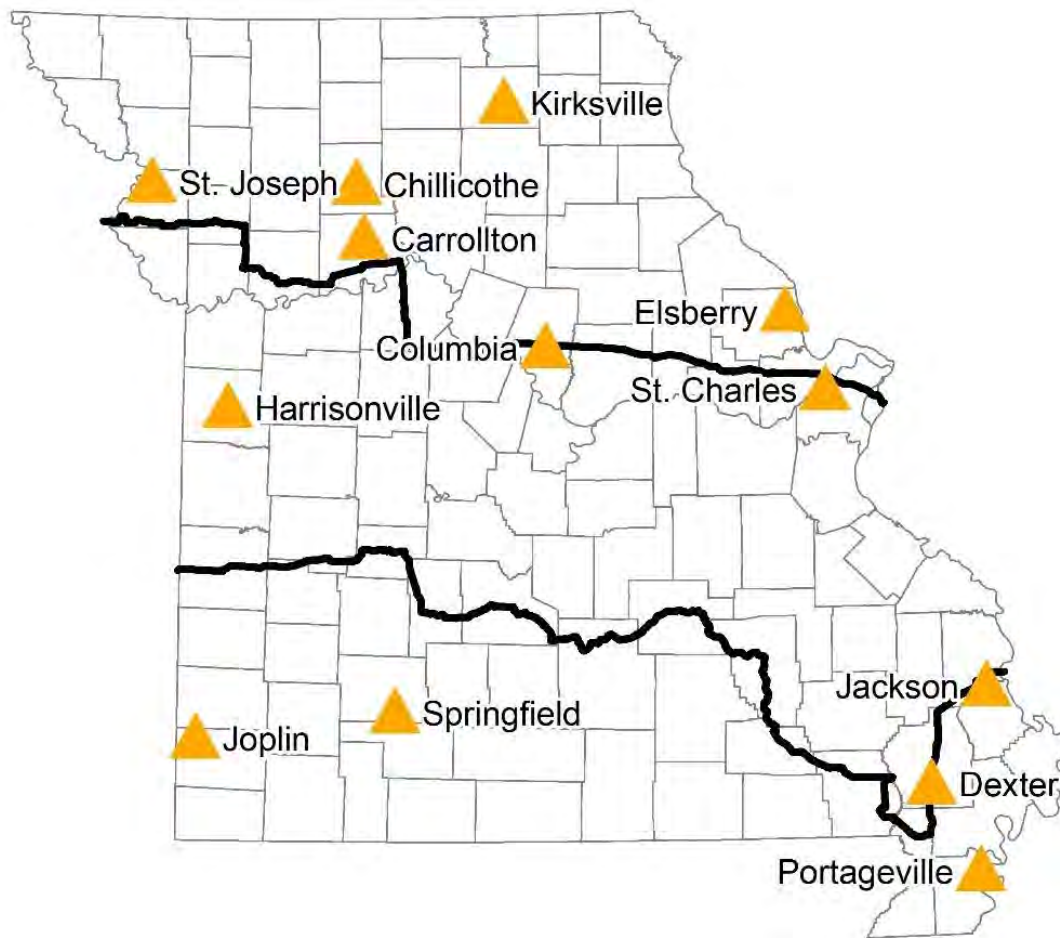


# Missouri Duck Season Dates and Zone Boundaries Review: 2026 – 2030



## Hunter Input and Recommendations

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## INTRODUCTION

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) typically allows states the opportunity to change duck season structure (continuous versus split seasons and zone boundaries) about every five years. Limiting changes in duck season date formulas and zone boundaries to every five years helps MDC and FWS evaluate the effectiveness of zone boundaries and season date changes over a range of conditions. It also allows the evaluation of new duck season structure and zone options allowed by FWS.

FWS uses adaptive harvest management to establish duck season lengths and daily bag limits, with overall seasons consisting of a liberal package (60 days and 6 ducks/day), moderate package (45 days and 6 ducks/day), or restrictive package (30 ducks and 3 ducks/day). Certain species of ducks have lower daily bag limits through management plans for those specific species. It is important to consider the possibility of shorter seasons, as the duck season structure option selected for the 2026 – 2030 seasons must remain in place even if duck season is shortened to 45 or 30 days. FWS allowed the following duck season structure options for 2026 – 2030 duck season structure options:

- Four zones and no splits
- Three zones with the potential for two segments (one split) in each zone
- Two zones with the potential for three segments (two splits) in each zone
- Statewide season (no zones) with the potential for three segments (two splits) in each zone

This report summarizes the public input the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) received regarding potential duck season dates and zone boundaries for the 2026 – 2030 seasons and explains the rationale for the duck season date formulas and zone boundaries recommended to the MDC Commission (Commission) during the May 2025 Commission meeting. In the pages that follow, we describe the MDC's objectives when setting season date formulas and zone boundaries, as well as the guiding principles used when formulating any recommended changes to zone boundaries and season dates. We then describe our methods for collecting hunter input, a summary of hunter input, potential impacts of the proposed season dates and zone boundaries, and some additional perspectives regarding the decisions that were made. The appendices include tables and charts that summarize the hunter input data. We thank all hunters who took the time to complete surveys, participate in workshops, and contact MDC staff.

## Missouri Duck Season Structure Objectives and Guiding Principles

### *Objective*

To establish zone boundaries and season dates that best accommodate hunter preferences, including those of hunters with varying levels of experience and those who hunt in different types of habitat (e.g., shallow water versus rivers and reservoirs), target different species (e.g., mallards versus early-season migrants), have varying physical capabilities (e.g. tolerance for cold and ice), and employ different hunting styles (e.g., water versus field hunting).

Given the range of hunter preferences, it is likely that not all hunters will be completely satisfied regardless of which season dates or zone boundaries are selected. The challenge is to provide a balance that will accommodate at least a portion of most hunters' desires. The choice of duck season structure and season dates has little impact on the overall status of duck populations. As a result, biological considerations are not as critical as providing duck seasons that contribute to overall quality hunting experiences. The FWS uses an Adaptive Harvest Management approach to determine if the season will be 60 days, 45 days, or 30 days in length and if the overall bag limit will be six ducks or three ducks. The combination of season length and bag limits is determined by the size of duck populations and habitat on the breeding grounds. States can select opening and closing dates between the Saturday nearest September 24 and January 31.

### *Guiding Principles*

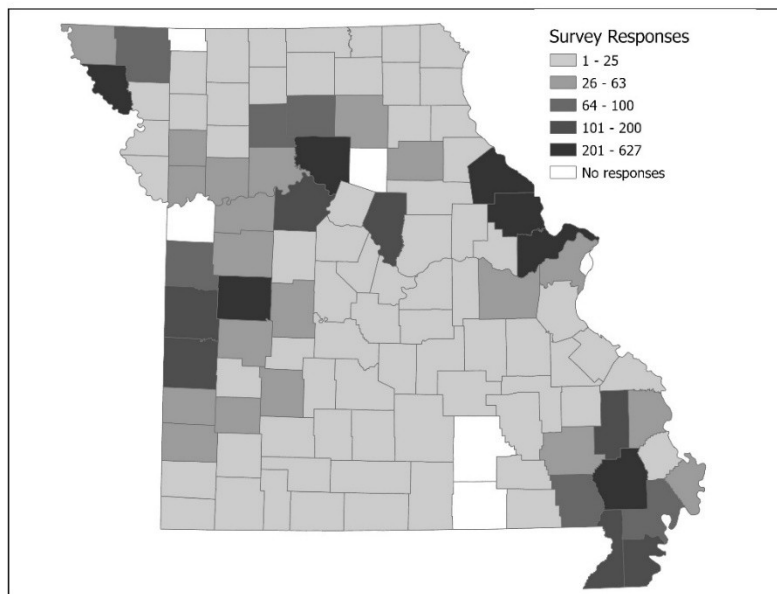
1. Current duck season options must consider the possibilities for 30-day, 45-day, and 60-day seasons. We have experienced nearly unprecedented opportunity with 60-day seasons since 1997. There is no guarantee that this will continue and potential season lengths of 30 and 45 days are possibilities that must be considered as changes in season structure are contemplated.
2. Duck season dates and zone boundaries will be recommended to accommodate a range of hunting styles and preferences. Dates that completely favor one group will likely disenfranchise another and may not accommodate the range of hunting styles throughout a region.
3. Duck season date and zone boundary selections will seek to balance providing opportunities for new hunters and satisfying more avid hunters. Over the past two decades, duck hunter numbers have declined across the country, but have remained relatively stable in Missouri. The Department will continue to consider the implications of season structure for recruiting new hunters as well as for retaining existing hunters.
4. Duck season dates for each zone must balance the hunter preferences from different regions within each zone.
5. Duck zone boundaries will be based upon the preferred season dates for hunters and historic harvest throughout a region. Boundaries will not be designed to accommodate a particular area or ownership, whether it is public or private.

6. The purpose of duck zones is to provide the “best” season dates for a particular region, not to extend the season for hunters who travel from zone to zone to extend their hunting season.
7. Recommendations for 2026-2030 will depend upon waterfowl migration timing, hunter harvest data, and hunters’ preferences and input. If most hunters from a particular region prefer a different season structure (zones and splits) or season dates, a change will likely be recommended. The time and effort taken by hunters to provide their input is valued and it will help us develop the best possible recommendation for Missouri duck hunters.

