



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Mountain-Prairie Region

Regional Priorities

October 2015



Cover: Sagebrush sea in Wyoming

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Operational Priorities

OUR PEOPLE

Invest in Our Workforce

Employee Professional Development:

Priority Goal: Be the “region of choice” by having a regional workplace culture that attracts, retains, and empowers highly engaged, skilled employees and exceptional leaders who work effectively together to accomplish our mission.

To maximize employee satisfaction and productivity, we strive to have the highest possible level of professional development and employee engagement by:

- Providing clear expectations to employees; ensuring they know the important roles they have in the mission accomplishment of the Service/Region
- Providing necessary critical resources to accomplish the Region’s highest priority objectives
- Providing employees opportunities to leverage their strengths and to improve their skills through a strong, supported employee development program
- Providing positive employee recognition for work well done and requiring and valuing quality work and products
- Hiring and developing exceptional, caring supervisors who value their employees
- Listening and seeking employee input

Safe and Productive Workplace:

Priority Goal: Have the safest, most environmentally sound workplace possible for our employees.

We will aggressively pursue creating an accident-free workplace and integrating risk management concepts and techniques into our daily activities. The Region will have the premier Safety and Environmental Compliance Program to support that end state.

Recruit/Retain a Diverse Workforce Reflective of the Public We Serve:

Priority Goal: Recruit and retain a diverse and inclusive regional workforce that is reflective of the varied cultures, perspectives, and backgrounds of the citizens we serve.

The Region is most effective in its mission work when its workforce represents the rich diversity of the American public whom we serve. To attract and retain this diverse, high quality workforce, the opinions, thoughts, and cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the workforce will be highly respected and valued.

OUR BUSINESS

Maximize Our Investments into Conservation Efforts

Business Process/Administrative Efficiencies:

Priority Goal: Have the most affordable, effective, efficient and customer-centric regional administrative system to support the Region’s employees and our mission.

Administrative support systems are essential to the success of the Service’s mission. Those systems must be efficient as well as effective to maximize the return on taxpayers’ investment to mission accomplishment. We will constantly strive to improve our business and administrative processes.

Continue to Advance the Principles of Strategic Habitat Conservation as our Conservation Delivery Paradigm:

Priority Goal: Advance the Principles of Strategic Habitat Conservation as our conservation delivery paradigm.

Strategic Habitat Conservation has been the operational management paradigm for the Service since 2007. Closely following this paradigm (setting objectives, designing and delivering conservation strategies, monitoring outcomes, and testing our assumptions) will help us deliver more efficient conservation.

Priority Goal: Build and leverage additional science capacity for the region to address Regional Priorities.

The Region will develop a unified plan on how scientific expertise can work together and develop capacity to allow programs to interact to fill the gaps in our science capacity. We will provide opportunities for programs to come together to address science capacity needs on common priority goals and support robust analyses and decision-making.

OUR PARTNERS

Priority Goal: Maintain and increase our collaboration with State Fish and Wildlife agencies.

Priority Goal: Maintain and increase our collaboration with Native American Tribes.

Priority Goal: Maintain and improve our collaboration with private landowners.

State Fish and Wildlife agencies are our primary peers and partners with whom we share primary management authority for fish and wildlife. We share a common interest in ensuring species biodiversity and large landscape conservation. Maximizing coordination and cohesiveness between our agencies will ensure that we are collectively meeting our mission and mandate for fish and wildlife conservation.

The Service and Indian tribes have a common goal of conserving sensitive fish and wildlife species and the landscapes upon which they depend. In the Mountain-Prairie Region, tribes own and manage more than 23 million acres of land, much of which remains relatively wild and unspoiled. In addition, we have a unique and important trust responsibility to tribes. Accordingly, we will strive to increase and improve the effectiveness of our communication with our tribal partners and the alignment of our strategic priorities.

Private lands represent more than 70% of our nation and are a critical component of our efforts to conserve large landscapes. These landowners have a deep connection to the lands they own and the fish and wildlife that call them home. Even in states with significant public land, private landowners provide stewardship of habitat critical for many sensitive species. We work very closely with private landowners and increasingly use easements and other cooperative agreements as the most effective conservation tool. Without a close partnership with private landowners, we will never recognize our most critical fish and wildlife objectives.

OUR PUBLIC

Priority Goal: Enhance communications efforts and further align outreach with Regional Priorities.

