acre of flooded corn after traveling to Missouri and North Dakota to work a few years ago.

"I thought, there's no way this is legal. It's no different than mowing it and then hunting over it. Manipulation is manipulation, whether you mow it or flood it," says Goins, executive director of Flyway Federation of Louisiana. "Look up the definition of 'normal farming practice.' You can't find anything about growing corn and then flooding it as a normal farming practice. It's legal baiting." There's little doubt federal waterfowl baiting laws are ambiguous, but one thing isn't: Flooding corn for the sole purpose of hunting ducks is perfectly legal, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which sets waterfowl hunting regulations.

Goins isn't alone in his contempt for flooded corn and those who manage and hunt it. Few topics generate as much debate among hunters as corn impoundments, their impact on hunter harvest, migration patterns and the ethics of hunting flooded crops.

"I think it's one reason we don't have nearly as many ducks in Louisiana as we used to. They don't need to fly south anymore," says Goins.

There isn't any specific research on the effect of corn impoundments on migrations, but Southern Illinois University-Carbondale wetlands ecology assistant professor Dr. Mike Eichholz thinks the

impact is minimal. Despite the increase in crops managed and flooded for ducks over the past 20 years, their footprint is a tiny fraction of the overall landscape.

“There are so many factors that influence migrations, it would be difficult to determine if crops grown specifically for hunting play a role. It would also be difficult to even quantify how much is out there,” he says.

Mississippi State University associate professor of wetlands and waterfowl ecology Dr. Brian Davis agrees.

“Snow coverage and temperatures influence mallard distribution more than anything. If they don’t have access to food and open water, they’ll fly south,” he says. “The amount of corn grown specifically for agricultural purposes throughout the U.S. is in the neighborhood of 82 million acres. A study determined that the amount of waste grain alone would support something like 100 million mallards. Not all of it is utilized by ducks, of course, but to suggest that flooded corn is disrupting migration patterns any more than all the other corn grown as a crop is just speculation.”

Ducks in Flux

There’s no question flooded corn can attract and hold ducks by the thousands and influence harvest on a regional level. Tommy Akin has seen it first-hand. When he started hunting more than 60 years ago, there was no such thing as a corn impoundment around his home in northwest Tennessee. The number of ducks fluctuated with the Mississippi River.

“There are corn clubs all around here now. Some plant hundreds of acres of corn and then flood it. They are holding thousands of birds that wouldn’t normally be here unless the river flooded naturally,” says Akin, 73. “The federal refuges plant corn, too. The ducks just go back-and-forth from the refuges to the private clubs.”

That’s not necessarily a bad thing, says Davis.

“When I talk to other hunters about this, I ask them, would you rather hunt in a county with 50 ducks or 50,000 ducks? Any time someone provides food and resting areas for ducks, you will have more ducks in the area,” he says. “Success rates can certainly be higher on these impoundments, but there is likely some spillover.”

Akin acknowledges some birds do leave the comfort of those impoundments and provide decent shooting at times for surrounding hunters, but that typically happens when the planted food is depleted later in the season. It can also occur when the ducks have been shot at a few times. The Missouri Department of Conservation actually examined duck use in flooded corn on federal wildlife refuges, along with success rates of hunters around those refuges. As it turns out, what mattered more than anything wasn’t the amount of corn on the refuge, but the overall size of the refuge.

“The bigger the refuge and the more waterfowl habitat, the better the hunting was around it,” says MDC research scientist Andrew Raedeke.

He also examined duck use on refuges with corn impoundments with no human access and compared them to places with unlimited access and limited access.

“What do you think happened on those places that were closed to hunting and human activity at 1 p.m.? Ducks started pouring in after 1 p.m. On places that were open all day, the ducks started pouring in right after sunset,” says Raedeke. “Hunting pressure and human disturbance dictate how much use flooded crops get more than the crops themselves.”

A study conducted in Ontario found similar results. It examined duck use of flooded crop impoundments that were hunted and found the birds stopped using those areas almost entirely during daylight hours a few weeks into the hunting season. Nighttime use jumped dramatically. The

study was in part a response to a proposal by the Canadian Wildlife Service that would prohibit modifying agricultural fields for the purpose of hunting, including flooding crops.

Feast Vs. Famine

Goins is trying to start a similar conversation in the U.S., although he admits his ultimate goal of banning flooded corn is a long-shot.

“I think it is hurting hunter numbers. These clubs are holding birds that would otherwise be scattered around the landscape and available to everyone. I talk to people who say they either quit hunting or are thinking about quitting because someone started planting corn nearby and they stopped seeing ducks. It just wasn’t worth hunting anymore,” he says.

Eichholz acknowledges flooded corn is a divisive and contentious topic among hunters, and he calls the ambiguous regulations “silly.” However, he sees no reason the practice should be banned from a biologist’s perspective. Any additional habitat is better than no additional habitat, even if it is seasonal and relatively poor overall.

“As resource managers, we tend to discourage flooding corn and other crops as a way to attract waterfowl or provide habitat for them. We would much rather see landowners and clubs conduct moist-soil management, which provides better habitat overall than a flooded corn field. It may be hard to believe, but ducks use moist-soil habitat at far greater rates than flooded corn when both are available,” says Eichholz, adding, “Biologically, giving ducks corn is like giving kids candy, but they will choose higher-quality foods typically found in moist-soil habitat if it is available. They know what they need to eat in order to survive. Lots of studies have shown that, although ducks do prefer corn when the weather is real cold.”

Raedeke says even if flooded crops are not the best habitat, they can be an important ingredient in the overall habitat equation, especially if landowners include moist-soil impoundments in their management efforts. Many do. The 10 clubs surveyed for the Ontario study planted 560 acres of corn and managed 1,775 acres of moist-soil habitat. However, all of them said they would not only no longer plant corn, they would likely close down and stop managing non-crop wetlands if hunting that corn was banned.

Whether or not that happens remains to be seen. The CWS is still considering it. However, there is no serious talk of outlawing the practice within the USFWS, which means the debate will only rage on.