



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Priorities of the Southeast Region

Fiscal Years 2011-2013



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service



Ty Ivey



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Introduction

We are in the midst of rapidly changing and exciting times. Our agency is faced with new and emerging challenges and unprecedented opportunities to respond with partners through progressive tools such as strategic habitat conservation and landscape conservation cooperatives. Global scale issues such as climate change, as well as regional concerns like the April 2010 Gulf oil spill, make even more daunting the challenges of human development into natural areas, invasive exotic species, and an American public increasingly disconnected from nature.

We have an urgent need to develop a shared sense of priorities to best focus our human and fiscal resources on conserving the most important wildlife resources. This document will help guide our work regardless of budget level. Whether we have decreasing, flat, or increasing budgets, priorities are about what we spend our funding and time on.

This priorities document is intended to be the foundation of program-specific strategic plans, the starting point for station annual work plans, and help focus individual Employee Performance and Appraisal Plans. Each Assistant Region Director will lead their program's efforts to use this document to provide meaningful and helpful work activity guidance for all employees.

We recognize that some priorities may never change for the Service, but we owe the American people and the wildlife resources we are entrusted by them to conserve, an efficient and strategic approach to address the highest priorities and to take advantage of the most promising conservation opportunities.

Our Mission

The mission of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service is,

"... working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people."

This mission has three elements and the bottom line is connections:

- Connecting with the resource to conserve, protect and enhance (or manage);
- Connecting with partners at all levels across the landscape to effect fish and wildlife conservation;
- Connecting with people so they value, support, and enjoy fish and wildlife resources and their habitats.

As we move forward through a new century of conservation, the vision of the Southeast Region is to be a conservation leader, connecting with partners at all levels to effectively deliver conservation of our trust resources and the lands we manage across all landscapes, engaging the public to value and participate in that stewardship.

Our Conservation Principles

Science

Our work is grounded in thorough, objective science.

Stewardship

Our ethic is to conserve natural resources for future generations.

Service

It is our privilege to serve the American people.

Professionalism

We hold ourselves to the highest ethical standards, strive for excellence, and respect others.

Partnerships

We emphasize creative, innovative partnerships, especially with our State agency brethren.

People

Our employees are our most valued asset and are critical to our conservation success.

Legacy

We ensure the future of natural resource conservation by connecting people with nature.

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Our Priorities

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service priorities, adopted in 2007:

- **National Wildlife Refuge System:** Conserving our Lands and Resources
- **Landscape Conservation:** Working with Others
- **Migratory Birds:** Conservation and Management
- **Threatened and Endangered Species:** Showing Recovery Success and Preventing Extinction
- **Aquatic Species:** National Fish Habitat Initiative and Trust Species
- **Connecting People with Nature:** Ensuring the Future of Conservation

Fish and Wildlife Service Efforts to Best Support Our Priorities

The Service Directorate identified several key efforts involving all programs that will best support our priorities. These areas – all interwoven with one another – will be where we spend our time, funding, and other resources above other activities aside from meeting legal obligations or priority program mandates. These key cross-program efforts are: implementing strategic habitat conservation (SHC) as our conservation model and standing up landscape conservation cooperatives (LCCs); enhancing our science capacity while responding to climate change impacts; and connecting people with nature.

Implementing SHC and Standing Up LCCs

Advances in the field of conservation science are leading us in a strategic pursuit of sustainable landscapes. This has led the Directorate to adopt Strategic Habitat Conservation (SHC) as our conservation model. Our best hope of increasing our effectiveness as an agency is to ensure that we have executed our priorities after first answering the questions “how much more” and “where” for our conservation work.

SHC incorporates biological planning and design, conservation actions, outcome-based monitoring, and assumption-driven research, all in a conservation community-wide partnership approach to accomplish landscape-scale, sustainable results for fish and wildlife. SHC gives managers the information and decision-making tools needed to carry out their work in the most efficient and effective ways possible.

To facilitate implementation of strategic habitat conservation, geographic areas that cover the entire nation have been identified by the Directorate. The boundaries of these geographies should be seen not as barriers, but rather a means to ensure full coverage. Within these geographies, shared conservation priorities, which are defined by the partnership and focus on population and habitat objectives for fish and wildlife resources, will be refined by Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs).

