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Western Governors' Wildlife Council Crucial Habitat Assessment Tool (CHAT)

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is CHAT?

A: When complete, CHAT will be an easily accessible online system of maps displaying crucial wildlife habitat and corridors. The system will provide information West-wide, but will also include CHATs for individual states as they are available. The regional CHAT will provide an informed and continually updated picture of crucial wildlife habitat across the West.

Q: Who is developing CHAT?

A: This is a collaborative project involving 17 Western states working through the Western Governors' Wildlife Council. The Council is a panel of Governors' designees from each of the states that was formed by the Western Governors' Association in 2008.

Q: What is the purpose of CHAT?

A: Economic progress across the West depends on healthy wildlife populations as well as the successful completion of energy, transportation, land use and other large-scale development projects that must incorporate potential wildlife impacts into their planning. CHAT aims to bring greater certainty and predictability to those planning efforts by establishing a common starting point for discussing the intersection of development and wildlife.

Q: What do you mean by "common starting point"?

A: The Western Governors' Wildlife Council has agreed to common definitions of crucial habitat and corridors for wildlife and issued guidelines to help each state prioritize habitat within its boundaries to meet its specific conservation objectives. The region-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.

Q: Do state wildlife agencies intend to use CHAT as a regulatory tool for evaluating the merits of various development projects?

A: No. The state and regional CHATs are non-regulatory and are not intended for project-level approval. What the system will do is give project planners and the general public access to credible scientific data on a broad scale for use in initial project assessment, siting and planning – including on large-scale development projects spanning multiple jurisdictions. This 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.

"Large intact and functioning ecosystems, healthy fish and wildlife populations, and abundant public access to natural landscapes are a significant contributing factor to the West's economic well being as well as quality of life."

—Western Governors'
Association Policy Resolution
10-10

"Once...wildlife data is made compatible across the region, the public and governments will have a powerful new tool to do the necessary planning for projects, such as transmission lines, natural gas extraction, renewable energy projects, transportation projects and conservation initiatives."

—WGA letter to Interior
Secretary Salazar (Sept. 1,
2010)

"...Federal and state lands play a critical role in the economies of local communities through their mixed use mandates that include recreation, wildlife management and energy development...Timely access to quality data on wildlife would benefit wildlife managers, state and federal land managers, local governments, industry and private property owners."

—State-Federal MOU on
Wildlife Corridors (June 15,
2009)

Q: So this isn't just a way to make more land off limits to development?

A: *No. CHAT is based on biological data and not biased in favor of, or against, any particular forms of development. The fact is, state wildlife agencies serve several different "customers" – from other government entities to outdoors enthusiasts, conservation advocates and business and industry groups. CHAT is a way for these agencies to provide all of their constituencies with credible and consistent scientific data for use in their own research, planning and decision making.*

Q: As a private landowner, I am concerned that my property might show up as crucial habitat on one of these maps and the government will impose limits on what I can do with my own land. Are my fears warranted?

A: *No. CHAT is a tool intended to guide planning of large scale, multi-state programs like electrical transmission lines and would not impose designations or identify species occurrences at the individual landowner scale. Furthermore, CHAT will not directly interfere with any conservation easements, lease arrangements or other optional land-use programs you currently exercise, nor will it directly affect land swaps or other existing partnerships you may participate in with government agencies, nonprofit organizations or other entities.*

Q: Will data in CHAT be used to guide federal decisions under the Endangered Species Act?

A: *The aggregated approach of CHAT is not species or site specific. The landscape view of CHAT to identify crucial habitat, and the use of that information by planners, should help reduce long-term impacts to species and their habitat and generally help prevent population declines that become relevant under the Endangered Species Act.*

Q: What is the timeframe for completion of CHAT?

A: *From now through October 2012, the Western Governors' Association will develop options for constructing and maintaining the regional CHAT, while individual states will continue compiling their data sets, applying crucial habitat definitions and building and improving 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. Feeding updated scientific data into the CHAT system will be an ongoing effort after that.*

Q: How can I remain informed about CHAT and offer my own comments on its development and use?

A: *Information – including upcoming meetings of the Western Governors' Wildlife Council (open to the public) – is always available at westgov.org/initiatives/wildlife or by contacting the Western Governors' Association at (303) 623-9378. You might also wish to contact your state's Wildlife Council representative to see if any local public or stakeholder meetings on CHAT are planned. (The Council Membership Roster is available on the same web site.)*