

---

---

**HABITAT CONSERVATION PLANNING  
AND  
INCIDENTAL TAKE PERMIT PROCESSING  
HANDBOOK**



December 21, 2016

U.S. Department of the Interior  
Fish and Wildlife Service

U.S. Department of Commerce  
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
National Marine Fisheries Service

---

## **Executive Summary**

Drawing on over 30 years of experiences, remarkable successes, and valuable lessons learned, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) (hereafter “Services”) are pleased to share with you this revised Habitat Conservation Planning (HCP) Handbook (Handbook). The revised Handbook is the culmination of hard work and dedication by Services staff. It reflects our common commitment to actively advance the congressional findings, purpose, and policies of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), including providing a means to foster relationships with public and private partners, reduce conflicts between listed species and economic activities, and promote long-term conservation of listed species and the ecosystems on which they depend.

Since the original HCP Handbook was published in 1996 (61 FR 63854), over 1,000 HCPs covering more than 46 million acres of land have been approved nationwide. During that time, the development and implementation of HCPs has evolved in response to advances in science and technology, changing public expectations, and feedback from our partners. For example, advances in computer technology and geospatial sciences have dramatically improved the way we view and understand species, habitat, and their connection to the larger landscape. In addition, the human dimension of the HCP process has become more complex with changes in public perceptions and expectations. Our experiences and input from our partners has highlighted concerns about the complexity, cost, and time commitment required to develop HCPs.

We addressed these opportunities and concerns by establishing process standards and best practices, and also through updated and refined policy guidance and procedures. These refinements are meant to streamline the HCP process and increase the overall effectiveness of the program. The revised Handbook is designed to be more user-friendly and applicable in both print and web media. We reorganized the Handbook’s contents to reflect each phase of the HCP process and include tools and templates to help us complete them. We clarified important concepts like maximum extent practicable, adaptive management, and changed and unforeseen circumstances, and refined our guidance on compliance with other Federal laws and regulations. We also established guidance for addressing climate change, effective communication and coordination with stakeholders, and reaffirmed our commitment to integrity, respect, and teamwork in our HCP partnerships.

A combination of innovation, flexibility, and clear direction for implementing the HCP program will ensure this Handbook is a viable and powerful tool for conservation and contribute to the recovery of threatened and endangered species. We expect the HCP program to continue to evolve and adapt to future ecological, societal, and economic changes, and we expect the Handbook to do so as well.

Finally, while the purpose of the revised Handbook remains to serve as an instructional aid for Services staff, it should be equally helpful to other HCP practitioners, such as applicants, consultants, and partners. The knowledge gained from experiences and lessons learned are essential to making the HCP process more efficient and manageable in the future.