

January 9, 2009

Western Governors Wildlife Council
2008-2009 Work Plan

BACKGROUND

On June 29, 2008, the Western Governors adopted the “Wildlife Corridors Initiative Report.” This report was developed through a multi-state collaborative effort that included six separate working groups, each of which was charged with developing findings and recommendations on various aspects of wildlife corridors and crucial habitat.

In adopting the report, the Governors established the Western Governors Wildlife Council (WGWC) “for the purpose of coordinating and overseeing implementation of the report, so that we can identify key wildlife corridors and crucial wildlife habitats in the West, and conserve these lands—and the vast wildlife species that depend upon them—for future generations.”

WGWC Mission

The mission of the WGWC, consistent with WGA Resolution 07-01, is to identify key wildlife corridors and crucial wildlife habitats in the West and to develop and coordinate implementation of needed policy options and tools for conserving those landscapes.

WGWC WORK PLAN

Guided by the recommendations contained in the Wildlife Corridors Initiative report, the Governors identified the following initial priorities for action by the WGWC between July 2008 and December 2009:

- Coordinate and implement steps that foster establishment of a “Decision Support System” (DSS) within each state. Coordination shall include:
 - Further developing and refining definitions for “Key Wildlife Corridors” and “Crucial Wildlife Habitats”
 - Ensuring portability of definitions so that they extend beyond, and can be operationalized across, political boundaries as appropriate, while maintaining flexibility that recognizes localized needs and conditions.
 - Identifying policies and best practices for avoiding, minimizing and mitigating impacts to wildlife corridors and crucial habitats.
 - Supporting research to understand climate change impacts on wildlife corridors and crucial habitat, and taking steps accordingly to support adaptation to climate change.

- Seek to establish policies, mechanisms and agreements that ensure information from state-led Decision Support Systems is considered early in planning and decision-

making processes, whether federal, tribal, state or local, in order to preserve these sensitive landscapes through avoidance, minimization, and mitigation.

- The WGA Western Renewable Energy Zone project (WREZ) will be a pilot for applying the wildlife corridors recommendations. In particular, WGA, in coordination with the WGWC, should ensure that development of the renewable energy zones 1) includes identification of relevant wildlife corridors and crucial habitat from the relevant state DSS, and 2) considers appropriate policies and actions to avoid, minimize, or mitigate impacts in these sensitive areas.
- Seek funding from state and federal sources, and from private foundations to support the WGWC. Regarding federal funding, there are many recommendations in the report that point to Congressional authorizations and appropriations. WGWC should develop a Congressional strategy related to funding for wildlife corridor and crucial habitat issues, targeting such federal legislation as the Farm Bill, climate change bills, the energy bill and the transportation bill.

Task I – Establishing the WGWC

The WGA will facilitate development of operating principles and governance to be documented in a Charter thus establishing and formalizing the WGWC.

Timeline: July 2008 – November 2008

Task II – Participating in the Western Renewable Energy Zone Project (WREZ)

The WGWC will participate in the WREZ in order to help shape the delineation of the renewable energy zones by identifying the relevant wildlife sensitivities in the proposed areas.

The Western Governors' Association and U.S. Department of Energy launched the WREZ in May 2008. Utilizing those areas in the West with vast renewable resources to expedite the development and delivery of clean and renewable energy is the central goal of the WREZ project. Participating in the project are 11 states, two Canadian provinces, and areas in Mexico that are part of the Western Interconnection.

The initiative ultimately seeks to identify renewable megawatts in identified renewable energy zones, as well as the conceptual transmission plans needed to deliver the renewable energy to load centers. The initiative will accomplish this goal by first identifying all commercial renewable resource potential, aggregate the best potential for utility-scale renewable megawatts in identified WREZs, and then help develop the conceptual transmission plans. Resource information will be compiled and made available for all commercial renewable resources, whether transmission is needed or not to access those resources. The process itself will help provide the foundation for

interstate collaboration on commercial delivery of renewable energy to meet growing demand throughout the Western Interconnection. Implementing the WREZ initiative will develop cost-effective renewable resources benefiting both suppliers and consumers of renewable resources.

The WREZ Technical Committee will organize work groups as needed to support data collection, consolidate stakeholder input, and produce the work needed for the initiative. Work groups will generally be organized to facilitate stakeholder participation. Work groups will report to the Technical Committee and will seek to make consensus recommendations where possible, articulating diverging opinions so that all stakeholder concerns are shared with the Technical Committee.

Environment & Lands Work Group (ELWG) Description and Objectives

The ELWG will be responsible for categorizing the development potential of candidate study areas based on environmental, land use, and wildlife criteria. This group will also identify policies and best practices to facilitate development in sensitive areas and recommend criteria for siting generation and routing transmission to the zones. The ELWG will work closely with the WGWC State Wildlife Task Group (which will be appointed by the WGWC).