## DATA COLLECTION

### Duck Hunter Opinion Surveys

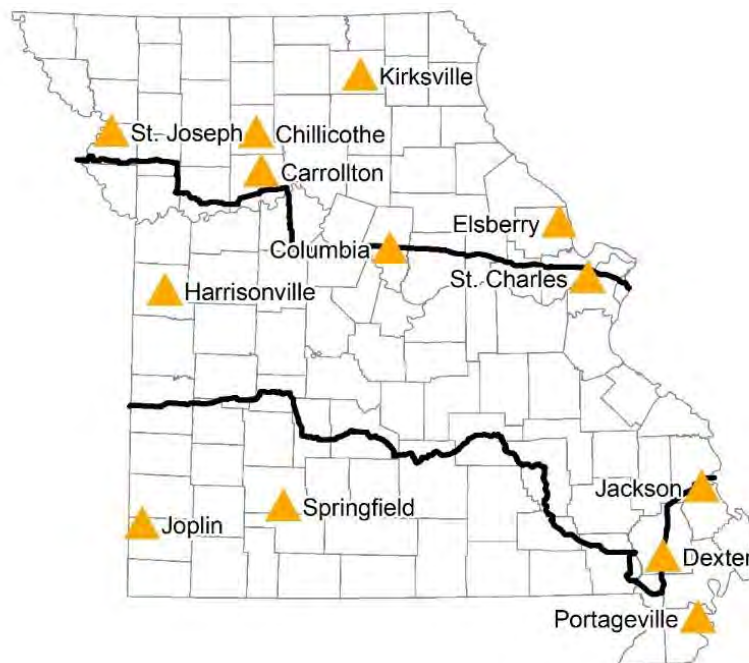
We sent 71,002 e-mail invitations to a sample of migratory bird hunters who provided MDC with an e-mail address. A total of 511 of the e-mails were undeliverable and 6,240 individuals responded resulting in a response rate of 8%. We also sent 18,966 mail surveys to a random sample of individuals who did not provide an email address when they purchased a Migratory Bird Permit. A total of 396 mail surveys were undeliverable and 2,821 individuals responded resulting in a response rate of 14%.



*Figure 1. Map of Missouri showing number of duck season dates and zone boundary survey responses by county.*

## Public Workshops

Missouri duck hunters had the opportunity to attend 13 workshops held throughout Missouri in January and February 2025. Our goal was to hear the opinions of hunters throughout the state. We held workshops at locations near existing zone boundaries (areas where questions had arisen in recent years about zones and season dates) but also made sure to provide hunters throughout each zone the opportunity to attend meetings (Figure 2). The workshops provided MDC with an opportunity to have more in-depth discussions with duck hunters about their season preferences. Each workshop participant received a report that summarized information about weather, habitat, harvest, and duck migrations by regions within the state. Each participant had the opportunity to share their individual opinions with MDC by completing an individual survey with many questions like those included in the web and mail surveys described earlier. Of the 394 individuals who participated in the workshops, 367 individuals completed this survey. We then divided workshop participants into small groups (~6 individuals/group) based on the regions in which they hunted most. The small groups gave hunters the chance to work together to develop formulas for setting duck season dates for the next five years and to adjust zone boundaries. These small groups then shared their conclusions with all the workshop participants. We received input from 70 small groups. The results from the workshop small groups reveal what hunters prefer after having the opportunity to work with other hunters to reach consensus on season date and season structure options.



*Figure 2. Map of Missouri showing locations of the 13 duck season zone review public input workshops held throughout January and February 2025.*

## Analysis

The results from the surveys of migratory bird hunters, the survey given to individuals who attended the workshops, and the workshop small group exercise provided three sources of information to gauge hunter preferences. The web and mail surveys provide the most representative picture of what all duck hunters in Missouri desire due to the fact it was e-mailed to a random sample of migratory bird permit holders who provided an email at time of permit purchase and a mailed to random sample of those who did not provide an e-mail. Those who show up for public meetings or workshops tend to be those hunters who are most interested in change. Based on MDC and FWS estimates, active duck hunters in Missouri hunt an average of 7.82 to 8.09 days per year. We found that mail survey respondents hunted an average of ## days, web survey respondents an average of 18.35 days, and workshop respondents 26.2 days. These results suggest all our input was likely from more avid hunters.

The results focus on the following questions:

- What is your most preferred week to hunt? (all surveys)
- In the event of a split season, what one week would you prefer the season to be closed? (all surveys)
- What four weeks would you select for a 30-day season? (all surveys)
- What season date formula would you most prefer? (The web and mail survey included 7 split and 4 continuous season options, while the workshop participants were given 7 split season options and 6 continuous season options on the individual survey.)

## ZONE BOUNDARY RATIONALE

### North Zone

#### *Northwest*

##### Recommendation

- No Change

##### Background

- This region includes the Missouri River and shallow water wetlands in the bottoms adjacent to the river, as well as wetlands and smaller rivers on the east side of the river bluffs (i.e. Nodaway Valley).

##### Hunter Input

- 30% of hunters surveyed agreed that the season timing was about right, with an additional 15% selecting for each: earlier season dates, later season dates, or adding a split. The remaining 25% indicated they had no preference.
- Over 50% of the workshop small groups indicated that they preferred season dates opening at the same time or earlier than the current formula, with no split during the season, while one workshop small group indicated that they mostly hunt shallow water wetlands in the river bottoms with the ability to artificially keep water open and preferred significantly later season dates.

##### Potential Impacts

- Earlier seasons allow for more opportunities for hunting shallow water habitats for those that cannot artificially keep water open late in the season and allow hunters more opportunities for hunting during early season migration (flight) days when new birds are arriving in the area.
- Earlier seasons may reduce the benefits of shallow water hunters who are able to artificially keep water open later in the season.
- Later seasons may not benefit river hunters on this portion of the Missouri River, as it historically gets significant ice flows that reduce river hunting as early as mid-December.

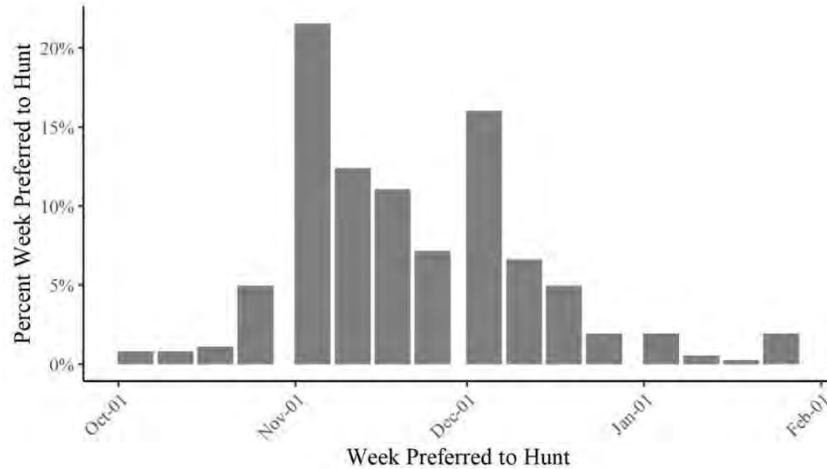


Figure 3. One week most preferred to hunt ducks by survey respondents and workshop participants in the Northwest Region.

### ***Northcentral***

#### Recommendation

- No change.

#### Background

- This region begins just north of the Missouri River bottoms and includes the northern part of the golden triangle (Swan Lake NWR and Fountain Grove CA) and many shallow water wetlands and dry fields in the region. During the 2020 zone boundary revision, this region was shifted into the north zone to allow shallow water hunters without the ability to artificially keep water open more opportunities to hunt during the season.

#### Hunter Input

- 30% of hunters surveyed agreed that the season timing was about right, and 25% preferring earlier season dates. However, 20% of hunters surveyed also preferred later season dates and 20% of hunters preferred to add a split, with the remaining 5% indicating no preference.
- Over 70% of the workshop small groups indicated that they preferred season dates opening at the same time or earlier than the current formula, with no split during the season, while two workshop small groups indicated preferences of adding a split during the season.

#### Potential Impacts

- Earlier seasons will increase the opportunity for hunting early season migrants and flight days that occur at the beginning of the season but may reduce mallard harvest opportunity later in the season for those that can artificially keep water open.

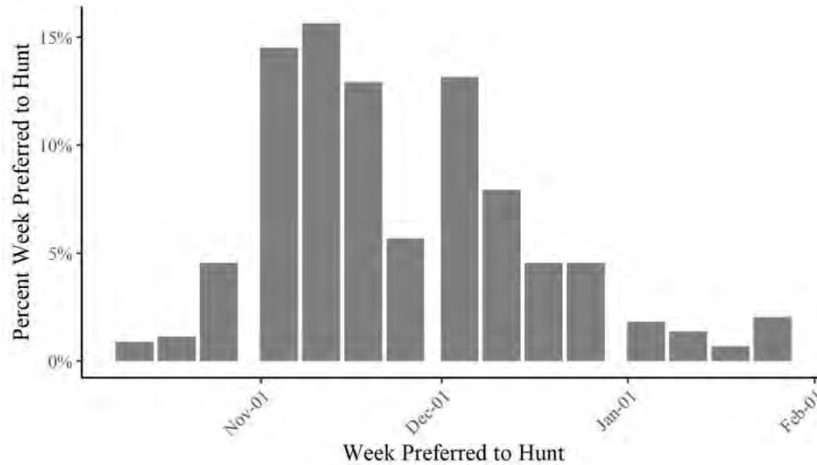


Figure 4. One week most preferred to hunt ducks by survey respondents and workshop participants in the Northcentral Region.

### ***Northeast***

#### Recommendation

- No Change

#### Background

- This region includes the Mississippi River and adjacent bottoms comprised of a mixture of shallow water and dry field habitats, and spreads west to include Mark Twain Lake and a greater number of irrigation lakes and large water bodies compared to other regions in the North Zone.

#### Hunter Input

- Hunter season timing preferences were extremely mixed in this region of the state, divided among hunters who thought the season timing was about right (35%), preferred earlier season dates (20%), preferred later season dates (25%), and wanted to add a split (20%).

#### Potential Impacts

- Some of the best hunting on small lakes can occur on flight days during the early season, and keeping this region in the North Zone will enable hunters to take advantage of these flight days.
- When nearby shallow water freezes, ducks often move to the remaining open water in larger lakes and divers such as goldeneyes and buffleheads can be more abundant later in the season. Later season dates would provide more opportunity to take advantage of these situations and provide more quality hunting opportunities on the Mississippi River and other large reservoirs.

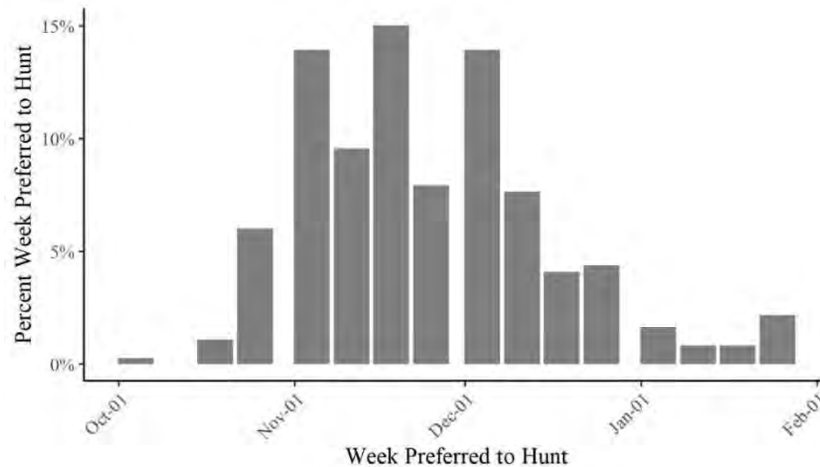


Figure 5. One week most preferred to hunt ducks by survey respondents and workshop participants in the Northeast Region.

