

Introduction

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has a strong presence in North Carolina, commensurate with the diversity and abundance of fish and wildlife resources in this great State. There are eleven National Wildlife Refuge units in the State, which comprise nearly half a million acres of fish and wildlife habitat and which provide exceptional opportunities for wildlife dependent recreation. Our Fisheries Coordination Offices and Edenton National Fish Hatchery work to protect and restore fisheries in North Carolina's coastal waters and rivers. Our Migratory Bird Field Offices provide biological assistance on habitat and population management for migratory birds. Our law enforcement officers enforce federal wildlife protection laws and international conventions and treaties. Additionally, our Ecological Services Field Offices in Asheville and Raleigh work with private and corporate landowners, local, state, and other federal agencies, and nongovernmental conservation organizations to protect National Wildlife Refuges, federally listed threatened and endangered species, migratory birds and fish, and the ecosystems upon which they depend.

This 5-year Strategic Plan (Plan) for the Raleigh Ecological Services Field Office (RFO) is intended to guide and focus our work efforts on those activities where we can be most effective in fulfilling our mission and visions within the RFO work area (Figure 1). There are myriad challenges facing the fish and wildlife resources of North Carolina and there are countless activities in which we could engage to meet those challenges. This plan explicitly acknowledges that the RFO does not have the resources, authority, and expertise needed to do everything that we may wish; therefore our efforts must be focused in order to make the best use of our resources and capabilities. Some of our recognized priorities include longleaf pine restoration and red-cockaded woodpecker recovery in the Sandhills, fish passage in the Neuse and Cape Fear Rivers, reconciling resource conservation and mobility/accessibility issues on the Outer Banks, recovery of endemic aquatic species (e.g., Cape Fear shiner, Waccamaw silverside, and Tar River spiny mussel) and terrestrial species (e.g., *Atrytonopsis* sp. 1, golden sedge), and protecting the environmental integrity of our National Wildlife Refuges.

We are fortunate in North Carolina to have a wealth of talented and committed partners in conservation. This plan is intended to focus our work efforts on those activities where we can provide the greatest benefit and best service to those partners and customers, ultimately benefiting our trust resources. The RFO staff has expertise in federal natural resource laws, policies and programs, fish and wildlife toxicology, plant identification and morphology, fish passage, aquatic and terrestrial habitat restoration, red-cockaded woodpecker and longleaf pine habitat management, imperiled species recovery and management, and information technology. To our counterparts within the Service, we pledge to use these capabilities to support, assist, and actively participate on the Roanoke-Tar-Neuse-Cape Fear (RTNCF) and Savannah-Santee-Pee Dee (SSPD) ecosystem teams, and to engage in those issues that are among our recognized shared priorities. To our external partners, we hope that this plan will help us clearly articulate our goals, priorities, and capabilities, and will help us identify opportunities and means to work together more effectively. Implicit in every strategy and project identified in this plan is our commitment to work with, support, and be responsive to our conservation partners, particularly our state counterparts in the Wildlife Resources Commission and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. We will also use our expertise and authority to be responsive to our customers' resource needs.

The strategies and projects highlighted in this plan reflect our assessment of the challenges facing North Carolina's fish and wildlife resources at the ecosystem level, an assessment of our capabilities to meet those challenges, and the capabilities and needs of our partners and customers. We have many mandates we must meet, but where we have discretion we will act in accordance with this plan to address high priority ecosystem concerns in ways that augment and support (rather than duplicate) the efforts of our partners.

Our emphasis on ecosystem level solutions leads naturally to a focus on collaborative, multi-party planning and problem solving. As such, many of the strategies in this Plan emphasize early involvement and communication with other agencies and organizations in their land use and project planning efforts. It is our intent to clearly identify and articulate fish and wildlife resource needs to local, state and federal planners and to work with them in a collaborative manner so that these needs can be fully integrated into their planning and project development.

This Plan is structured around our four primary trust resource responsibilities; endangered and threatened species, migratory birds, migratory fish, and National Wildlife Refuge lands. The structure of this plan further emphasizes that these resources are fundamental to our work and are central to our decision-making. Our role in conserving these resources is mandated under the authorities of the Endangered Species Act, Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, and other laws, regulations, and Executive Orders (see <http://laws.fws.gov/lawsdigest/indx.html>). In addition, the plan includes a goal and set of

objectives and strategies to foster a professional and productive work environment and to ensure effective management and administration.

In addition to identifying the federal trust resource priorities within the RFO work area, this plan is also designed to link those priorities to national-level priorities as identified in the Department of the Interior (DOI) Strategic Plan (Fiscal Year 2003 – 2008), the Service's forth-coming Operational Plan, and other national mandates such as the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). The intent is to clearly show how our activities contribute to meeting our locally defined goals and objectives as well as national goals and GPRA requirements. Where applicable, we have adopted performance measures identified in the DOI Strategic Plan for use in our Plan.

This Plan establishes the goals, objectives, strategies and projects that will guide our work efforts over the next five years. The Plan is a living document and will be reviewed annually. Projects may change as milestones are reached or as unforeseen circumstances or new opportunities arise; however, the overall goals and objectives are expected to remain stable throughout the planning cycle.

At the beginning of each fiscal year we will use the Plan, in conjunction with regional and national work activity guidance, to develop an Annual Work Plan for the office. We also hope that this Plan will influence the development of regional and national work activity guidance. The Annual Work Plan will identify the specific strategies and projects to be emphasized for the coming year, the tasks to be completed relative to those projects, and will assign lead responsibilities for those tasks.