

*This notice is published by Alterra Wageningen UR on October 5<sup>th</sup> 2009*

## **Evaluation of overwintering policy for geese and widgeons**

**The Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality informed the Second Chamber of Parliament about the evaluation of the policy on overwintering geese and widgeons. About 60% of the geese overwinter in the designated areas and approximately 40% in regular farming areas. Up till now actively driving doesn't result into further concentration of the geese into the designated areas. The policy for overwintering geese and widgeons amounts to ca €17 million a year.**

*During the winter, many geese and widgeons migrate to the Netherlands where they find attractive areas with sufficient food. The overwintering species include the white-fronted goose, the greylag goose, the barnacle goose, the bean goose and the widgeon. Watching migratory geese in the winter is a wonderful nature experience for many people. Because the numbers of migrating birds have increased sharply, there is also a less desirable effect for farmers: agricultural damage. This was the reason for new policy. Together with relevant organisations (VBN, KNJV, LTO, NM and SBB), the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality established the fauna management policy framework. This policy framework sought a balance between providing overwintering possibilities for geese and widgeons and limiting the agricultural damage caused by these birds to an acceptable level. The core of this policy is that geese in designated areas are left undisturbed, while outside such areas they can be actively driven away and consequently become concentrated in the designated areas. On behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, Alterra evaluated the policy for overwintering geese and widgeons during the period 2005-2008 in cooperation with SOVON, Bureau Waardenburg, CLM Onderzoek & Advies, Altenburg & Wymenga, Oord Faunatechniek and LEI Wageningen UR.*



Of the 60% overwintering in designated areas, approximately 35% concerns farming-foraging areas and 25% nature reserves. The development of the numbers of migratory geese and widgeons has remained essentially unchanged following the

implementation of the overwintering policy (between 1975 in 2008, there has been an annual increase of approximately 6%; during the past five years, there have been signs that the numbers are beginning to stabilise). The research showed that the quantity of food in the designated areas – even if the numbers continue to increase – is still sufficient for the next 10 years. After this, food shortages may occur. So the food supply is not a limiting factor for the time being. In addition, no indications have been found that the overwintering geese have a negative effect on nesting meadow birds.

However, the overwintering policy for geese and widgeons is expensive. Every year, the government pays approximately €17 million as compensation for the overwintering areas. The costs turned out to be higher than anticipated. There are several reasons for this. For example, farmers who agree to a nature management package are given a higher compensation, and the damage outside the designated overwintering areas has not decreased as anticipated. Moreover, the overwintering geese are staying longer in the Netherlands and are consequently eating more of the valuable spring grass.

Based on these research results, policymakers have been advised to alter the spatial limits of the designated overwintering areas, to take measures to promote the spatial concentration of the birds and to ensure that the areas concerned are involved in this policy.

The research has provided a treasure trove of information and expertise about geese and widgeons and their habitats: food availability; the use of terrain by geese and widgeons; the possibilities for limiting damage; the importance of the size and shape of the designated overwintering areas; the development in the bird populations at the national level and in an international context; the relationship between geese and meadow birds; the compatibility of geese management with the operational management of farms and the costs of the overwintering policy.

The research project was completed with the publication 12 sub-reports and a synthesis report. For more information about the research, go to the website [www.kennisonline.wur.nl](http://www.kennisonline.wur.nl) (<http://www.kennisonline.wur.nl/BO/BO-02/002/018/beschrijving.htm>). You can also download the report (<http://www.kennisonline.wur.nl/BO/BO-02/002/018/producten.htm>).

Text: Dick Melman, Alterra Wageningen UR  
Photography: Hugh Jansman, Alterra Wageningen UR