WGWC State Wildlife Task Group (SWTG) Description and Objectives

The WGWC will name a task group made up of individuals with diverse interests and areas of expertise, including Wildlife and GIS experts from the 11 states in the Western Interconnect. The work of this Task Group will be overseen and directed by the WGWC.

The objectives of the SWTG include the following:

- Coordinate the relevant state fish and wildlife agencies for the purpose of compiling state and regional wildlife maps relevant to the WREZ candidate study areas.
- Develop protocols and definitions for collecting state data (including species being impacted by renewable generation and format of information).
- Coordinate with the ELWG and integrate into state wildlife maps, as appropriate, other relevant information identified and collected by the ELWG.
- Develop and submit state overlay maps of wildlife to inform where WREZ candidate study areas should avoid development, minimize impacts to wildlife, or mitigate impacts, and coordinate this state data across the Western Interconnection region. The WGWC should consider and incorporate as appropriate information from the ELWG in determining the level of sensitivity, i.e., avoid (exclude), minimize, or mitigate.
- In coordination with the ELWG, recommend policies and best practices for avoiding, minimizing and mitigating impacts to wildlife in the WREZ zones and corresponding transmission.
- The SWTG will ensure that its efforts builds upon existing planning and program documents, such as the State Wildlife Action Plans, and other state wildlife management strategies.

WGWC Role in WREZ Transmission Planning Phase

WGWC will provide recommendations regarding wildlife during later phases of the WREZ project (Phases 2-4), as the WREZ develops transmission plans. This work may begin after July and will likely carry into the 2010 Work Plan.

Draft WGWC State Wildlife Task Group (SWG) Timeline

2008 Timeline

Objectives:

- September-December 15: Develop a description of wildlife data requests (definitions, protocols, format) to be submitted to the 11 states of the Western Interconnect and others;
- September-January 30: Develop criteria for categorizing areas based on wildlife considerations;
- September-January 9: Provide comment on proposed “exclusions” and “initial avoidance” areas based on land use considerations.

2009 Timeline

Objectives:

- January-April 1: Compile and analyze data; with input from the ELWG, categorize lands within the ‘Qualified Resource Areas’ relevant to their wildlife sensitivity.
- April 1: Finalize first draft of WREZ wildlife maps and help to determine next steps for the continued improvement of the maps.
- April-May: Draw “lessons-learned” from the WREZ process for creation of a West-wide “Decision Support System”.
- July – December 2009: Compile and analyze data, determine areas to avoid, mitigate or minimize areas based on impacts from transmission development and siting.
- January 2010: Finalize maps for treatment of areas based on transmission development

Task III – Defining “Wildlife Corridors” and “Crucial Habitat”

The WGWC will establish a standing committee (Science Committee), whose initial mission shall be to refine the definitions of “wildlife corridors” and “crucial habitat” on a species-by-species or case-by-case basis. The purpose of these refinements is to provide a coordinated understanding of these terms, and to provide guidance for the mapping of wildlife corridors and crucial habitat as a part of the DSS (Task IV). In refining these terms, the working group should contemplate the goals for wildlife corridors and crucial habitat, and also consider the implications of climate change.

Task IV – Coordinating Development of a GIS-based Wildlife Decision Support System (DSS)

The Science Committee was responsible for developing the recommendations in the Wildlife Corridors Initiative Report for identifying wildlife corridors and crucial habitat in the West. The report, adopted by the Governors, states:

The Science Committee envisions the creation of a geographic information system-based spatially-explicit Decision Support System that builds upon existing information and programs, but is improved by a commitment to invest in the information base by filling data gaps, bringing consistency across the West to the mapped data of crucial habitats and important wildlife corridors, increasing integration of that information into decision processes, promoting research on adaptive resource management (Lancia et al. 1996, Williams et al. 2007), and creating sustainable funding. The System must accommodate the dynamic nature of wildlife populations and habitat landscapes, and include regularly updated data as landscapes and wildlife populations change. It also should be designed to serve as a first-cut assessment tool that is used to flag circumstances in which potential impacts are of a serious enough nature to require additional inquiry at a more detailed, finer scale.

...Together, recommendations 1-5 will create an Integrated Fish and Wildlife Decision Support System (DSS) within each state. Each DSS will compile information, assure data quality, and make the data, models, and analyses available at scales useful to analyzing proposed energy, land use, and transportation projects in terms of on-site impacts, regional context, and a changing climate.

Consistent with the Science Committee's recommendations in the report, the WGWC will create a standing committee to develop an integrated fish and wildlife DSS. The DSS will exist in each state, with the WGWC providing coordination and support.

The WGWC will partner with entities that coordinate among local governments, tribes, land management agencies, and conservation groups at local to county scales (such as Natural Resource Conservation Districts). Another important group of partners are university-based organizations that strive to improve the scientific basis for environmental decision making (such as National Center for Science and the Environment). The WGWC will have the targeted mission to coordinate among the States on crucial habitat and wildlife corridors at regional, multi-state scales.