### ***Lincoln Region***

#### Recommendation

- Revert the north/middle zone boundary to the 2017-2020 zone boundary following Highway 47 to I-70, encompassing the northern portion of St. Charles County and the southern portion of Lincoln County in the Middle Zone.

#### Background

- In 2016, it appeared there may be a growing interest of moving Lincoln County into the Middle Zone. However, at the workshop held in Elsberry in 2020, hunter preferences remained aligned with the North Zone season dates.

#### Hunter Input

- In the Lincoln region, hunters strongly preferred later season dates, however, despite preferring later dates, many workshop groups indicated they would not prefer season dates later than the 2021-2025 middle zone formula.
- Out of the survey responses for the Lincoln region, over 40% of hunters indicated they would prefer later season dates, with an additional 25% indicating they would want to add a split to the season. Only about 25% of hunters indicated that they felt season timing was about right or preferred earlier season dates.
- Out of the individuals and small groups that hunt most in this region, attended a workshop, and would be affected by a zone boundary change, 74% would prefer the zone boundary follow Highway 47 to the Mississippi River, only placing the southern portion of the region in the Middle Zone, while only 26% would prefer the zone boundary be moved all the way north to Highway 54, placing the entire region in the Middle Zone.

#### Potential Impacts

- Keeping this region in the North Zone will provide duck hunting opportunity during the time when the greatest number of ducks are present in this region, will provide more

opportunity for early season migrants and will be less likely to miss “flight days” than if this region were in the Middle Zone.

- Later season dates would accommodate those who like to target mallards and can artificially keep water open by pumping water or the use of ice eaters. It would also allow more late season hunting opportunity on the Mississippi River.

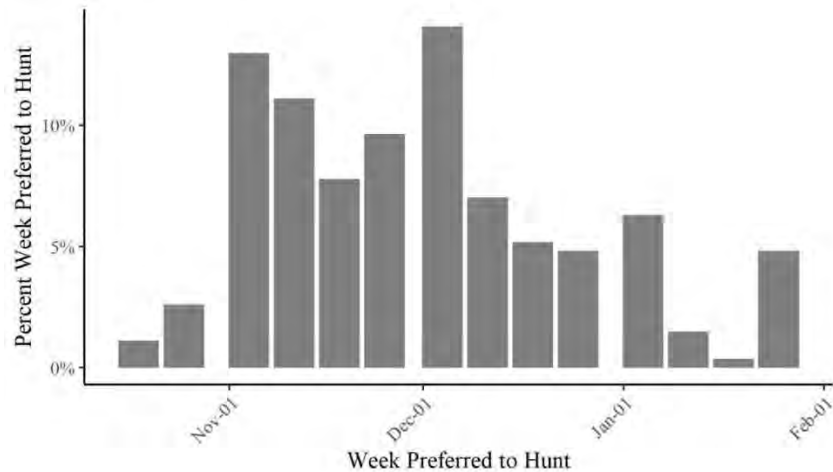


Figure 6. One week most preferred to hunt ducks by survey respondents and workshop participants in the Lincoln Region.

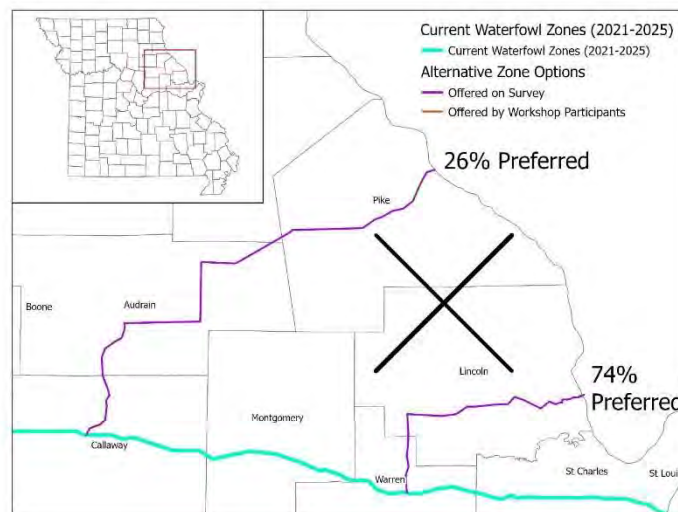


Figure 7. Map showing zone boundary options near the Lincoln Region and preferred zone boundary of hunters that hunt near the black “X” and would be most affected by a change in the zone boundary. Out of the individuals and small groups that attended a workshop and would be affected by a zone boundary change, 74% would prefer the zone boundary follow Highway 47 to the Mississippi River, only placing the southern portion of the region in the Middle Zone, while only 26% would prefer the zone boundary be moved all the way north to Highway 54, placing the entire region in the Middle Zone.

## ***St. Charles Region***

### Recommendation

- Revert the north/middle zone boundary to the 2017-2020 zone boundary, starting at Lock and Dam 25, following Highway N to Highway 47, then following Highway 47 to I-70, encompassing the northern portion of St. Charles County and the southern portion of Lincoln County in the Middle Zone.

### Background

- This region was in the North Zone until 2006 when it was moved into the Middle Zone after the 2001-2005 season structure review. It remained in the Middle Zone until 2021, when it was moved back into the North Zone due to the shift to later season dates in the Middle Zone and hunters worried about missing early season opportunities during migration days earlier in the season.

### Hunter Input

- In the St. Charles region, hunters strongly preferred later season dates, however, despite preferring later dates, many workshop groups indicated they would not prefer season dates much later than the 2021-2025 middle zone formula.
- Out of the survey responses for the St. Charles region, almost 50% of hunters indicated they would prefer later season dates, with an additional 20% indicating they would want to add a split to the season. Only about 25% of hunters indicated that they felt season timing was about right or preferred earlier season dates.
- Out of the individuals and small groups that hunt most in this region, attended a workshop, and would be affected by a zone boundary change, 56% would prefer the zone boundary follow Highway 47 to the Mississippi River, only placing St. Charles into the Middle Zone, while 44% of individuals and groups preferred that the zone boundary not change and the entire region remain in the North Zone.

### Potential Impacts

- Keeping this region in the North Zone will provide duck hunting opportunity during the time when the greatest number of ducks are present in this region, will provide more opportunity for early season migrants, and will be less likely to miss “flight days” than if this region were in the Middle Zone.
- Later season dates would accommodate those who like to target mallards and can artificially keep water open by pumping water or the use of ice eaters. It would also allow later season hunting opportunity on the Mississippi River.
- With the timing of the current split in the Middle Zone, hunters are likely to miss major migration events surrounding Veteran’s Day and will need ducks to remain in the area for later season hunting opportunities.

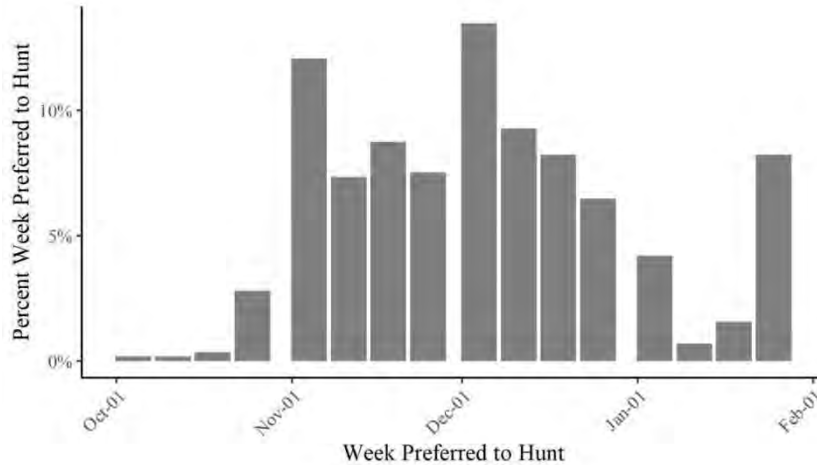


Figure 8. One week most preferred to hunt ducks by survey respondents and workshop participants in the St. Charles Region.

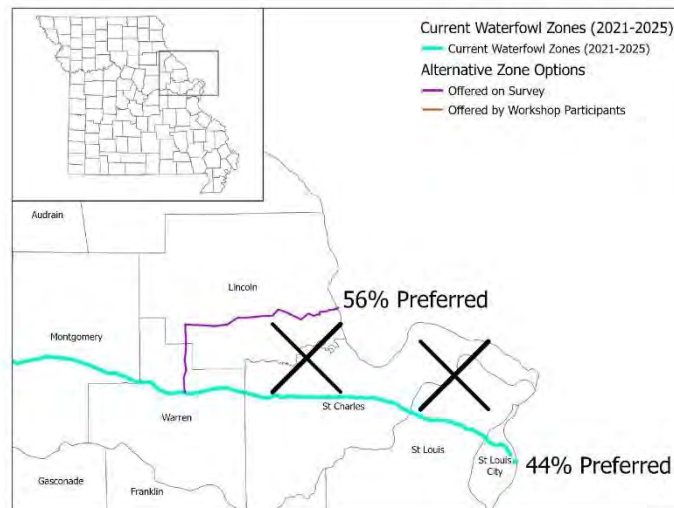


Figure 9. Map showing zone boundary options near the St. Charles Region and preferred zone boundary of hunters that hunt near the black “X’s” and would be most affected by a change in the zone boundary. Out of the individuals and small groups that attended a workshop and would be affected by a zone boundary change, 56% would prefer the zone boundary follow Highway 47 to the Mississippi River placing St. Charles into the Middle Zone, while 44% of individuals and groups preferred that the zone boundary not change, and the entire region remain in the North Zone.

### ***Dalton Bottoms Region***

#### Recommendation

- Return the north/middle zone boundary back to Hwy 24 to Hwy 63 so the river bottoms east of Miami, MO are in the Middle Zone.