Priority Goal: Embrace new technological platforms to remain relevant with today's society.

Priority Goal: Invest in improving our communication proactively with members of Congress and their staff.

Priority Goal: Engage with non-traditional audiences to build a new conservation constituency.

Priority Goal: Establish a conservation constituency in and around urban areas, particularly around urban wildlife refuges, to increase support for our conservation mission.

We will focus on both internal and external audiences by developing new tools that will communicate our conservation mission in a way that is inspiring and informative. We will provide opportunities that demonstrate communication in a proactive manner that promote information sharing and relevance to the public.

We will transition into a technologically advanced, nimble, social media platform that will keep pace with changes in 21st century communication to better inform our partners, constituents, and supporters. We will also strive to engage new audiences to gain their support for fish and wildlife.

The Mountain-Prairie Region will engage Members of Congress in a proactive way that demonstrates constituent support and our conservation mission. We will begin a regional Congressional Communications Campaign, that empowers our employees to develop relationships with members of Congress and their local staff and endeavor to communicate in a way that provides early timely information to Congress.

In order to remain relevant and ensure we will have the resources to meet our mission, we need to connect with a new conservation constituency. Anchored in our urban refuges and conservation partnerships, we will engage communities and non-traditional audiences in a way that promotes education, support, and a conservation legacy in the U.S.

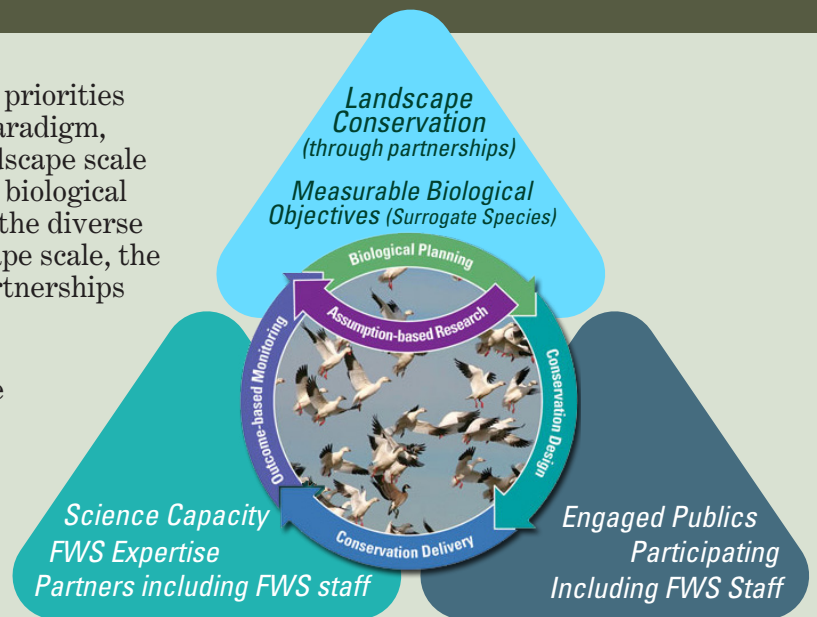
We will increase partner opportunities to increase our relevance with urban audiences. We will engage youth and others in a way that highlights our mission and will partner with our urban neighbors to foster a sense of conservation stewardship, support, and appreciation for wildlife conservation.

Resource Priorities

This is an illustration of how the Service achieves its priorities for landscape conservation through its operational paradigm, Strategic Habitat Conservation. To achieve true landscape scale conservation, the Service must establish measurable biological (or resource) outcomes for priority resources. Given the diverse land ownership and resource authorities on a landscape scale, the Service can only achieve its goals by establishing partnerships with the appropriate entities.

The primary foundation for our success is the science expertise of the Service and our partners. We cannot establish achievable resource goals without foundational science to direct our efforts. The second foundational component is the involvement of our partners and the public. This involvement must go beyond passive support, to include an engaged and active public.

The center of the triangle illustrates the central importance of the paradigm. This is the process through which the Service, partners and engaged publics design, implement and evaluate landscape conservation delivery. Strategic Habitat Conservation is critical to the Service's success in achieving conservation at a landscape scale by delivering the most effective conservation actions in the most efficient manner.



