



WESTERN GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION

C.L. "Butch" Otter
Governor of Idaho
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Vice Chair

Pam O. Inmann
Executive Director

Headquarters:
1600 Broadway
Suite 1700
Denver, CO 80202

303-623-9378
Fax 303-534-7309

Washington, D.C. Office:
400 N. Capitol Street, N.W.
Suite 388
Washington, D.C. 20001

202-624-5402
Fax 202-624-7707

www.westgov.org

October 7, 2010

The Honorable Ken Salazar
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W., Room 6151
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave. S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretaries Salazar and Vilsack:

The Western Governors' Wildlife Council is pleased to provide information and recommendations for consideration as part of the America's Great Outdoors Initiative (AGO). The Council is made up of wildlife policy leadership from 17 western states and was created by the Western Governors in 2008 to implement the Governors' Wildlife Corridors Initiative report.

One of the primary tasks of the Wildlife Council is to establish a useful and consistent source of mapped biological information across the West that decision makers and the public can use to identify and better understand crucial wildlife habitat and wildlife corridors. The Governors have called for each state over the next three years to create a wildlife Decision Support System (DSS) that will be compatible across the West. It is intended that the DSSs will support landscape-scale wildlife habitat and corridor identification, conservation planning, and better information for the public regarding important wildlife habitats.

This effort of the Governors, and the many stakeholders who are assisting in this project, would be valuable to address topics being considered by AGO as follows:

Challenges - *What obstacles exist to achieving your goals for conservation, recreation, or reconnecting people to the outdoors?*

Large, intact and functioning ecosystems, healthy fish and wildlife populations, and public access to natural landscapes are vital to our nation's quality of life and economic well-being. Important wildlife movement corridors and crucial wildlife habitats within these landscapes are critical to maintaining healthy lands.

As states have primary trust and legal obligations to manage and conserve wildlife in the United States, it is imperative that states generate and maintain landscape-scale wildlife information. Western states must, however, work closely with federal agencies that have management

authority over much of the public land in the region. The Department of the Interior (DOI), in particular, is launching a number of similar wildlife mapping efforts, including Landscape Conservation Cooperatives and Rapid Eco-Regional Assessments. These initiatives are well-intended yet need to be well coordinated both within the DOI and with the state DSSs so that the public can be confident that governmental landscape-scale mapping tools provide consistent and complementary information. Furthermore, for the states to fully develop and maintain their wildlife DSSs over time, additional non-state resources will be required. Devoting federal resources to the states for this purpose would be an efficient use of these dollars as GIS-based state wildlife data that is available, current and compatible across the states, assist federal mapping efforts and lead to consistent public information on wildlife from both levels of government.

Both of these challenges, coordination with federal agencies and the need for federal resources, were addressed in a June 2009 Memorandum of Understanding between Western Governors and the Secretaries of the Interior, Agriculture and Energy. The goals of the MOU have yet to be fully realized, and it will require ongoing high-level attention to do so.

What Works - *Please share your thoughts and ideas on effective strategies for conservation, recreation and reconnecting people to the outdoors.*

Across the Western states, human land use and development can impact wildlife habitat unless carefully planned. Land use and development projects can affect the movement of wildlife and the functioning of ecosystems. One of the most effective strategies to abate the threats posed by any changes to habitat is to design development in a manner that protects those crucial habitats and maintains the ecological permeability of the intervening landscape so that wildlife can move between those areas. Strategies are also invaluable if they direct scarce funds towards helping to conserve key private land holdings that serve as important wildlife habitat. These strategies will become fully realized, only if there is publically available information on the status of wildlife habitat in the state.

Western state wildlife agency DSSs will utilize landscape-level mapping to visually depict crucial wildlife habitat and wildlife corridors. DSSs will be developed to promote the conservation objectives of each state wildlife agency and will give the public access to important wildlife information for use in proactive planning and decision-making processes. The development of these systems will include on-going monitoring and updating of data to maintain their relevancy. Conservation efforts will receive an invaluable new tool once state DSSs are completed.

Federal Government Role - *How can the federal government be a more effective partner in helping to achieve conservation, recreation or reconnecting people to the outdoors?*

Wildlife do not observe political or land ownership boundaries. Conservation of wildlife corridors and crucial habitat must therefore be coordinated across government, including the federal land management agencies (BLM & Forest Service); federal agencies responsible for

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water delivery and flood control (Bureau of Reclamation and the Corps of Engineers); federal wildlife agencies (Fish & Wildlife Service and NOAA Fisheries); tribal governments; states; and local governments.

As discussed above under the topic of "Challenges," close coordination with and resources from federal agencies are critical to both state and federal efforts to develop, make accessible and maintain landscape-scale wildlife data. Western Governors and their Wildlife Council are hopeful that this cooperation can be increased and expanded.

Tools - *What additional tools and resources would help your efforts be even more successful?*

According to the United States Forest Service, the United States is now losing about 2 million acres of natural land per year, or 6,000 acres per day. Not surprisingly, wildlife is impacted. It has been reported that habitat loss and fragmentation is one cause of the decline for about 83% of U.S. species. The viability of wildlife is an indicator of the functionality of ecosystems and, thus, affects the sustainability of our communities, our economies, and the Western way of life.

The Western Governors' Wildlife Council effort to create West-wide and landscape-scale wildlife DSSs will make tools available that would contribute greatly to the goals of the America's Great Outdoors Initiative. Conservation, recreation and reconnecting people to the outdoors are goals sought by state governments, as well as the federal government. Support for state wildlife DSSs will help both levels of government to meet these important objectives.

More information on the work of the Wildlife Council may be found at www.westgov.org. You may also contact either of us and Madeleine West and Paul Orbuch at the Western Governors' Association if you have any questions or require further information. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



John Harja
State of Utah, Office of the Governor
Chair, Western Governors' Wildlife Council



John Mankowski
State of Washington, Office of the Governor
Vice-Chair, Western Governors' Wildlife Council