#### Background

- This region was moved into the Middle Zone along with the Missouri River Bottoms west of Grand Pass CA in 2017. While most hunters emphasized the potential benefits

later seasons would have for river and field hunting, we also expected it would benefit those hunters who hunted Dalton Cutoff, a shallow oxbow lake just off the Missouri River. In 2020, we heard that the shift to the Middle Zone had resulted in more days of ice, missed migrations, and reduced harvest, resulting in the return of this region to the North Zone. During the 2020 zone boundary revision, this region was shifted into the north zone to allow shallow water hunters without the ability to artificially keep water open more opportunities to hunt during the season.

#### Hunter Input

- The workshop small groups focused on this region unanimously recommended the zone boundary be returned to Hwy 24 and Hwy 63 so that this region was returned to the Middle Zone. Some workshop small groups preferred similar season opening dates as the Middle Zone but recommended moving the split to December instead of early November, while others preferred no split. This would allow more harvest of early migrant species and the potential to capture more flight days early in the season.
- Out of the individuals and small group workshop attendees that hunt most in this region and would be affected by a zone boundary change, 86% would prefer the zone boundary follow Highway 24 to 63 and place the river bottoms east of Miami, MO in the middle zone while 14% would prefer the zone boundary not change.

#### Potential Impacts

- Shallow water hunters without the ability to artificially keep water open will likely experience days lost due to ice, and hunters will likely miss major migration events and have reduced opportunity to harvest early season migrants at the end of October and during the November split, if the split remains in November.
- Later season dates may provide more opportunity to hunt the river during late season freeze-up events, prior to major ice flow events on the river and could potentially spread-out hunting pressure on the Missouri River.
- It could positively affect shallow water hunters who can artificially keep water open and target late season mallards.

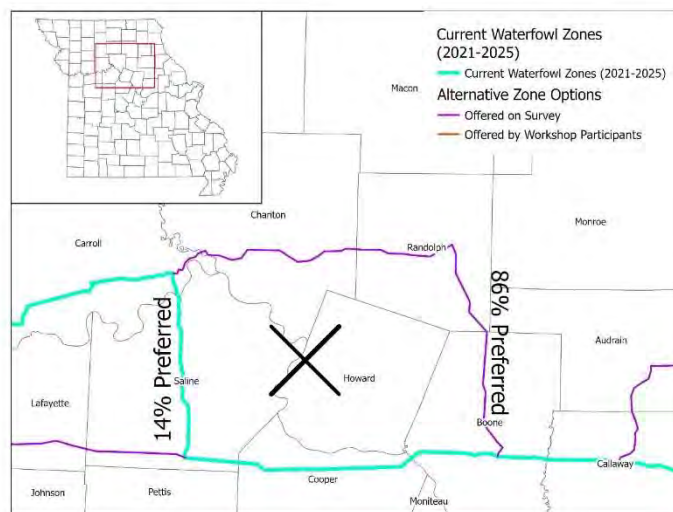


Figure 10. Map showing zone boundary options near the Dalton Bottoms Region and preferred zone boundary of hunters that hunt near the black "X" and would be most affected by a change in the zone boundary. Out of the individuals and small group workshop attendees that hunt most in this region and would be affected by a zone boundary change, 86% would prefer the zone boundary follow Highway 24 to 63 and place the river bottoms east of Miami, MO in the Middle Zone while only 14% would prefer the zone boundary not change and remain in the North Zone.

## Middle Zone

### *Smithville Region*

#### Recommendation

- No Change

#### Background

- This region was first moved into the Middle Zone in 2016 to accommodate a shift in hunter preferences towards later dates. The feedback indicated that Smithville Lake hunters would benefit from this change as ducks often use larger lakes and rivers later in the season.

#### Hunter Input

- Hunters were far less divided than in 2016 and 2021, with all workshop small groups (three groups) preferring the current zone boundary (Middle Zone) over a change into the North Zone.
- Survey results from this region indicate that almost 50% of hunters feel that the season timing is about right, with the remaining hunters divided among earlier season dates, later season dates, and changing the timing of the split.

#### Potential Impacts

- This zone boundary will continue to benefit those who are willing to break ice and hunt Smithville Reservoir later in the season but will reduce late season opportunity for

hunters who primarily hunt shallow water habitats and are unwilling to break ice, unless they can artificially keep water open.

- It will reduce opportunities for hunting during early season flight days and early season migrants, however, it may provide more later season hunting opportunities targeted at mallards and diving ducks.

### ***Missouri River West***

#### Recommendation

- No Change

#### Background

- The current zone boundary was first considered after the 2011 Zone Workshops, but opinions were diverse enough that no changes were made until the 2017 season, where it has remained since.

#### Input

- Hunter season timing preferences were extremely mixed in this region, with about 30% of hunters indicating that the current season dates are about right, and 15% of hunters preferring earlier season dates. About 30% of hunters preferred later season dates, with another 15% of hunters indicating they wanted to change the timing of the split and 10% had no opinion.
- The workshop small groups preferred similar season opening dates as the Middle Zone but recommended moving the split to December instead of early November and potentially extended the split to allow for a few more days of hunting opportunity later in the season. This would allow more harvest of early migrant species and the potential to capture more flight days early in the season.

#### Potential Impacts

- The current zone boundary allows more late season opportunity for hunters who primarily hunt shallow water habitats as they will likely face more days when these habitats are frozen without the ability to artificially keep water open, however it will benefit those who hunt the Missouri River and surrounding fields.
- The boundary reduces opportunities for hunting during early season flight days and early season migrants, however, changing the timing of the split to December is likely to allow more early season opportunities.

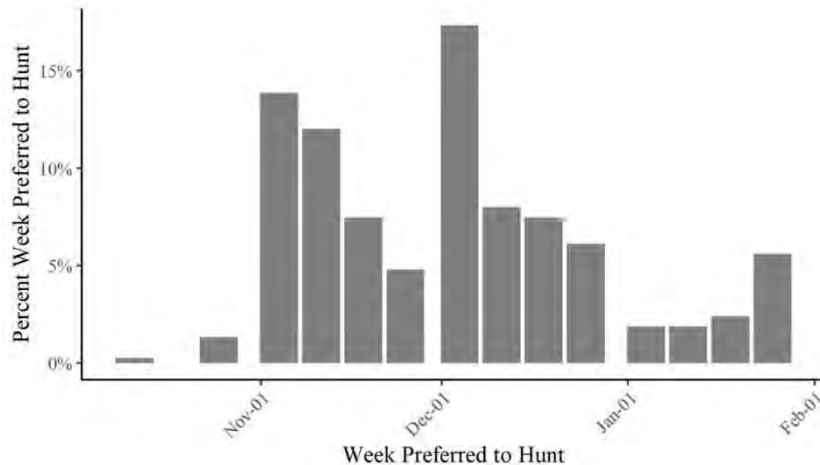


Figure 11. One week most preferred to hunt ducks by survey respondents and workshop participants in the Missouri River West Region.

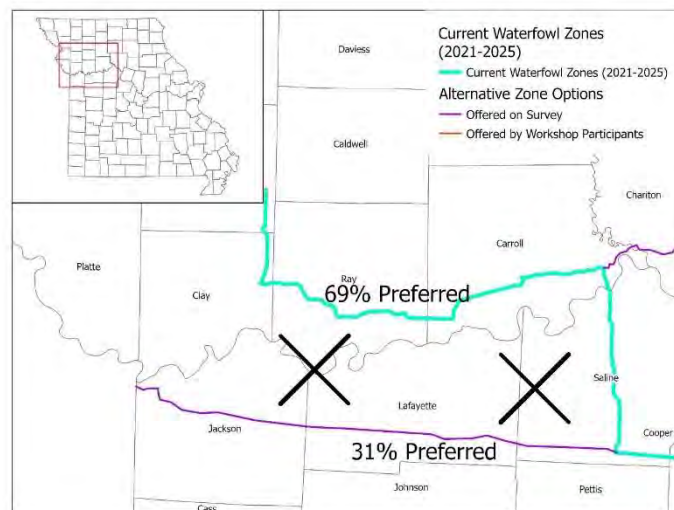


Figure 12. Map showing zone boundary options near the Missouri River West Region and preferred zone boundary of hunters that hunt near the black "X's" and would be most affected by a change in the zone boundary. 69% of hunters that hunt in this region prefer no change and to remain in the Middle Zone, while only 31% of hunters preferred a zone boundary change to be placed into the North Zone.

### ***West-Central Region***

#### **Recommendation**

- No Change

#### **Background**

- Over time, the western part of the South/Middle Zone boundary has bounced back and forth in the Barton area. There has also been prior discussion regarding the rivers and reservoirs in West-Central Missouri, and the area around Four Rivers Conservation Area and Schell-Osage Conservation Area.

### Hunter Input

- In the west-central region, season preference was very divided among early season starts with an elongated split and later season dates that more closely matched the south zone.
- Hunter season timing preferences showed a large shift towards later season dates, with opening dates of the second or third Saturday in November. However, workshop participants also indicated that they did not desire for the season to match the South Zone, as it was too late of an opening, and they did not want a season that went through the end of January.
- Over 50% of hunters indicated the season was too early and they preferred later season dates in this region. Twenty percent of hunters indicated they thought the timing of the season was about right, 5% preferred earlier season dates, and 15% of hunters wanted the timing of the split to change.
- Workshop groups in the region were divided between earlier season dates with preference for hunting as early as the end of October and beginning of November and later season dates with preference for hunting throughout January. These divisions were due to different hunting styles and habitats that included shallow water wetlands along the rivers that feed Truman Reservoir versus those hunting fields and the main body of the reservoirs.

### Potential Impacts

- Earlier season timing that aligns with the Middle Zone allows hunting opportunities for the abundant wood ducks and early season flight days and migrants in the area, and more days for hunting shallow water habitats.
- Later season dates reduce opportunities for hunting shallow wetland areas and targeting wood ducks and other early season flight days and migrants in the area. However, they may allow hunters to specifically target late season mallards and other ducks on deeper rivers, reservoirs, and dry fields in the region.
- Late season dates may increase the chances of hunting during “reverse migrations”, which occurs during warm periods in January and February when ducks return north after leaving the area to migrate south during cold weather. Biologically, most ducks that exhibit reverse migration behavior are already in mating pairs, and hunting after the creation of pair bonds and during reverse migrations may impact breeding success.

