

Working Together for Wildlife: State Wildlife Action Plans provide information on priority for species, habitats, conservation actions, and identify collaborations that should be integral to the development of Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs)

It was only 5 years ago that leaders of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) championed the development of state wildlife action plans (SWAPs) for each state and territory. Leaders from FWS and AFWA proclaimed,

“The wildlife action plans collectively form a nationwide strategy to prevent wildlife from becoming endangered. The state wildlife action plans (SWAPs) stand out from many prior conservation plans because of the broad participation and open planning process. By working with stakeholders and other members of the community, wildlife agencies translated pressing conservation needs into practical actions. This resulted in wildlife action plans that are firmly grounded in science and successfully balance differing interests in how we use the lands and waters that are home to wildlife.”

More recently, the US Fish and Wildlife Service announced a commitment to organize conservation collaborations at landscape scale, largely in recognition that climate change will require communication and conservation planning in different forms than we have used in the past. **“LCCs will engage in biological planning, conservation design, inventory and monitoring program design, and other types of conservation-based scientific research, planning and coordination.”** Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs) are applied conservation science partnerships that will drive success at landscape scales. They are partnerships between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the broad conservation community. The FWS has provided assurance that states will be essential partners.

This is familiar territory for state fish and wildlife agencies and their partners who developed and are now implementing SWAPs. The vision for LCCs is ambitious and structures for success are organizing at a rapid pace. Recognizing that the pace of implementation will make collaboration challenging, state fish and wildlife agencies offer the following guidance on how to build connectivity with State Wildlife Action Plans.

“Working Together for Wildlife” will be on the right track if we build on the existing plans, processes and conservation actions identified in the state wildlife action plans that were developed with and approved by the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

State Wildlife Action Plans include information on the distribution and abundance of wildlife. State plans have already used expert processes and identified animals (and sometimes plants) that are species of greatest concern need (SGCN). Many of these species will be further affected by climate change. A compilation of these state lists, by LCC geography, is an obvious place to start to compile lists of “focal species” for

strategic habitat conservation within the LCC. Although states used different methods to generate lists of SGCN, a compilation of SGCN by LCC geography, or sub-unit, along with FWS trust species, and species that are economically and recreationally important should form the starting point for conservation planning in each LCC.

Action Item 1. Develop a list that compiles and integrates SGCN, FWS trust species, and other important species by LCC geography.

Result - The conservation community within each LCC will be working from the same base list of SGCN. Through collaborative participation, the LCC geography list would be a useful reference to evaluate regional priorities, particularly as it relates to identifying species that rank high for vulnerability assessments.

Action Item 2. Develop a database that assigns integrated lists of SGCN, FWS trust species and other important species by habitat type, in each LCC. These data will support a collaborative process to identify a set of “focal species” that represent groups of species (plants and animals) that can be used in strategic habitat conservation.

Result - The conservation community within each LCC will be working from the same “core framework” of habitats and associated species that represent conservation concern in the face of climate change.

Additional Benefit: State fish and wildlife agencies, as they wish, will consider this LCC list (with state level additions) a revision to Required Element 1. States and other conservation partners would always be welcome to add to the list at the state, local, or project level.

State Wildlife Action Plans describe locations and relative conditions of habitats essential to conservation. State plans have identified habitats essential to SGCN. While different planning methodologies were used in different states, building on these existing habitat priorities would provide a defensible framework of LCC priority habitats. In addition, many states identified priority places, which have already been compiled by the broad conservation community into a representative framework for conservation action. Because “LCCs will comprise a seamless national network focused on helping conservation agencies and organizations maintain landscapes capable of sustaining abundant, diverse and healthy populations of fish, wildlife and plants”, there is every reason to evaluate and build upon the existing framework. There are gaps in the existing framework it is not seamless but the priority places already identified by SWAP-supported conservation collaborations is an existing reference for guiding LCC priorities.

Action Item 3 – Develop maps and products that represent the existing framework of “priority places” identified by SWAPs, by LCC geography using a common mapping system.

Result - The LCC conservation collaboration can utilize the existing habitat conservation framework that was developed in cooperation with partners, to guide conservation while LCC conservation plans are developed.