LCCs are envisioned as multi-state and multi-agency partnerships that provide state-of-the-art biological planning and conservation design support that will inform conservation delivery, while helping to coordinate outcome-based monitoring and assumption-driven research. LCCs will develop models and apply them for specific geographic and management context to answer questions about how populations of key species may shift in response to factors like climate change, land use change, and aquatic invasive distributions. The collective LCC partnerships will be comprised of capabilities pooled by partners (State, Federal, non-governmental, etc.) to develop a shared vision and goals, work towards consensus on priorities, and provide scientific support for the benefit of managers conserving, restoring, enhancing, and managing wildlife and their habitats.

Responding to Climate Change Impacts

Climate change, the transformational conservation challenge of our time, is already impacting wildlife and their habitats across the nation. The Southeast Region, after perhaps only the Alaska Region, is expected to be the most impacted. Climate change influences all the other stressors of our wildlife resources such as extreme weather events; changes in the timing, location, and intensity of wildfires; altered hydrology in rivers and wetlands; changes in rain and snowfall patterns; changes in access to water resources; and rising sea levels at the Service's coastal refuges. Our challenge will be to translate climate change projections into reliable predictions of how wildlife populations and habitats will respond at a local level so we can better manage habitats and species. We will work with our conservation partners through LCCs as well as with USGS Climate Science Centers to obtain the science needed to address this challenge.



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Connecting People with Nature

The Service must take a leadership role in connecting people with nature to ensure the future of conservation, helping the public understand that they have a stake in conservation. As Service Director Sam Hamilton said, “Our planet is now home to the most technologically connected generation in the history of the world, yet increasingly disconnected from the natural rhythms of the world around them.” Our challenge is to grow a national awareness of the need for conservation. As an agency and conservation community we must engage in focused efforts – not simply “general outreach” – that will significantly increase awareness, change attitudes, and alter behavior.

Examples of what the Southeast Region will undertake during 2011-2013 to advance Service priorities:

- Work across our field stations and regional office programs in a “One Service” fashion to align station priorities and program activities to address landscape conservation, assisted by the emerging LCCs, with a foremost focus on fish and wildlife resource priorities such as recovering threatened and endangered species; conserving and managing migratory birds; protecting, restoring, and enhancing aquatic resources; and effectively managing our National Wildlife Refuge System and National Fish Hatchery System lands.
 - Coordinate our approach to flexible funding across our various programs, to ensure our highest priorities are being supported. Programs will evaluate, and, where appropriate according to the funding source, develop new criteria for grant selection that specifically addresses climate change where data can support this consideration. Partners for Fish and Wildlife, Challenge Cost Share, year-end station funds, and many other examples exist of flexible funding opportunities.
 - Establish and support Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs) in each of the geographic areas associated with the Southeast Region: South Atlantic (Region 4 lead with R5), Peninsula Florida (R4 lead), Caribbean (R4 lead), Gulf Coastal Plain and Ozarks (R4 lead with R2 and R3), Appalachian Mountains (with R5), and Gulf Coast (with R2).
- Support LCCs by assisting with communication and facilitation between the States and the Service. At this time, efforts are underway in many states to address climate changes issues as part of their Wildlife Action Plans with funding through the State Wildlife Grant program. For example, Federal Assistance will encourage and/or allow states and territories to use SWG grant funds for LCC-related travel and other LCC activities, such as working group participation or other planning activities.
 - As LCC partnerships are established, begin developing a list of priority species and habitats. Once determined (in collaboration with other LCCs as needed), identify as soon as possible the appropriate subset of species that might serve as “umbrella” or “indicator” species, recognizing that if these species are conserved, then many other associated species’ needs might be addressed.
 - Support the aggressive plan to restore the Gulf Coast environment, economies, communities, and culture. Despite decades of loss of coastal barrier islands and marshes, devastating storms like Katrina, and the recent oil spill, the Gulf Coast remains a treasure of biodiversity, with enormous potential for recovery and restoration. We will work on our own lands and with the States, communities, and our other partners throughout the Gulf Coast to protect and restore the ecosystem and the economy it supports.
 - The recently capped spill was the largest maritime oil spill in United States history, with at least 5 million barrels of oil released into the Gulf. While some impacts of the spill were immediately obvious, the full impacts will not be understood for years. We are committed to both understanding these impacts and ensuring the affected natural resources are fully recovered. We will establish a NRDAR office to lead the way in assessing the impacts of the spill and planning for restoration. While our efforts during these years will focus on assessing the impacts and developing a restoration plan, we will also support immediate restoration projects as opportunities arise.