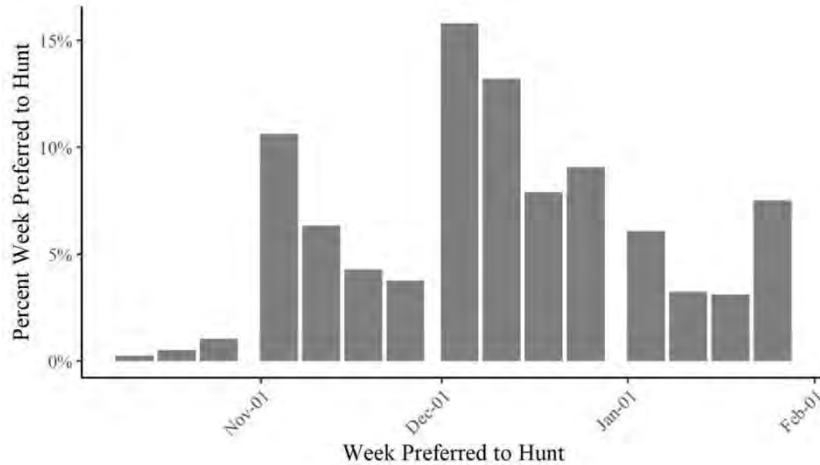


Figure 13. One week most preferred to hunt ducks by survey respondents and workshop participants in the West Central Region.

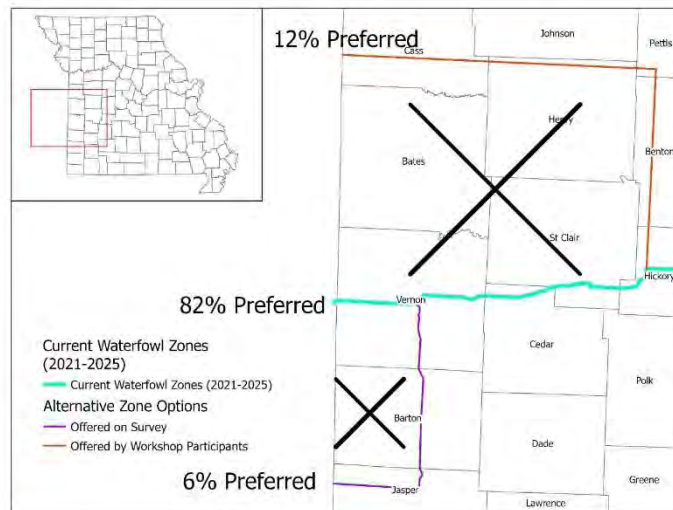


Figure 14. Map showing zone boundary options near the West-Central Region and preferred zone boundary of hunters that hunt near the black “X’s” and would be most affected by a change in the zone boundary. 12% of individuals and small groups that attended workshops and hunt in the region currently in the Middle Zone would prefer a zone boundary further north, placing them in the South Zone, while 6% of individuals and small groups that hunt in the current South Zone would prefer a zone boundary further south, placing them in the Middle Zone. 82% of individuals and small groups preferred the current zone boundary so that they remain in their current zones.

**Lake Wappapello Region**

**Recommendation**

- No Change

**Background**

- On and around Lake Wappapello, hunters noted that they experienced the best hunting early in the season. They indicated they mainly shoot species other than mallards and

depend on flight days. By mid-December the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers begins lowering water levels in the reservoir and the blinds may be inaccessible late in the season. Based on this input, we looked specifically at the workshop and survey results to determine if changes are needed and if there were changes that could be made without too significantly impacting season dates in surrounding areas.

#### Hunter Input

- Hunter preferences more closely align with the North Zone than Middle Zone, with most hunters preferring season openings in October, no split during the season, and most preferred weeks to hunt in October and early November.
- Only one workshop group focused on this region, and they recommended the season to open the last Saturday in October and run for a continuous 60 days.

#### Potential Impacts

- The current Middle Zone formula results in Lake Wappapello hunters potentially missing most migrations and not being able to access blinds and hunt the lake during the late season.
- We explored zone boundary alternatives but could not come up with a solution that would not result in negative outcomes for significantly large geographies and much greater numbers of hunters. It should be noted that in surrounding counties, we are faced with the opposite challenge of hunters often wanting seasons slightly later than what is currently offered in the Middle Zone.

### ***Southeast Region***

#### Recommendation

- No Change

#### Background

- The placement of the South Zone boundary in Southeast Missouri has historically been a source of much debate, particularly from hunters not familiar with hunting in that region. Some hunters have questioned why the zone boundary makes a significant jog south in this region, while others have noted that duck hunting is typically not available in the timber tracts at Duck Creek early in the season. Still others have desired to have Duck Creek CA in the Middle Zone and Otter Slough CA in the South Zone to maximize the total number of days they can hunt. We continue to emphasize that we set zone boundaries to influence hunting on broader geographies and not to accommodate single areas, whether public or private, and that we do not set zone boundaries to extend duck seasons for those who travel.

#### Hunter Input

- In the Southeast Region, season preference was very divided among early season starts and later season dates that more closely matched the south zone.
- Hunter season timing preferences showed a shift towards later season dates, however, there was lots of mixed opinions about the timing of the season and timing of the split.

- About 30% of hunters indicated the season was too early and they preferred later season dates in this region, however, 40% of hunters indicated the season timing was about right or preferred earlier season dates. Almost 25% of hunters preferred that the timing of the split change, but the overall opening and closing of the season remain the same.
- Workshop groups in the region were divided between earlier season dates with preference for hunting as early as the end of October and beginning of November and later season dates with preference for hunting throughout January. Workshop participants also acknowledged that although they would prefer Duck Creek and Mingo in the South Zone for timber hunting opportunities, the rest of the surrounding region may not benefit from being moved into the South Zone.

#### Potential Impacts

- Harvest is typically higher in November than December in this region. Remaining in the Middle Zone will increase the likelihood that the season will be open when major migrations are likely to occur and when early season migrants are present.
- Later dates could potentially result in more habitat available given precipitation patterns, as well as more flooded timber hunting opportunity.
- We acknowledge that Duck Creek Conservation Area would benefit from season dates similar to the South Zone, as most years the timber would be flooded for a greater proportion of duck season than it currently is. However, we cannot set zone boundaries around a specific area and rather are setting zone boundaries that best match hunter preferences for a region.

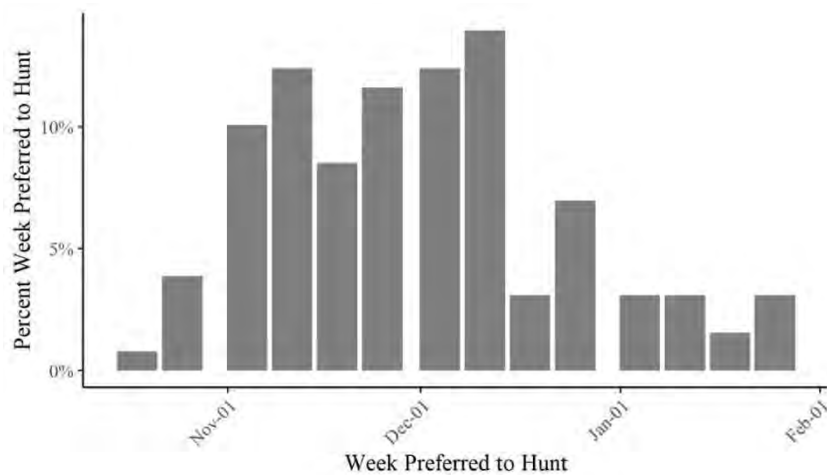


Figure 15. One week most preferred to hunt ducks by survey respondents and workshop participants in the Southeast Region.

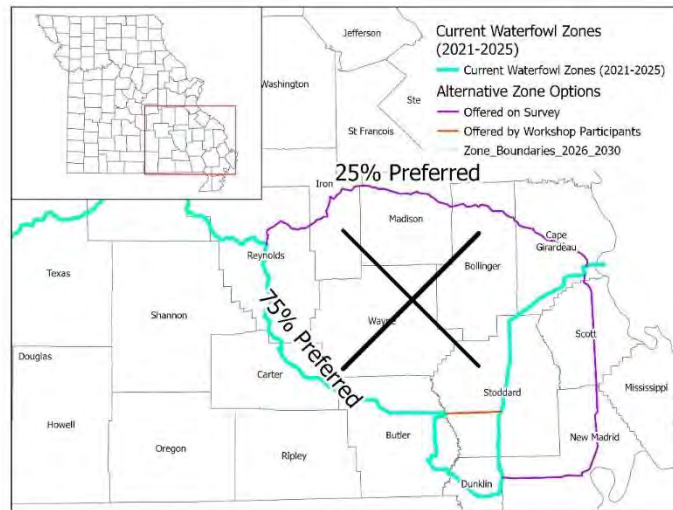


Figure 16. Map showing zone boundary options near the Southeast Region and preferred zone boundary of hunters that hunt near the black “X” and would be most affected by a change in the zone boundary. Out of the individuals and small groups that hunt most in this region, attended a workshop, and would be affected by a zone boundary change, 75% would prefer the zone boundary not change and keep the current zone boundary, while 25% of participants would prefer the zone boundary change to move the region entirely into the South Zone.

## South Zone

### *Stoddard Region*

#### Recommendation

- No Change

#### Background

- One of the challenges of setting season dates in this region is that ducks arrive in early November as they do in the remainder of the state but often stay throughout the winter. This creates many opinions about earlier versus later seasons, what species of ducks are preferred for hunting, and weather patterns that influence habitat and hunting success.

#### Hunter Input

- Stoddard County hunters prefer season dates that are slightly later than the current Middle Zone but not as late as the current South Zone. The preferred time to hunt ducks also varies on an east-west gradient throughout the county, with the western portion preferring earlier seasons and the eastern portion preferring later seasons.
- Workshop participants also indicated that the timing of the split in the Middle Zone should be changed, as they lose out on early season migration days with the current split in November. They preferred a longer split that occurred in mid-December, allowing for additional late season days when weather patterns are more likely to occur and create better days of hunting.