Priority Goal: *Protect enough grassland and wetlands in the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) to ensure stable populations of waterfowl, and wetland and grassland migratory birds.*



Prairie Pothole Region

We are working to permanently protect 1.4 million acres of high priority wetlands and 10.4 million acres of high priority grasslands in the PPR. The Service is using both the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund (MBCF) and the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) to purchase permanent conservation easements and expand Waterfowl Production Areas in the highest priority areas for waterfowl and other high priority wetland and grassland migratory birds.

The Prairie Pothole Region of eastern South Dakota, eastern and northern North Dakota, and northern Montana contains millions of depressional wetlands termed “potholes” and their surrounding grasslands and constitutes the most important breeding habitat for waterfowl and other grasslands birds on the continent. The rich soils of grassland areas make them attractive for agricultural production and ongoing conversion of grassland to cropland and associated wetland drainage has increased habitat loss in recent years, partially in response to greater demand for biofuels. Loss of habitat affects the diversity of plant, animal, and aquatic life; impacts the continental significance of this area for birds; and impacts water quality and quantity locally and downriver.

Priority Goal: *Recover the black-footed ferret.*



Black-footed ferret

Once the most-endangered mammal in North America, black footed-ferrets are on the road to recovery. Establishing approximately 3,000 adults in populations that span at least nine of the 12 historical range states is the recovery goal. Ensuring suitable release sites by providing landowner-friendly incentives, controlling prairie dogs on neighboring lands, and reducing the impact of the disease sylvatic plague are strategies that need to be continued to reach this priority goal.

Black-footed ferrets are native to the Great Plains and existed largely in the short-grass prairie. They prey almost exclusively on prairie-dogs and thus are limited in range to grasslands with robust prairie-dog populations. Other species will benefit from conservation of ferrets including grassland nesting migratory birds and raptors.

Priority Goal: *Recover two or more populations of grizzly bears.*



Grizzly bear and cubs

The grizzly bear is a quintessential symbol of the American west; its habitat evokes the wildness of North America. The grizzly bear was virtually extinct from the continental US by the mid-20th century and this galvanized the conservation community to act. The Service, other federal agencies and states have worked over the last 35 years on measures to bring the grizzly back from the brink of extinction. The grizzly bear represents an incredible success of the Endangered Species Act, and robust populations exist in some parts of its range.

Grizzly populations occur in a very diverse suite of habitats in the Yellowstone ecosystem and the Northern Rockies, including the Cabinet/Yaak area in Northwest Montana, Northern Idaho, and Northeast Washington. Grizzly populations occur in the Northern Rockies in National Parks (Yellowstone and Glacier) and wilderness areas on both Federal and private lands. Diverse habitats include remote mountainous habitat, forested and alpine areas, riparian areas, and mountain foothills where private lands overlap grizzly range.

Priority Goal: *Ensure habitat connectivity in the Northern Rocky Mountains to support healthy populations of grizzly bear, lynx, wolverine, and other native species.*



Lynx / Steve Torbit

These species are wide ranging and require large expanses of habitat to feed, shelter, and reproduce; meeting their needs will help ensure healthy habitats for many species. Natural connectivity is threatened by a number of development activities that fragment or degrade habitat. Other potential impacts include wildfires, insect outbreaks, invasive species, and anticipated impacts of climate change. Maintaining or restoring connectivity will continue to require a concerted and cooperative effort by many.

The associated habitats of the Northern Rocky Mountains extend through the western portion of the Mountain-Prairie Region from the Canadian border to the north down to the New Mexico border to the south. States within the Mountain-Prairie Region that contain habitat for these species include Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado. The landscape within these areas includes foothills, montane, subalpine, and alpine ecosystems characterized by pinyon-juniper, ponderosa pine, mixed conifer, aspen, and spruce-fir forests interspersed with meadows and streams.

Priority Goal: *Recover the four endangered Colorado River fish species.*



Bonytail



Colorado pikeminnow



Humpback chub



Razorback sucker

The endangered Colorado River fish (Colorado pikeminnow, razorback sucker, humpback chub, and bonytail) are long-lived species endemic to the Colorado River system and are indicators of the health of this critically important system. The eventual recovery of these species of fish will be a testament to tremendous accomplishments by many and will demonstrate successful implementation of the ESA in one of the world's most managed and regulated river systems.