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- Begin staffing and workload planning to address response to high-priority, renewable-energy development projects.
- Implement priority actions recommended by the Eastern Water Team, a climate change function. For example, address highest priority information needs related to water quality and quantity across Southeast Region landscapes, especially for units of the National Fish Hatchery System and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

- Help lead the various other teams and workgroups called for in the Climate Change Strategic Plan and its Action Items, fulfilling timetables and percentage completion objectives. Programs will provide representation on the Regional Climate Team commensurate with their staffing levels.
- At a regional and field level as needed, partner with the U.S. Geological Survey in 2011 in establishing the Southeast Regional Climate Science Center to coalesce partner capabilities to deliver downscaled climate science to field managers and other users.
- Starting in 2011 through LCCs and regional climate-focused staff, engage in the developing climate change risk and vulnerability assessment methodologies for habitats and ecosystems in collaboration with the U.S. Geological Survey, States, and others to initiate climate change risk and vulnerability assessments for fish and wildlife species. The initial focus will be on interjurisdictional fish, migratory birds, and threatened and endangered species, especially those most vulnerable to extirpation or extinction due to climate change.
- Ensure that climate change is addressed in existing on-the-ground projects to promote habitat connectivity among protected areas, including plans for habitat acquisition.
- Prioritize and implement options to reduce the carbon footprint of our workforce by increasing energy efficiency in our facilities and office space, reducing unused office space, carpooling, telecommuting, video conferencing, coordinating meetings and conferences, and green purchasing. Consider offering unused space to conservation community partners (States, USGS, NGOs, etc.) to enhance collaboration, especially in support of landscape conservation cooperatives.
- Implement restoration/management actions – through grants or staff efforts – (e.g., planting, thinning, prescribed burning, invasive/exotic species removal, acquisition/easements, etc.) in priority areas within the historic longleaf pine ecosystem range. This will be done consistent with the recommendations of the America's Longleaf initiative, which the Service helps lead.



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- Establish and actively maintain an interactive web site presence highlighting the contributions of our employees, formal volunteers, and the public to wildlife conservation.
 - Integrate into a sophisticated communications program where appropriate, progressive avenues of communication to reach target audiences, with special emphasis on venues for children and young adults (e.g., texting, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.).
 - Conduct the two remaining Strategic Habitat Workshops planned for regional office staff and in the Caribbean within the first half of FY 2011.
 - Led by the National Wildlife Refuge System, with close engagement by Ecological Services, Fisheries, External Affairs, and Migratory Birds, complete land acquisition planning for numerous projects FY 2011 through 2013. Planning is underway to establish 5 new refuges in the Southeast Region. By FY 2011 we expect to complete final plans for Green River (KY), Conasauga (GA), Paint Rock (AL, TN) and Mountain Bog (NC), with final planning for the Everglades Headwaters (FL) in FY 2012. Major and minor expansions will be completed at 16 additional refuge units by the end of FY 2012.
- Note:* Since development of this Regional Priorities document was put on hold in late April 2010 due to the Region's response to the Gulf oil spill, other cross-program efforts originally proposed for inclusion in the list above have already been completed. Among them, we are pleased to highlight that the series Strategic Habitat Conservation workshops are nearly complete. In addition, we helped lead an Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies-sponsored Climate Change meeting well attended by States which are incorporating climate change considerations into State Wildlife Action Plans.
- For More Information**
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- Fisheries will lead the engagement of all Service programs in the Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership (SARP), where the Service's Southeast Region has been a key leader, working with the states and other partners to conduct science-based watershed and habitat assessments that collectively identify regional aquatic conservation priorities and targeted on-the-ground aquatic restoration actions.
 - Increase by 10% in both 2011 and 2012, the number of employees participating from the previous year, in the "I Gave 8" volunteer education/outreach program to help connect people with nature. The top performing program by percentage will be recognized. With a 1,500-person workforce, the "I Gave 8" program can help make great strides in advancing our efforts to connect people with nature.
 - All programs will annually support at least three separate events, with staffing assistance from following long-standing and successful outreach programs: Endangered Species Day, International Migratory Bird Day, National Fishing and Boating Week, National Wildlife Refuge Week, and the Jr. Duck Stamp Program.
 - Commensurate with field station number and outreach-focused staff, require each program to contribute a specific number of articles to "E-grits" each month, including rotating "cover story" responsibilities among the nine assistant regional directors.