- Out of the individuals and small groups that hunt most in this region in the 2021-2025 Middle Zone portion, attended a workshop, and would be affected by a zone boundary change, 55% would prefer the zone boundary not change and keep the current zone boundary, while 45% of participants would prefer the zone boundary change to move the region entirely into the South Zone.
- Out of the individuals and small groups that hunt most in this region in the 2021-2025 South Zone portion, attended a workshop, and would be affected by a zone boundary change, 75% would prefer the zone boundary not change and keep the current zone boundary, while 25% of participants would prefer the zone boundary change to move the region entirely into the Middle Zone.

#### Potential Impacts

- Harvest is typically higher in November than December in this region, particularly in the western portion of the region. Keeping this region in the Middle Zone will increase the likelihood that the season will be open when major migrations are likely to occur, and new ducks are arriving in the area.
- Later dates could potentially result in more habitat available given precipitation patterns in this region, and hunters may have more opportunity to take advantage of freeze-thaw events that often result in greater duck movements.
- Moving this entire region into the South Zone would likely result in season dates that would be too late for most hunters and would come at the cost of some of the weeks with the highest harvest in this region.

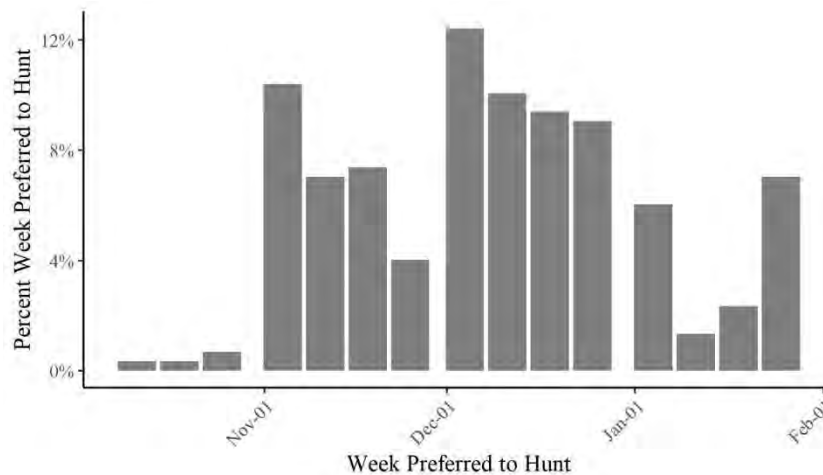


Figure 17. One week most preferred to hunt ducks by survey respondents and workshop participants in the Southeast Region.

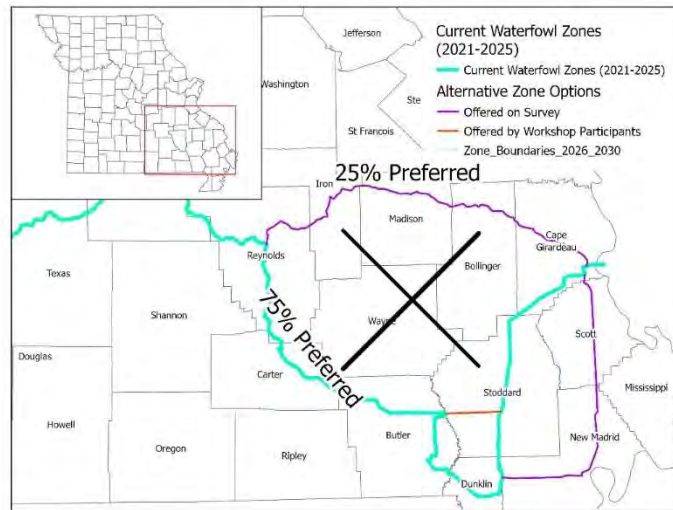


Figure 18. Map showing zone boundary options near the Southeast Region and preferred zone boundary of hunters that hunt near the black “X” and would be most affected by a change in the zone boundary. Out of the individuals and small groups that hunt most in this region, attended a workshop, and would be affected by a zone boundary change, 75% would prefer the zone boundary not change and keep the current zone boundary, while 25% of participants would prefer the zone boundary change to move the region entirely into the South Zone.

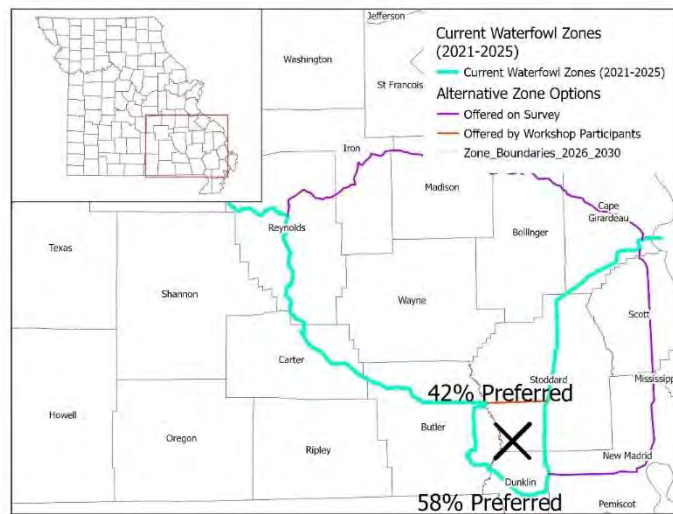


Figure 19. Map showing zone boundary options near the Stoddard Region and preferred zone boundary of hunters that hunt near the black “X” and would be most affected by a change in the zone boundary. Out of the individuals and small groups that hunt most in this region, attended a workshop, and would be affected by a zone boundary change, 58% would prefer the zone boundary not change and keep the current zone boundary, while 42% of participants would prefer the zone boundary change to move the region entirely into the South Zone.

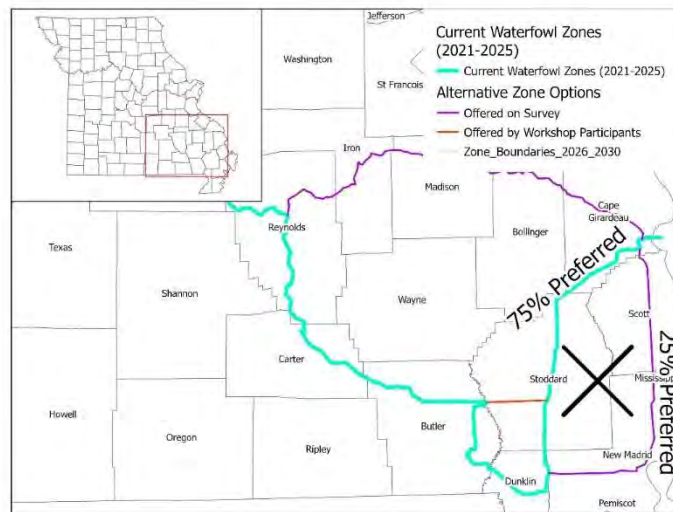


Figure 20. Map showing zone boundary options near the Southeast Region and preferred zone boundary of hunters that hunt near the black “X” and would be most affected by a change in the zone boundary. Out of the individuals and small groups that hunt most in this region, attended a workshop, and would be affected by a zone boundary change, 75% would prefer the zone boundary not change and keep the current zone boundary, while 25% of participants would prefer the zone boundary change to move the region entirely into the Middle Zone.

## SEASON DATE FORMULA RATIONALE

### 60-Day Season Date Formulas

#### *North Zone Formula Recommendation*

- A continuous season that opens the last Saturday in October for 60 days.
- The season currently opens on the Saturday nearest October 31 with no split.

#### Hunter Input

- Survey data pointed to a nearly even split between offering seasons like what we have now (30%), earlier seasons (20%) later than what we now have (30%), and adding a split (20%). Nearly all phone, e-mail, and mail correspondence outside of hunter workshops and public surveys were hunters in the north zone explaining their preferences and reasoning for earlier seasons in the North Zone. Workshop participants also expressed a strong desire for earlier seasons, except in Northwest and Northeast Missouri where a few river hunting groups desired later seasons.
- Most hunters surveyed in the North Zone did not prefer a split season option, and the continuous season was preferred. Many comments received at the workshops regarding the split centered around uncertainty of the timing in weather patterns and duck migrations every year, and adding a split was not worth the risk of missing a migration day.

- Most workshop participants felt that the change from the last Saturday in October to the Saturday closest October 31 meant they missed out on too many early season flight days that occur around Halloween.
- Most counties within the proposed North Zone boundaries prefer to hunt in the month of November, with a few most preferring to hunt in October or December.
- There were numerous comments received regarding preferred season dates; however, most comments were followed by a statement indicating that although they may prefer different season dates, they would also be satisfied if nothing changed.

#### Potential Impacts

- Given the nearly even divide between those hunters in the North Zone wanting much earlier/slightly earlier seasons and those wanting season the same/slightly later, this change will split the difference. Compared to the current formula, the proposed season date change will result in the season opening the same time as it does now during three of the five years from 2026-2030 and a week earlier in the other two years.
- During the two years the season will be earlier, it will provide North Zone hunters more days to hunt when harvest is typically higher and early season migrations are underway. The change will reduce harvest opportunity in late December, however, that is one of the lowest harvest weeks in the North Zone.
- This shift is not so great that it should adversely affect the hunters who wanted the season date formula to remain the same or even shift later and will still provide field hunters and big water hunters opportunity at times they prefer hunting after hunting success declines for those hunting shallow water.

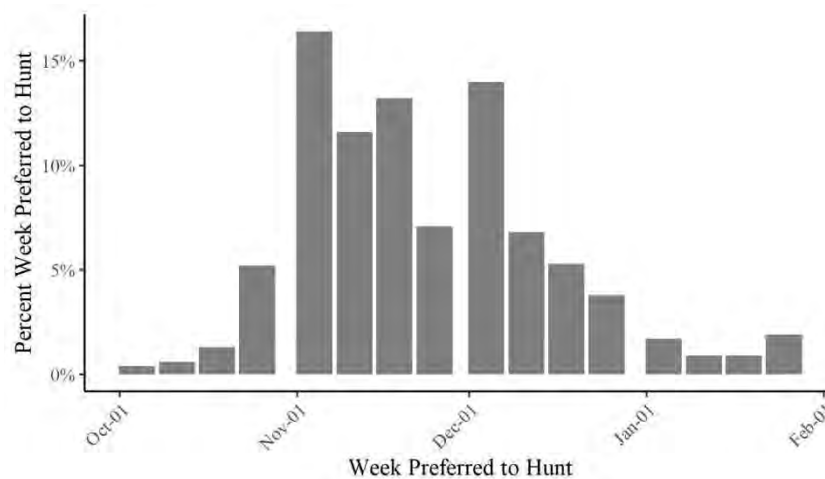


Figure 21. One week most preferred to hunt ducks by survey respondents and workshop participants in the proposed North Zone.