The Colorado River fish are found in large river habitats and mid-elevation tributaries throughout the sage-steppe landscape of the Green, Colorado, and San Juan River sub-basins. Recovery actions for the Colorado River fish benefit other native fish species found in the same river reaches, but whose range extends upstream into headwater reaches in montane landscapes.

Resource Priorities

Priority Goal: Reverse the declining trend for monarchs and other endemic pollinators.



Monarch butterfly

The Monarch butterfly is one of the world's most beloved and recognizable species in North America. It is famous for the annual migration of the eastern population across the United States to its wintering grounds in Mexico. It has declined by more than 90 percent during the past two decades along with other pollinators, linked to habitat loss, pesticides, disease, parasites, and climate change. The eastern population of the monarch butterfly has a population objective of 225 million butterflies occupying of an area of approximately 15 acres in the overwintering grounds of Mexico. The Strategy also calls for the restoration and enhancement of seven million acres of land for pollinators in the next five years.

Monarchs and other pollinators searching for the best sources of nectar and pollen require habitats with a variety of native flowering plants that have overlapping blooming times and are adapted to local soils and climate. The Region's large intact native prairies and grasslands provide these resources. Specific to Monarchs, actions will be focused in a key geographic area called America's "Corn Belt" which is important for summer breeding and migration habitats. The portions of the Corn Belt within Region 6 include eastern North and South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas.

Priority Goal: Ensure self-sustaining populations of sage-dependent birds and other sagebrush associated species.



Sage thrasher

The sage-steppe ecosystem is critical to more than 350 species that depend on sagebrush for all or part of their life cycle, including at least four birds of conservation interest (Sage Thrasher, Sagebrush Sparrow, Brewer's Sparrow, and Greater sage-grouse). Pygmy rabbits and pronghorn are among an elite group of species that depend on sagebrush and are termed "sagebrush obligates." In the sagebrush ecosystem, food, cover, and water resources are widely distributed and many obligate species have evolved to cover large areas of habitat to meet their seasonal needs. The sage-steppe has been facing increasing fragmentation. Strategic conservation to reduce fragmentation can go far in reducing the negative trends of many sagebrush dependent species.

The sage-steppe covers more than 150 million acres across 11 western states. Sagebrush communities include open sagebrush plains, rolling hills, and rim rock escarpments, interspersed with coulees, wetlands and riparian corridors, including important breeding and brood habitat for migratory songbirds, many of whom are declining. Across this landscape, sage-steppe communities have been lost or degraded by conversion, exurban development, energy extraction, improper grazing, invasion by exotic plants and changes in fire frequency. Prioritization of the ecosystem by the Service will bring much-needed attention and resources to declining bird species and this habitat.

Priority Goal: Recover the St. Mary population of bull trout in Montana.



Bull trout in Montana

Bull trout evolved as the top predator in the aquatic systems across their native range. They are uniquely suited to the cold, clean waters in the montane landscape and are highly sought after by anglers and revered by tribes. The St. Mary's Bull Trout recovery unit is unique in that it is the only population that occurs east of the Continental Divide. While this population is relatively stable, significant but addressable threats remain, largely associated with water diversions and fish entrainment.

The Saint Mary Recovery Unit is located in northwest Montana east of the Continental Divide and includes the U.S. portions of the Saint Mary River basin from its headwaters to the international boundary with Canada. The U.S. portion includes headwater spawning and rearing habitat in the tributaries and a portion of the foraging, migrating, and overwintering habitat in the main-stem of the Saint Mary River and Saint Mary lakes.

Priority Goal: Recover listed cutthroat trout and improve or maintain the conservation status of other cutthroat trout and Arctic grayling populations.



Westslope cutthroat trout / NPS



Arctic grayling underwater

Native salmonids, such as cutthroat trout, which are found throughout the montane portions of Region 6, and Arctic grayling, which occur in Region 6 only in Montana, are important components of the historic aquatic fauna of the western United States. These species remain species of conservation concern to varying degrees. Currently, the greenback cutthroat trout of Colorado is listed as threatened under the ESA. The Service is actively involved in ongoing conservation and recovery efforts with internal and external partners for our native coldwater species and ensuring healthy and intact habitat for these species will mean the aquatic habitats that so many other species depend are healthy and function.

