

Goal Five: Increase Accountability

Measure, assess, and report on the effectiveness, efficiency, and fiscal integrity of our habitat conservation programs and activities.

Introduction

Accountability is an important responsibility for all government programs, and requires defensible methods of planning, rationale objectives and strategies, and the ability to deliver results based on realistic expectations. Historically, the Partners Program has reported acres and miles (activity-based outputs) of wetlands, uplands, riparian buffers and streams, and invasive species control as actual or estimated project accomplishments. The Partners Program also reports other criteria such as the type of partnership activity, more specific information about habitat type, number and type of partners, cost information, monitoring information, references, and links to species of concern.

All Program technical assistance and project accomplishments are recorded by project managers in the Partners Program Habitat Information Tracking System (HabITS) database that provides a permanent record and allows project information to be tracked and summarized into a variety of reports at the field office, regional and national levels.

Within the Partners Program there is an expectation that the implementation of habitat improvement actions will result in perceptible increases in fish and wildlife populations. Thus, an overarching goal is to be able to document that the implementation of habitat improvement projects on private lands achieves sustainable and increasing populations of Federal Trust Species (i.e., biological response outcomes). However, it should be appreciated that there are several external factors that

significantly affect the ability of Service to achieve this desired goal within the five-year time frame of this strategic plan. These factors are:

- Independent and variable environmental factors that are beyond our control may significantly influence biological response associated with specific habitat improvement actions.

For example, severe weather events, climate change, disease, unexplained population cycles, and behavior such as migration can be expected to influence the population status and trends of target species, regardless of any impact that may result directly from the implementation of specific habitat improvement actions. The effects of such variables must be evaluated and factored out to objectively understand the impacts of specific habitat improvement actions on population status.

- There are often significant time lags between our habitat management actions and their impacts to target species.

For example, efforts to reestablish a functional ecosystem such as the longleaf pine or the bottomland forest ecosystem in the Southeast would require from 40 to 60 or more years from the time trees are planted and management activities begin. The habitat conditions will change naturally over time, or as a result of planned management activities such as the use of prescribed fire, until the ecosystem structure and function approaches some recognized ecosystem standard (reference type). As such, the specific life needs for one or more target species may not be achieved until many years after the habitat improvement actions are carried out, and the population status of such species would have to be monitored and evaluated based on this knowledge.

To help us address the biological response goal, our approach has been to use available habitat-species predictive models, published research reports, and qualitative

approaches that support our assumptions that our delivery of habitat improvement projects addresses limiting habitat factors and will provide benefits to the target species.

The Service has recently considered and developed ideas of bringing Strategic Habitat Conservation (SHC) principles to our conservation work (USFWS and USGS 2006; US DOI 2007). The strategic habitat conservation is a framework for setting and achieving conservation objectives at multiple scales, based on the best available information, data, and the use of qualitative and quantitative models. The Southeast Region Partners Program will seek to improve our effectiveness using the principles and methods embodied in SHC. This includes, but is not limited to,

- reviewing and evaluating the program using the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program Strategic Model (Figure 1);
- supporting and working with partners; and
- adapting and incorporating the latest scientific, decision, and/or analysis tools which will produce greater efficiency and effectiveness in achieving Program goals.

The Partners staff recognizes the importance of biological response information and the need for monitoring. Monitoring guidance is provided in Appendix C. Our staff will document in the HabITS database those research studies and references that support our assumptions regarding project benefits to target species, and we will work closely with other Service program areas (e.g., Migratory Birds, Fisheries, and Endangered Species) and other partners (e.g., U.S. Geological Survey, other federal and state agencies, universities, private industry, and others) to help develop and direct additional monitoring and research efforts to address our many fish and wildlife information needs.

Objectives, Targets and Implementation Strategies for Goal Five

- **Objective 5.1:** Ensure that all Partners Program activities and funding are consistent with Program policy and the requirements of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act of 2006.
- **Five-Year Performance Target:** Program funding and activities will be consistent with Program policy and the requirement of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act of 2006 and other laws, where applicable. All Program positions (32) will be reviewed and evaluated.
- **Implementation Strategy:** The Regional Office will develop budget allocation recommendations for the Partners Program, based on recommendations from the field staff. All Program staff will strive to ensure that all Program funds and technical assistance activities are directed to activities and projects consistent with Program policy and guidance.

All positions funded through the Partners Program are expected to devote at least 95 percent of their time to implementing Program activities; exceptions must be approved by the Assistant Regional Director, Ecological Services. The cost of habitat improvement activities are expected to be comparable to the costs of similar activities within the work area.

Program Oversight Reviews: The Partners Program in the Southeast Region uses a cross-program Regional Review Teams to conduct periodic oversight reviews of all Program positions. These oversight reviews help to ensure that Program activities are consistent with Program policy, and provide a forum for staff recognition, sharing helpful information and resolving issues and problems that may be encountered. A Review Team report is prepared subsequent to each review and provided to the Project Leader, Partners staff, and other appropriate staff.

- **Objective 5.2:** Continue to carry out the Program monitoring policy and guidelines (Appendix C). Modify the monitoring protocol as may be needed, based on feed back information and adaptive management.
- **Five-Year Performance Target:** Within a 5 year period, all project sites should be monitored according to the Program monitoring policy (Appendix C).
- **Implementation Strategy:** All Program staff will comply with the Program monitoring policy and guidelines (Appendix C). Recommendations for modifying the policy shall be provided to the Regional Coordinator as appropriate.

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- **Objective 5.3:** To help ensure and track Program accountability, enter all project and technical assistance information into the Habitat Information Tracking System (HabITS) data base according to technical guidance and quality standards. Develop and submit recommendations to the National data base manager for improving the data base as they are identified.

- **Five-Year Performance Target:** Each fiscal year, Partners Program staff will enter all in-year technical assistance and project information into the HabITS data base by September 15, and will review their entries to help ensure accuracy and quality. Active projects with output estimates will be updated to completed project status with project location and other required information during the fiscal year that they are completed. Any required narrative reports will be completed by the requested target dates.
- **Implementation Strategy:** Habitat improvement accomplishments and specific technical assistance activities associated with the Partners Program will be entered and reported by the Regional Office and each appropriate field office

through HabITS. All projects will be entered into the HabITS data base during the required timeframe to ensure that all project accomplishments are recorded and captured for required reporting purposes.

The Regional Coordinator will work with the National Office during the development of a HabITS training course to be offered at the National Training Center beginning in fiscal year 2007.