

Opinion

Canada Geese Issue Full of Spite, Hypocrisy, Waste and No Solutions!

by **Bud Jones**

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In March last year Minister of Conservation, at the strident urging of Federated Farmers New Zealand, removed Canada geese from the wildlife schedule of game birds and reduced them to the official status of "pest."

The decision by the minister showed a lack of strength in the face of a vociferous lobby group as well as significant backward thinking reminiscent of the 1930 Deer Menace conference which condemned deer as pests to be exterminated. The damage has been done. A bird revered world wide as a stunning game bird is now designated as a "pest" akin to the noxious animal tag once stuck on wild deer. There was absolutely no need to brand Canada geese as "pests".

Arguably, Federated Farmers reacted to Fish and Game NZ's "dirty dairying" campaign by vowing to get Canada geese branded as "pests". Smug from achieving success with the Minister, Federated Farmers then realised it had created its own problem, of having no means to reduce geese numbers as had traditionally been done for decades utilising recreational hunters as harvesters at no cost. So it made application to the Minister of Conservation for a subsidy to "control" geese, [read, slaughter enormous numbers]. So much for Federated Farmers' long standing philosophy of market ideals; of abhorring any and every subsidy, a revelation of serious hypocrisy.

Kate Wilkinson, at the behest of Minister for Primary Industries David Carter, then gave a grant of \$100,000 "to help fund the interim control" of Canada geese during this year's moult. The consequence has been the recent slaughter of 18,000 Canada geese at Canterbury's Lake Ellesmere which, frankly, was a callous, cruel and unjustified slaughter of a world recognised game bird. The birds, all laid to waste and left to rot in the lake, were killed using lead shot which has been against the law of this land for many years! Clearly a travesty when Federated Farmers are able to use \$100,000 of taxpayer money to slaughter geese, which are a public asset.

The result showing numerous dead bodies was screened on a prime television slot (TV3). This news will be filtering overseas and further undermines the "Clean, Green, 100% Pure" branding for New Zealand used by tourism, agriculture and exporters. Minister of Tourism John Key should be concerned. Is he? Does he even know or concern himself that the internet will be awash with this story?

The Minister of Conservation's move with a stroke of a pen, to convert the Canada goose from a game bird into a so called "pest" in legislation was completely and utterly out of sync with worldwide thinking in wildlife management and game and fish departments. The minister, to make matters worse, had no majority mandate to make such a decision.

There were far, far preferable alternatives. World-wide wildlife conservation institutions show these issues can be sensibly worked out by communication, co-ordination, common-sense and game management.

After all, a very small number of properties, in the whole scheme of farming, are affected by Canada geese. Prominent scientist Murray Williams has done the research and the maths. He reports what miniscule affect geese actually have on the sum total of NZ grass available for farming, [“the equivalent of 1000 dairy cows flying around the skies sneaking free grass”]. Further, Williams states, “the debate over goose status played out with no demonstration that geese grazing actually affected any farm’s bottom line, even the Minister’s department couldn’t provide her with one....not a good sign, if you happen to believe in evidence-based decision-making”.

One alternative was for Canada geese to remain a game bird in legislative status, with landowners given the right to take control measures on their own land if they were deemed necessary. Another would be to identify and establish farmers with paddocks at risk or showing “damage”, almost all of which would be adjacent to lakes; have them mapped, and a dossier thus compiled. Government could have spent the \$100,000 on constructing goose mounds in those paddocks, similar to those on the edge of Lake Ellesmere which are pits with seats and essentially below ground. Each affected farmer could then be provided with 50-75 decoys to store in preparation and a communication email/phone network hot line to Fish and Game or NZ Game Bird Hunters’ Association as co-ordinators. When geese establish a pattern of coming in and are set in their ways - and they always behave that way - the hunt is on. The farmer communicates an alert, hunters are set up and the hunt has the element of surprise. Subsequently geese will move off and my experience is they don’t come back.

I hunted them seriously in the Leeston district, Birdlings Flat, Little River area, the high country lakes, Mt. White Station and others for 25 years, and they are just about impossible to hunt unless one lets them behave normally and make the mistakes. Being highly socially organized and gregarious is their Achilles Heel. They cannot be pursued. However, organized drives can also be successful though less pragmatic in logistics and fail to address individual farm paddocks of concern.

Such a regime of goose pits/decoys and communication lines are the permanent way for all concerned to benefit from this national asset. Any farmer refusing hunting permission or rejecting the scheme could be struck off the list and left to deal with the geese on his own.

An argument could also be made for a sale arrangement of goose meat to processing plants to produce superb prime game meat or sausages plus remnant off cuts for pet food processing. Venison has already shown the way forward on this subject; even “farmed geese” harvested on properties or a regime of safari hunting as an addition to farm income. Designated paddocks on farms could be planted and maintained FOR geese as a lure where harvesting or safari hunting could take place. Profit from farming does not have to come from sheep, cattle and cows alone. It bewilders me why this has not crossed the consciousness of ministers on down the hierarchy to farmers.

Instead the Minister of Conservation and Federated Farmers NZ, under the auspices of the Department of Conservation chose to murder 18,000 geese and leave them to rot. This was a shameful act in any sphere of thinking and totally out of keeping with a civilized society in a world of starvation.

Footnote:

Bud Jones is a North Wairarapa farmer and hunting and fishing sportsman dedicated to conservation.

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