



## ***Conserving Wildlife Corridors and Crucial Wildlife Habitat***

Wildlife and their habitat are what many people love most about the West, whether they are hunters, fishermen or wildlife watchers. Many rural communities also rely on these activities to generate revenues and support their local economies. To help ensure wildlife and local economies remain viable, states are working together through the Western Governors' Wildlife Council to develop compatible Decision Support Systems that will help in protecting crucial wildlife habitat and corridors across the region.

### **State Action**

In June 2010 Western Governors committed to having their state agencies complete and make public regionally compatible DSSs within three years. Eight regional pilot projects are underway, funded primarily by a grant from the U.S. Department of Energy. These 2-year pilots will begin to coordinate data across political jurisdictions and have states apply common definitions for crucial wildlife habitat and corridors.

### **The Western Governors' Wildlife Council**

The council was established in 2008 to develop a useful and consistent source of mapped biological information throughout the West. It receives advice and feedback from a State-Federal Implementation Group and from a Stakeholder Advisory Group.

### **Decision Support Systems are valuable in:**

- **Supporting wildlife corridor identification, conservation planning, and gross infrastructure siting efforts**
- **Ensuring wildlife information is considered early in planning and decision-making processes**
- **Providing consistent wildlife information at a landscape scale**
- **Focusing limited conservation funding to promote state conservation objectives**

Each participating state will coordinate its wildlife data with neighboring states, applying common definitions for crucial habitat and wildlife corridors. The information developed will be made publically available online by states across the entire region, and any interested party will be able to access and use the GIS-based tools that are designed to be easily interpreted.

### **Benefits of Consistent Wildlife Maps**

Change is occurring at a pace that is challenging to track for decision makers at all levels. Providing landscape-scale maps will allow them and the public to better understand potential impacts to crucial wildlife habitat and important corridors, and to identify opportunities to minimize impacts to wildlife while still pursuing necessary development. Consistent wildlife information will provide certainty to industry and allow state wildlife agencies to prioritize limited conservation funding.

### **Partnerships**

States are committed to engaging all potential users of the Decision Support Systems as they are being developed to ensure they provide necessary information and will be used. As they seek to help conserve sensitive landscapes, federal, state and local agencies are expected to use information gleaned from these systems early on in their planning and decision-making processes. Coordination between state DSS development and similar federal initiatives will also be key to their success.

## **Regional Pilot Projects**

**Alaska** is working with local and federal governments, NGOs, industry and university partners to prepare and consolidate spatial data for respective aquatic/resident fish, arctic migratory caribou herds. Through this effort they will demonstrate capabilities to define crucial habitats and corridors using common definitions outlined in a Western Governors' Wildlife Council white paper.

**Arizona, California, Nevada and Utah** are identifying areas of wildlife conservation potential at a landscape scale. Their goal is to develop a useful and consistent source of mapped biological information across the states. At the end of this two year pilot project, each of the states will be positioned for designing, building and implementing a publically available mapping tool that can be used to encourage energy development that minimizes impact to wildlife.

**Colorado & New Mexico** are working to implement an MOU signed by Governors Ritter and Richardson last December. Their joint pilot will identify and prioritize crucial habitat and important wildlife corridors in the region, and will evaluate potential threats to those corridors from future development. The creation of publically available wildlife mapping tools will guide the development of strategies to aid the management of crucial wildlife habitat and important migration corridors shared by these two states.

**Idaho & Montana** are partnering in the coordination of a transboundary wildlife mapping tool for fish, wildlife and habitats along the Idaho-Montana Divide. The pilot will focus on shrub-steppe, high desert and coniferous forest ecosystems and associated fish, wildlife and plant species in the Bailey's Ecoregional Sections of the Beaverhead Mountains, Idaho Batholith, Bitterroot Mountains, and Flathead Valley. The joint development of this mapping tool will make it easier for developers and state agencies to identify areas where development can occur with minimal impacts to wildlife.

**Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota** are jointly identifying important habitat for priority wildlife species affected by energy and transmission development. Habitat mapping will be combined with energy site planning to allow for improved risk assessment and planning of future energy and transmission sites.

**Oklahoma and Kansas** are identifying crucial Lesser Prairie Chicken habitat across the five LPC states, which include Colorado, New Mexico and Texas. Once crucial habitat for the species is identified across the five-state region, the states will work together to assess risk of habitat loss in relation to various threats, such as wind energy development and agriculture. Ultimately the states will be developing a range-wide mapping tool that could be used to identify areas important for LPC conservation, as well as connecting corridors for population maintenance.

**Washington, Idaho & Oregon** are partnering in the conceptualization and coordination of a transboundary wildlife mapping tool for fish, wildlife and habitats that occur along the Columbia Plateau Ecoregion in those three states. The pilot will focus on the Arid Lands shrub-steppe, high desert, and associated fish, wildlife, and plant species in those states. The joint development of this mapping tool will make it easier for developers and the states to identify areas where development can occur with minimal impacts to wildlife.

**Wyoming** is building a wildlife mapping tool that will function seamlessly across all political jurisdictions within the state. They will develop a centralized database for housing important wildlife information and will make that information publically available to help identify areas where development, particularly energy development, can occur with minimal impacts to wildlife.

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