Action Item 4 – Support and guide the development of a consistent habitat mapping across the LCCs utilizing the most recent satellite and other remote sensing imagery. These maps will support models relating population objectives for focal species to existing and future habitat.

Result – Strategic habitat conservation within the LCC will benefit from a consistent mapping and conservation planning methodology. States with existing “priority places” will be able to build additional support when those geographies are recognized within a regional framework. States that have been unable to develop geographically specific “priority places” will be able to participate in conservation planning and use the regional priorities to the degree desirable.

Additional Benefit: State fish and wildlife agencies that participate in conservation planning to identify priority habitats and priority places for conservation action can consider this regional framework of priority habitats (with state level additions) a revision to Required Element 2. States and partners would be encouraged to build on the “priority places framework” at the state, local, or project level.

Action Item 5. Develop projections of future climate conditions and response models to estimate how the habitats will change under various climate scenarios and from other stressors.

Result – This information will support vulnerability assessments and scenario planning in support of adaptation planning for climate change. The conservation community can evaluate their conservation actions in light of climate change and the projected gains or losses of habitats.

State Wildlife Action Plans describe the conservation actions proposed to conserve species and habitats. State plans have identified conservation actions that will conserve SGCN by reducing threats and restoring habitat. Some state action plans contain so many actions that setting priorities is difficult. Which conservation actions are the most important for immediate and near term funding? Strategic habitat conservation implemented cooperatively within an LCC could inform the actions of partners and other interested parties in their delivery of on-the-ground conservation.

Action Item 6 – Support strategic habitat conservation planning that develops proposed conservation actions based on models that relate these actions to population objectives for focal species. This will assist conservation partners in setting priorities and allocating resources. This also will assist in identification of assumption-based research to improve conservation planning and delivery.

Result - Implementing conservation actions for focal species based on strategic habitat planning should make conservation more effective and efficient by allocating resources to the most important actions in the most important places.

State Wildlife Action Plansincluded broad public participation through ambitious coordination with federal and local agencies as well as Indian tribes. A desired outcome is that “LCCs will play an important role in helping partners establish common goals and priorities, so they can be more efficient and effective in targeting the right science in the right places”. State plans were developed through broad public participation and extensive coordination from the conservation community. Many states have established implementation committees or other state-level coordinating organizations with developed administrative structures and processes to support collaborations that are integral to implementation of conservation. Building connectivity with and supporting these existing collaborative structures will enhance implementation of LCC conservation plans at state and local levels.

Action Item 7 – Incorporate existing state action plan implementation and coordinating organizations and structures into the implementation of conservation actions in the LCC.

Result – The existing structures can help to speed up implementation through the collaborations already in place and working.

State Wildlife Action Plansincluded plans for monitoring wildlife as well as monitoring the effectiveness of the conservation actions and for adapting these conservation actions to respond to new information. States identified plans for monitoring species and habitats. However, most states are still struggling with full implementation of monitoring (MON), measuring management effectiveness (MEE), and collecting and sharing information that makes adaptive thinking and structured decision making possible. Lack of monitoring is partly from lack of agreement on protocols, although adequate funds and staff time is probably the biggest obstacle. Some states are further along with MON and MEE than others, but the experiences of selected states would inform the developing LCC of recent progress and plans.

Action Item 8 – Develop and implement multi-agency monitoring plans to inform adaptive implementation of conservation actions in State Wildlife Action Plans and within the LCC.

Result – Multi-agency collaboration in monitoring using protocols and systems developed by partners will be critical to obtaining information to support adaptive management that is essential to successful implementation of state wildlife action plans and strategic habitat conservation.

How can future SWAP revisions contribute to the vision for conservation science partnerships that inform on-the-ground conservation efforts?

Action Item – States must revise their State Wildlife Action Plans by 2015. However, many states planned to revise their action plans after five years and have already begun the revisions. LCCs and the conservation planning products developed by LCCs will be important in revising state wildlife action plans especially for climate change.

Implementation: Conservation actions would be implemented by the partners within the LCC. Funding for implementation is expected to come from a variety of sources including federal, state, and local agencies and non-governmental agencies.