### ***Middle Zone Formula Recommendation***

- A split season that opens on the Saturday closest November 6 until the Monday closest December 15<sup>th</sup>, closes for five days, and then reopens for the remaining number of days.
- The season currently opens on the first Saturday in November for 9 days, closes for five days, and then reopens for the remaining 51 days.

### Hunter Input

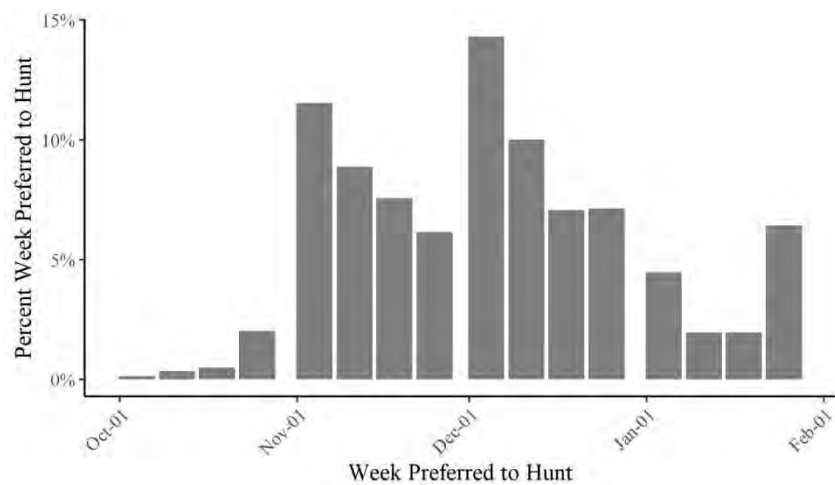
- Hunters in the Middle Zone provided mixed results on season timing, with about 25% of hunters indicating the timing was about right. Most hunters preferred later season dates (35%), but there were still 15% of hunters that preferred earlier season dates. Twenty (20) percent of hunters also indicated that they would prefer the timing of the split to change but the start and end of the season remain the same. Five percent of hunters had no preference.
- Hunter preference in the Middle Zone varies greatly, with hunters preferring both early and late season hunting opportunities, as early as October and as late as January 31. Most workshop discussions revolved around slightly later season timing and by far the largest point of discussion was the timing of the Middle Zone split.
- Many hunters that preferred early season hunting voiced concerns over the current timing of the split, which occurs when large numbers of early dabblers and the first major movements of mallards occur in the zone. These hunters indicated that a split in December would be preferable, as it would give ducks a break once there are fewer new ducks arriving in the area and it would allow for hunting throughout the month of November. Many hunters that preferred early season hunting indicated they would likely be satisfied with a slightly later opening if the split was moved out of November.
- Workshop participants that preferred later season hunting preferred the split in early November; however, they acknowledged the “lull” in harvest and hunting success in mid-December, and with a later start date that allowed for later season hunting opportunities, it would balance out some of the loss of later season opportunities with a December split.

### Potential Impacts

- The proposed Middle Zone season date formula will provide more days in January for late season opportunity while continuing to provide early season opportunity for the hunters that prefer hunting in early November.
- The change in timing of the split will prevent the Middle Zone from missing a substantial number of days in November despite the shift to a later start. For those hunters who hunt in locations that depend on early season migrants and flight days, the November split from 2021-2025 significantly reduced hunting opportunity. A significant migration, including mallards, often occurs around Veteran’s Day, and has occurred during the split in recent years, reducing hunting opportunity on these flight days.
- Delaying the season start until the Saturday closest November 6 will allow for more hunting opportunities into early January for those hunters that prefer later season dates. Moving the split to December should provide pressure relief for the ducks after hunting

season has been open for a significant amount of time and create better hunting opportunities late in the season.

- We recognize that these season dates may be later than preferred by some hunters especially around Smithville, portions of the Missouri River bottoms in western Missouri, the Ozarks, and the reservoirs such as Wappapello. We are hopeful that hunters from these regions recognize that one of the reasons we proposed changing the timing of the split to December instead of November was to keep some of the early season hunting opportunity lost by shifting the season later to the Saturday closest November 6.
- Hunter preferences in the St. Charles region prefer season date preferences that do not entirely align with the North Zone or Middle Zone. By moving this region into the Middle Zone that now contains a split in December instead of November, this will hopefully help alleviate the loss of early season hunting opportunity with a start the Saturday closest November 6. The timing of the split in December will allow for hunting opportunity throughout November when many ducks are arriving in the area.
- We are hopeful that hunters around West Central Missouri recognize that their season date preferences really did not align with the Middle or South Zones. The tradeoff was between staying in the Middle Zone and having a season that opens earlier than desired by many hunters in this region and moving to the South Zone and opening later than most hunters preferred (even those hunters that wanted later dates in the region). While remaining in the Middle North Zone will include days in early November, which may not be desired by all, it will provide early season opportunity in November. The shift to a later start will allow for hunting slightly later into January for those that want to hunt in mid-January.



22. One week most preferred to hunt ducks by survey respondents and workshop participants in the proposed Middle Zone.

### ***South Zone Formula Recommendation***

- No Change: A split season that opens on Thanksgiving Day for four days, closes, and then reopens from December 7 through January 31, the latest the federal framework allows.

#### Hunter Input

- The most popular week to hunt in the South Zone was the second week of January, with most counties preferring to hunt in the month of January.
- Survey results indicated that most hunters would prefer a split season in the South Zone, and the split to occur the first week of December.
- Survey results indicate that many hunters in the South Zone would still prefer to hunt later, however, duck hunting is only allowed until January 31 due to pair bonding and other important life-cycle events for ducks.
- Throughout the workshops in the South Zone, there were mixed opinions about opening on Thanksgiving Day for four days and just waiting until December 2 to open for a continuous 60-day season. Overall, opinions were very mixed, but many hunters acknowledged that opening on Thanksgiving through the weekend allowed for an opportunity to hunt over the holidays with family and friends from out-of-town.

#### Potential Impacts

- This option maintains offering a season as late as possible while preserving hunting opportunity over the Thanksgiving weekend, a popular time to hunt, especially with family, for many duck hunters.
- This option maintains the opportunity for hunting late season mallards and divers on reservoirs, which is the most popular habitat to hunt in the South Zone.
- These season dates will continue to be much too late for those hunters who target early season migrants and wood ducks on small water bodies in the Ozarks. These hunters would be best served by North Zone dates.
- Late season hunting opportunity likely allows for hunting during periods of “reverse migrations”, and hunters continue to note hunting can be very good on days with strong south winds. It appears that as ducks winter further north and more quickly begin migrating north that spring migration may begin earlier and that ducks may be exposed to more hunting pressure during spring migration. We heard similar comments from hunters in West Central Missouri that want to hunt later in January due to the abundance of ducks that arrive during a thaw after the region has experienced a solid freeze.

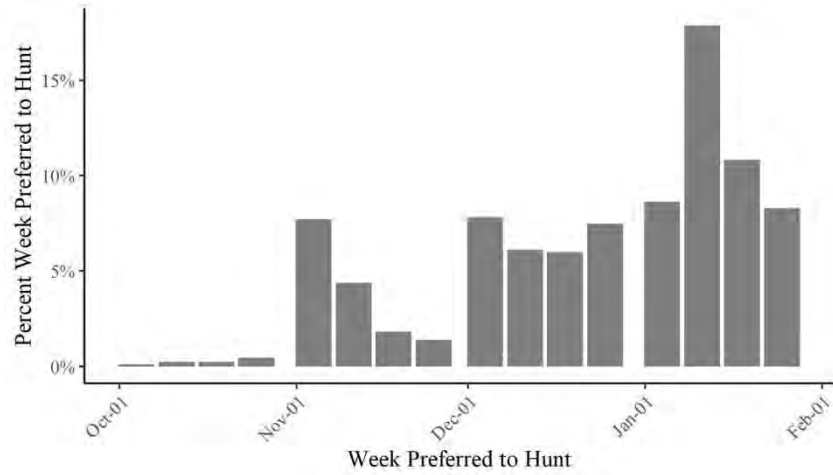


Figure 23. One week most preferred to hunt ducks by survey respondents and workshop participants in the proposed South Zone.

## APPENDICES

### Recommended Season Date Formulas (60-Day Season) 2026-2030

#### *North Zone*

- Open last Saturday in October for sixty (60) days.

#### *Middle Zone*

- Open the Saturday closest November 6 until Monday closest December 15, close on Monday closest December 15 for five (5) days, open remaining number of days.

#### *South Zone*

- Open Thanksgiving Day for four (4) days, close through December 6, reopen December 7 through January 31.

### Recommended Zones 2026-2030

#### *North Zone*

- That portion of Missouri north of a line running west from the Illinois border at Lock and Dam 25 to Sandy Slough Road East; west on Sandy Slough Road East to Sandy Slough Road North; west on Sandy Slough Road North to Lincoln County Hwy. N; west on Lincoln County Hwy. N to Mo. Hwy. 79; south on Mo. Hwy. 79 to Mo. Hwy. 47; west on Mo. Hwy. 47 to I-70; west on I-70 to U.S. Hwy. 63; north on U.S. Hwy. 63 to U.S. Hwy. 24; west on U.S. Hwy. 24 to Mo. Hwy. 10; west on Mo. Hwy. 10 to U.S. Hwy. 69; north on U.S. Hwy. 69 to Mo. Hwy. 116; west on Mo. Hwy. 116 to U.S. Hwy. 59; south on U.S. Hwy. 59 to the Kansas border.