Six currently extant cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii*) subspecies are native to Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, and Montana. The Bonneville cutthroat trout is native to the Bonneville basin in the western half of Utah and extending slightly into adjacent states but are currently found only in Utah and the western edge of Wyoming. Recent research on the Colorado River cutthroat trout recognizes two distinct lineages with populations in the Green, Yampa and White Rivers, different than those in the upper Colorado and Gunnison Rivers. The Greenback cutthroat is native to the South Platte River system, and possibly the Arkansas River. The Rio Grande cutthroat is native to the Rio Grande River as well as the upper Canadian and Pecos Rivers in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. The Westslope cutthroat trout was originally one of the most widely distributed cutthroat species extending from western Montana into northern Idaho, western Washington, Oregon, and up into the Canadian Rockies but are found only in western Montana and a small area in Yellowstone Park in Wyoming. Yellowstone cutthroat trout are native to the Snake and Yellowstone River drainages. Arctic grayling are still present in southwestern Montana and the remaining confirmed, viable population resides in the Big Hole River, upstream from Divide, Montana.

Priority Goal: Reverse the declining trend of grassland nesting migratory birds.



Western meadowlark

Grassland nesting birds populations have been declining faster than birds of any other guild in the last 40 years. Declines have commonly been attributed to habitat conversion, (including conversion to row crops), energy development, incompatible grazing management, removal of fire, and tree invasion. The Service and its partners have invested in grassland conservation based on current information but much is still unknown. We must ensure our actions address species showing the greatest declines in population by targeting their limiting factors.

The grasslands landscape in the Mountain-Prairie Region comprises the prairies and plains communities running from the Red River Valley to the front of the Rocky Mountains. The northern mixed grass prairies, especially in Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota, provide some of the largest blocks of continuous grassland remaining in the United States. Row crop conversion and other habitat impacts are increasing and, in some areas, creating threats to several declining grassland birds for which this region is critical breeding habitat.

Resource Priorities

Priority Goal: *Recover the pallid sturgeon.*



Juvenile pallid sturgeon

The endangered pallid sturgeon in many ways serves as an indicator of the health of the Missouri and Mississippi river systems. Pallid sturgeon are descended from species that co-existed with dinosaurs more than 70 million years ago, and recovery will demonstrate that species can exist alongside man-made riverine alterations and management that are necessary for sustainable agriculture, flood control, recreation and commercial interests. A significant effort is being led by the Service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, with many stakeholders, to find and implement appropriate habitat modifications that will again allow the species to thrive through natural recruitment. Pallid sturgeon recovery goals call for a self-sustaining, genetically diverse population of 5,000 adults maintained in each of four management units with measures that will ensure long-term persistence of the species.

The pallid sturgeon is native to the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, with conditions generally described as large drainages with free-flowing, turbid, warm-water, with a diverse assemblage of physical habitats that originally were in a constant state of change. These rivers are important components of the larger grassland ecosystems they flow through.

Priority Goal: *Maintain healthy golden eagle populations.*



Golden eagle in flight

This long-lived, widely-migrating, iconic western species faces threats ranging from electrocution, to wind turbine strikes, to lead ingestion. Maintaining a healthy population requires a better understanding of the current population trends and demographics for individual populations, improved understanding of threats, and targeted engagement to minimize those threats. This will require collaborative efforts from Service staff to refine decision support tools and encourage implementation of best practices by project proponents and other stakeholders.

Golden eagles range across most of the Mountain-Prairie Region landscape, including especially sage steppe and short-grass prairie. Eagles migrate to and through our region, and current research highlights large breeding populations in several portions of the Region. Ongoing tagging programs are increasing our knowledge of eagle movements and areas of particularly high eagle use, and this data will be used to target our conservation efforts and engagement with project proponents.

The Mountain-Prairie Region consists of eight states in the heart of the American west including Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming. The Region is defined by three distinct landscapes. In the east lie the central and northern Great Plains, primarily the vast mixed- and short-grass prairies. To the west rise the Rocky Mountains and the intermountain areas beyond the Continental Divide, including parts of the sprawling Colorado Plateau and the Great Basin. The northeastern part of the Region contains millions of shallow wetlands known as the "prairie potholes," which produce a large portion of the continent's waterfowl.

Some of the nation's greatest rivers rise in the Region including the Missouri, Colorado, and Platte rivers. The fish and wildlife that make their home on the Region's prairies and in its mountains are among the nation's most iconic species: grizzly bear, gray wolf, the American bison and cutthroat trout.