



# THE WESTERN WILDLIFE

## CRUCIAL HABITAT ASSESSMENT TOOL (CHAT)

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### **Common Ground**

Wildlife and their habitat are essential pillars of life in the West. Hunters, fishermen, backpackers, birders and other enthusiasts spend their leisure time and resources viewing and engaging wildlife, while many rural communities rely on such activities to support their local economies. At the same time, economic progress across the West also depends on the successful completion of energy, transportation, land use and other large-scale development projects that must incorporate potential wildlife impacts into their planning.

A collaborative effort among 17 states, the Western Wildlife Crucial Habitat Assessment Tool (CHAT) aims to bring greater certainty and predictability to planning efforts by establishing a common starting point for discussing the intersection of development and wildlife. In its simplest form, CHAT will be an easily accessible online system of maps displaying crucial wildlife habitat and corridors across the West. While not intended for project-level assessment, CHAT will lead to fewer conflicts and surprises while ensuring wildlife values are better incorporated into land use decision-making as well as large-scale conservation projects.

### **A Bird's Eye View**

The Western Governors' Wildlife Council has agreed to common definitions of crucial wildlife habitat and corridors and issued guidelines to help each state prioritize habitat within its boundaries to meet its specific conservation objectives. The West-wide definitions will also help achieve compatibility and consistency across state boundaries and address certain discrepancies that may exist in identifying habitat and natural features along state borders.

In addition to helping states establish their individual CHATs, the Wildlife Council is creating a "regional CHAT" to provide an informed and continually updated picture of crucial wildlife habitat across the West. The state and regional CHATs will be non-regulatory but give project planners and the general public access to credible scientific data for use in planning and decision-making – including on large-scale development projects spanning multiple jurisdictions.

### **Timeline**

In June 2010, Governors across the West committed to having their states complete regionally compatible CHATs and make them public within three years. From now through October 2012, the Western Governors' Wildlife Council will develop options for constructing and maintaining the regional CHAT, while their state agencies will continue working together to compile important data sets, apply crucial habitat definitions and build and improve upon their individual state CHATs. From November 2012 to December 2013, the focus of activity will be to knit each state's crucial habitat layers together in the regional CHAT.

## **History**

Established in 1984, the Western Governors' Association (WGA) is an independent, non-partisan organization of governors from 19 Western states, two Pacific-flag territories and one commonwealth. Through WGA, member Governors identify and address key policy and governance issues in natural resources, the environment, human services, economic development, international relations, transportation and public management.

To help ensure both wildlife and local economies remain viable, WGA began examining how state wildlife agencies could be more collaborative and innovative in providing wildlife species and habitat information to their various “customers” – including Federal agencies, other state agencies, local and tribal governments, conservation advocates, business and industry groups, private landowners, outdoors enthusiasts and even foreign countries.

With the adoption of its *Wildlife Corridors Initiative Report* in June 2008, WGA created the Western Governors' Wildlife Council - consisting of designees from 17 WGA member states – and tasked its members to develop policies and tools to identify and conserve crucial wildlife habitat and corridors across the region. Now guided by WGA policy resolution 10-10, and focused on implementing the CHAT model, the Wildlife Council is working to make information on important fish and wildlife habitat compatible across the West and available to the public in 2013 for use in informing land use decisions.