

WILDLIFE

Catfish farmers free to resume war against cormorants

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The Fish and Wildlife Service said tens of thousands of double-crested cormorants may be killed to protect commercial aquaculture projects. Peter Wallack/Wikimedia Commons

The Fish and Wildlife Service has now concluded that up to 51,571 double-crested cormorants may be killed annually to protect commercial aquaculture projects.

In a new environmental assessment completed under court order, the agency determined that the "lethal removal" of the birds across a number of central and Eastern states and the District of Columbia would have "no significant impact" on the quality of the human environment.

The agency's conclusion, to be published tomorrow in the *Federal Register*, means officials will resume issuing "depredation" permits for the "take" of the birds that are otherwise protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

"It's a good thing for the catfish industry," Chad Causey, spokesman for the Catfish Farmers of America, said in an interview today. "It will allow some needed relief."

Each double-crested cormorant eats 4 or 5 pounds of fish annually, Causey noted ([Greenwire](#), Jan. 10).

Ken Richkus, deputy division chief of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Division of Migratory Bird Management, said today that officials are seeking to "balance the needs of the birds with the needs of people," adding that "we wanted to make sure cormorants were managed with the best available science."

The Fish and Wildlife Service's [new assessment](#), spanning more than 100 pages, is the latest turn in an ongoing conflict that really took flight with a 2014 lawsuit filed by **Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility**. The conflict may not be over yet.

"It's the sort of sloppy science that gets the Fish and Wildlife Service sued regularly," PEER Executive Director Jeff Ruch said today of the agency's latest work, adding that it will lead to "militarized wildlife management ... just shoot everything."

The group challenged two agency orders regulating management of the goose-sized bird, whose adult wingspan stretches 4 ½ feet.

The current cormorant population estimate in the central and eastern United States and Canada is between 731,880 and 752,516, according to the new study.

One FWS order authorized freshwater commercial aquaculture producers in 13 states to kill double-crested cormorants committing or about to "commit depredation of aquaculture stocks." The other order authorized state, federal and tribal agencies to kill double-crested cormorants to protect fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats.

The two orders were reissued every five years since their start in 1998 and 2003, respectively. The orders addressed concerns that the cormorants were gobbling up fish and costing the aquaculture industry time, energy and money.

In 2016, a federal judge in Washington, D.C., agreed that the Fish and Wildlife Service had not adequately studied the potential environmental consequences of the two orders and directed the agency to try again. The previous orders were [vacated](#).

"It goes without saying that if these orders are left in place, additional cormorants will be killed," U.S. District Court Judge John Bates wrote in a May 2016 opinion. "As a result, PEER argues, certain beneficial ecosystem services that cormorants provide will be lost."

Pointedly adding that the Fish and Wildlife Service's initial environmental assessment was "markedly deficient," Bates strongly urged the agency to "take its remediation obligations seriously" and "take care not to cut corners" on the second go-round ([Greenwire](#), May 26, 2016).

In addition to resuming the issuance of permits protecting aquaculture facilities, the Fish and Wildlife Service over the next year will assess alternatives for managing the even more complex interactions between cormorants and wild fish.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service wanted to get back on solid ground," Richkus said.

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