



Jim Lytle

Research evaluates waterfowl management in rice

For Mississippi farmers whose lands provide waterfowl hunting sites once the crops are harvested, hunting leases can be a lucrative additional income.

By Bob Ratliff

Mississippi State wildlife scientists are finding, however, that waste rice available to waterfowl in the Mississippi Delta—where duck and geese hunting generates nearly \$30 million annually—may not be as abundant as previously thought.

A new study by MAFES and the Forest and Wildlife Research Center is evaluating the effectiveness of several postharvest practices for conserving waste rice for wintering waterfowl.

Funded by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the new study, when completed, will provide cost-effectiveness data of the practices, as well as outlining other benefits to landowners.

Richard M. Kaminski, professor of wildlife and fisheries, said previous research documented how wintering ducks and geese were dependent on the Delta's abundant waste rice and other croplands for food.

"In the mid-1990s, it was estimated that nearly 200,000 acres of rice land and about 320,000 total cropland acres were managed for waterfowl on private lands in the Delta," Kaminski said. "The earlier research showed from 140 to 490 pounds of waste rice per acre."

The latest research, he added, "Indicates that the amount of waste rice has decreased to less than 100 pounds per acre."

Kaminski said the declines can be attributed to improved efficiency of grain harvest, increased germination rates in the field, decomposition and consumption by birds and small animals before migrant waterfowl arrive.

Other financial sponsors of the project include the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission; Ducks Unlimited's Institute for Wetland and Waterfowl Research; Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks; North American Wetland Conservation Act; and the U.S. Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Md..

Based at the Delta Research and Extension Center in Stoneville, the MSU study will analyze five treatment scenarios to identify the best two or three.

Kaminski said those practices that seem to be the "best" at Stoneville then will be tested on private rice-producing lands in the region.

"This study will determine whether the costs are met or exceeded by their benefits," Kaminski said.