The WGWC will assess region-wide needs for geospatial wildlife data and recommend strategic action. The system of consistent protocols and funding priorities established by the WGWC will help guide state-level investments by highlighting areas that require extra attention for wildlife habitat and corridor conservation. Through the WGWC, the states will annually report to the WGA on their progress to achieve the Wildlife Corridors Initiative recommendations. In establishing the DSS, WGWC will encourage states to build on existing efforts and to use data from state wildlife agencies, state natural heritage

programs, federal agencies, tribes, local governments, conservation NGOs, and industry that meet accepted data quality standards.

The WGWC will include climate change concerns as a central part of its program, and to that end, the WGWC will support research to understand climate change impacts on wildlife corridors and crucial habitat, and will take steps accordingly to support adaptation to climate change, i.e., climate adaptation planning and projects.

Work Plan Actions on DSS

The WGWC will build on the experiences of the WREZ in establishing the integrated DSS in the WGA member states.

Beginning in January 2009 (pending funding), the WGWC will identify partners and establish create a standing committee to develop an integrated fish and wildlife DSS. The DSS will exist in each state, with the WGWC providing coordination and support. Partners could include wildlife and GIS experts in the state wildlife agencies, federal agencies, tribal and local government representatives, conservation groups and industry which collect and manage wildlife data, research institutions, and GIS software and technology experts.

Working with the DSS work group, the WGWC will develop a plan for improving the mapping of wildlife corridors and crucial habitat in each of the western states, and for coordinating and integrating the individual states' maps into a dynamic, state-based regional DSS.

The DSS plan will include: 1) strategies for developing/coordinating protocols and definitions for collecting data; 2) identification of relevant data sources outside of the state wildlife agencies; 3) strategies for integrating data and evaluation of existing federal agency data management systems

The WGWC will develop a budget for establishing the integrated DSS—including the estimated costs for each State's maps and DSS. The WGWC will also identify sources of funding, including federal funding, state funding, and private foundation support, and will develop strategies for pursuing funding.

Timeline

Objectives:

- September 2008 – December 2008: The WGWC will participate in the WREZ, using that experience as a pilot for developing the broader DSS. The WGWC will also develop a detailed work plan for the DSS work, based in part on the experience of the WREZ.
- January 2009 – December 2009: The WGWC will convene the work groups and relevant state agencies to coordinate development of the integrated, state-base DSS, and to otherwise implement the work plan (as more fully developed between September and December 2008). Additionally, the WGWC will explore

options for partnering with USDA and DoI for purposes of establishing the integrated, state-based DSS.

As the DSS will be a dynamic tool, it is expected that work on the DSS will extend well beyond the one-year time-frame in this Work Plan.

Task V – Establishing Policies, Mechanisms and Agreements that Ensure Application of the DSS in Relevant Planning and Decision-Making Processes

In the Wildlife Corridors report, the Science Committee stated: *There is no point creating the Decision Support System if it is not available and used.*

To ensure that the DSS is indeed available and used, the WGWC will establish goals and policies that will result in development proposals considering the data, models, and analyses from the DSS developed by each state to assess impacts to crucial habitat or wildlife corridors. Avoidance, minimization, and mitigation of such impacts will be the goal, with avoidance and minimization of impacts preferred to mitigation. The experiences of the WGWC's participation in the WREZ project will again serve as a pilot project.

Specifically, the WGWC will pursue the following actions under this Work Plan:

1. Develop model Executive Orders and model statutes and regulations that require state and local governments to consider the impact of their proposed actions on crucial habitat and wildlife corridors, and to use the state DSS when making land use decisions that affect crucial habitat or wildlife corridors.
2. Work with the relevant federal agencies, including the Council on Environmental Quality, the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture, to establish—through MOU, Executive Order or CEQ regulations—policies that require use of the state's information (each state's DSS) for federal actions that may affect crucial wildlife habitat and wildlife corridors as determined by the states. A goal of such policies is to ensure that Governors, under their cooperating agency status, work with federal land managers to facilitate earlier and more effective communication among interested parties in site-specific NEPA analyses.

Timeline: January 2009 – December 2009

Task VI – Congressional Strategy

The WGWC will develop and pursue a targeted Congressional strategy related to funding for development of the DSS, considering such federal legislation as the Farm Bill, climate change bills, energy bill, and the transportation bill.

Additionally, the WGWC may advocate federal legislation or regulation if opportunities arise to advance policies consistent with the WGA Wildlife Corridors Report (and the WGWC Charter regarding lobbying).

Timeline: January 2009 – December 2009

List of Acronyms

CEQ	White House Council on Environmental Quality
DoI	US Department of the Interior
DSS	Decision Support System
ELWG	Environment and Lands Working Groups
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
SWTG	State Wildlife Task Group
USDA	US Department of Agriculture
WGWC	Western Governors Wildlife Council
WREZ	Western Renewable Energy Zones