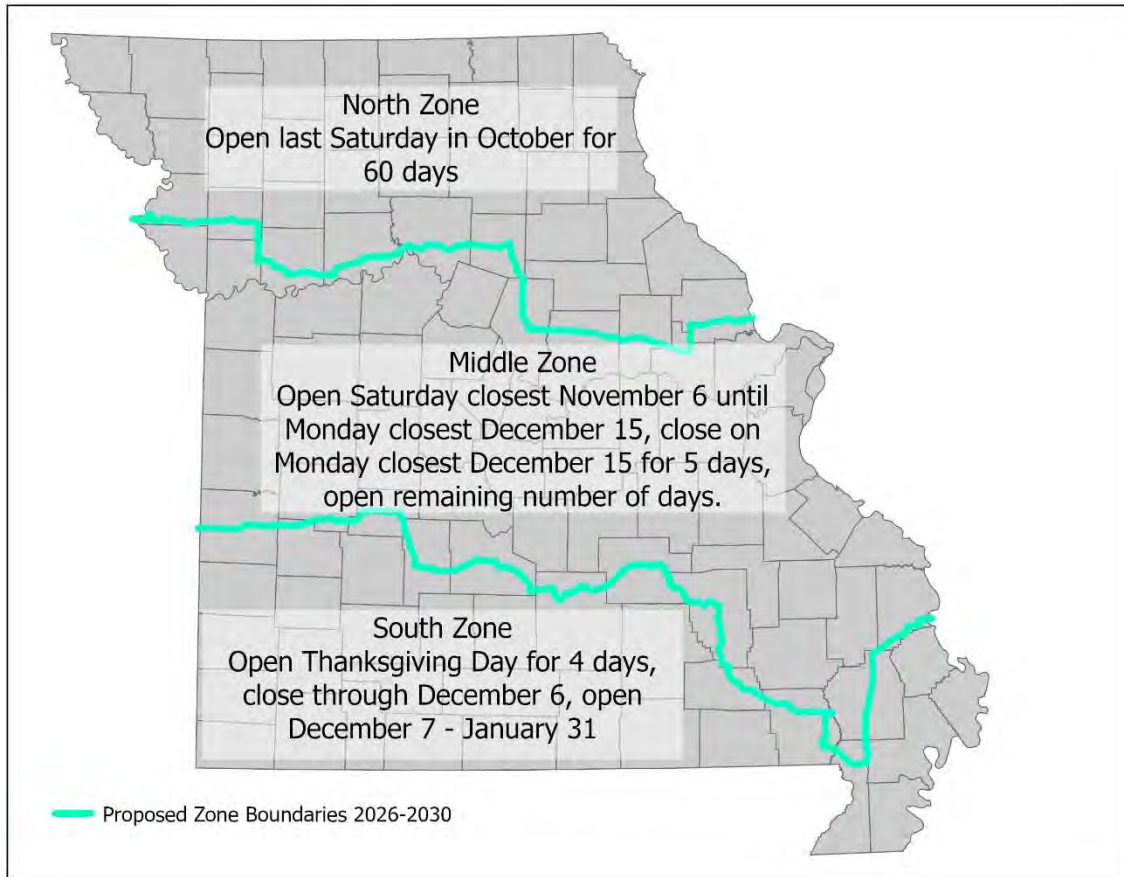
#### *Middle Zone*

- The remainder of Missouri not included in other zones.

#### *South Zone*

- That portion of Missouri south of a line running west from the Illinois border on Mo. Hwy. 74 to Mo. Hwy. 25; south on Mo. Hwy. 25 to U.S. Hwy. 62; west on U.S. Hwy. 62 to Mo. Hwy. 53; north on Mo. Hwy. 53 to Mo. Hwy. 51; north on Mo. Hwy. 51 to U.S. Hwy. 60; west on U.S. Hwy. 60 to Mo. Hwy. 21; north on Mo. Hwy. 21 to Mo. Hwy. 72; west on Mo. Hwy. 72 to Mo. Hwy. 32; west on Mo. Hwy. 32 to U.S. Hwy. 65; north on U.S. Hwy. 65 to U.S. Hwy. 54; west on U.S. Hwy. 54 to the Kansas border.

**Supplemental Materials**



*Figure 24. Recommended duck season date formulas and zone boundaries for Missouri duck seasons 2026-2030.*

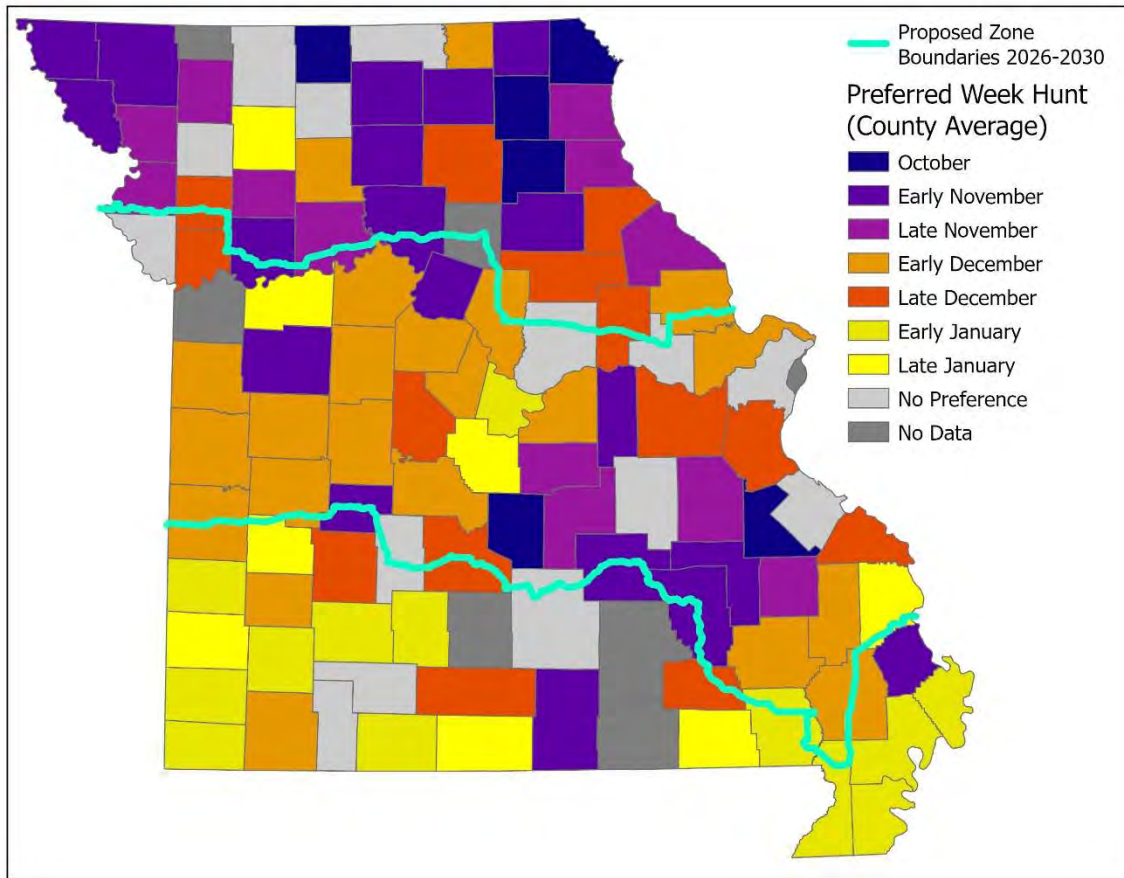


Figure 25. Map showing the most preferred time to duck hunt by county, in Missouri.

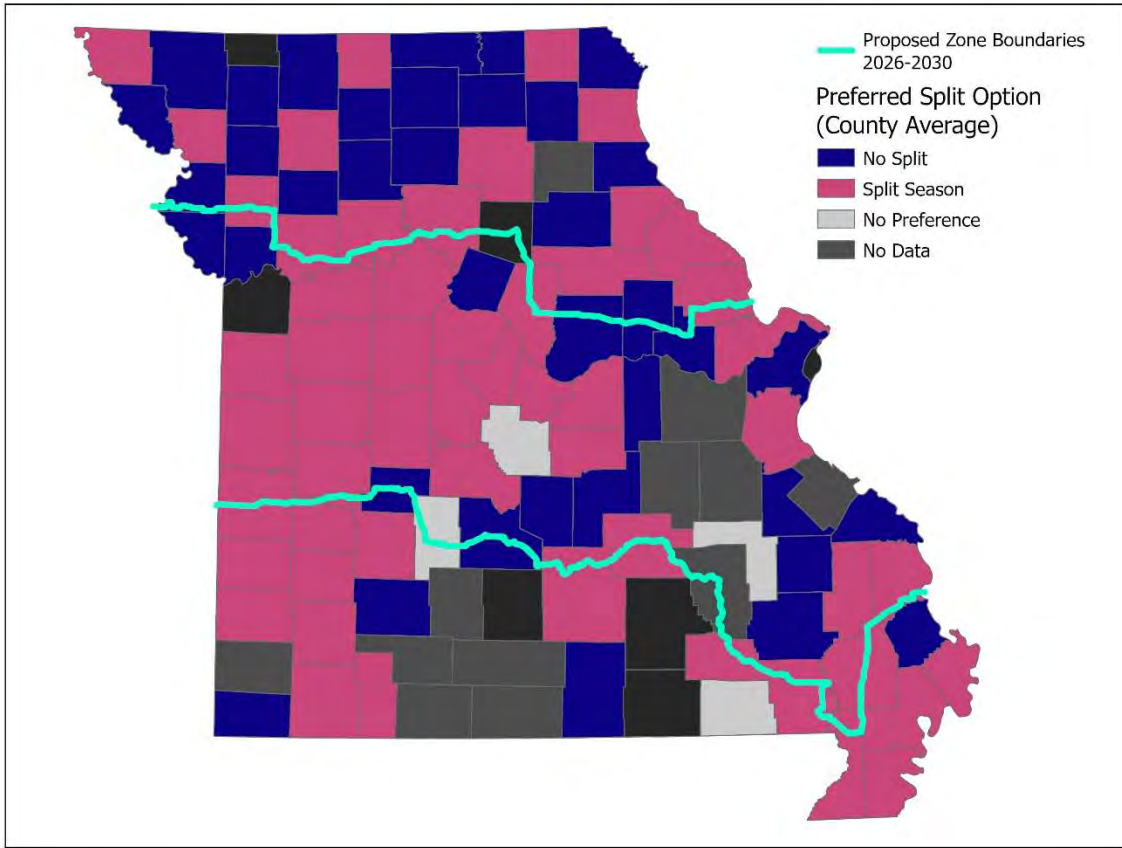


Figure 26. Map showing if a split season or continuous season is preferred, by county, in Missouri.