

United States Department of Agriculture



**2011 Utah NRCS Action Plan
To Conserve Priority Fish and Wildlife Species and Habitats**

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Prepared by:

Utah NRCS
with assistance from the State Technical Advisory Committee

I. Background

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) leadership have recognized and promoted fish and wildlife conservation as an agency priority at the national and state level. When applicable, NRCS has been directed to use their program's authorities to address fish and wildlife concerns and to focus conservation efforts on the habitats and species of greatest conservation need.

As a result of national and state leadership, special NRCS program initiatives have been directed to promote conservation of high priority species and habitats (e.g., Pacific and Atlantic Salmon-Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP); Sage-Grouse WHIP and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP); Northern Bobwhite Quail WHIP and EQIP; and Bull and Cutthroat Trout-EQIP). Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) have been signed at the national level with multiple partners (Bat Conservation International, National Audubon Society, Pheasants Forever, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Trout Unlimited, Quail Unlimited, and the National Wild Turkey Federation) to help deliver effective conservation for the Nation's fish and wildlife resources.

Identified fish and wildlife conservation targets and resource concerns may be addressed under the authorities of one or multiple NRCS programs. National guidance recommends the entire portfolio of NRCS delivered Farm Bill programs be used to benefit the Nation's fish and wildlife resources.

This Action Plan for Utah NRCS identifies conservation targets, major threats, conservation actions for each target, and discusses opportunities for NRCS programs to help implement conservation actions. Note that the conservation targets chosen are not meant to be inclusive of all fish and wildlife conservation issues in Utah, but are a subset upon which NRCS programs can focus. This action plan is a dynamic document to be adapted to address changing or evolving conservation issues as identified by NRCS and its conservation partners.

NRCS MOUs, National Biology Handbook, and other NRCS general national biology information can be accessed by visiting: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/biology.html>

II. National and Regional Fish and Wildlife Priorities

Projects that enhance habitat essential for the survival of species protected under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA), as amended, and those that are candidates for listing have first priority for Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (Farm Bill) program funding. The ESA requires federal agencies to use their programs to actively support the goals and objectives of the ESA. The NRCS National Policy states the Agency's intent to ensure conservation of federally protected species through implementation of its programs. Conservation of federally protected species and species in decline is an objective of WHIP, EQIP, Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), and Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP).

Executive Order 13186, Protection of Migratory Birds, signed by President Bill Clinton in January 2001, requires all federal agencies to promote the recommendations of migratory bird programs, as well as other conservation considerations.

As directed by Executive Order 13352, Facilitation of Cooperative Conservation, signed by President George W. Bush in August 2004, NRCS will also use its existing programs to contribute to National or Regional conservation plans and initiatives. Cooperative Conservation is also identified as an overarching strategy in the NRCS Strategic Plan for 2005-2010. Plans and Initiatives that have well defined objectives and use a partnership approach to focus resources of state and federal agencies and national conservation organizations are emphasized. Objectives of these plans and initiatives are recognized and supported by numerous conservation agencies and organizations. Projects involving multiple partners are more cost effective for NRCS and more technically sound. Therefore, projects which combine the technical and financial resources of Utah NRCS with other partners will be favored in the ranking criteria for Farm Bill program funding.

Additionally, the NRCS Strategic Plan for 2005-2010 lists “Healthy Plant and Animal Communities” as one of six Mission Goals. Outcomes of this goal include working lands, wetlands, and waters that provide habitat for diverse and healthy migratory birds and other wildlife, aquatic species, and plant communities. To increase the effectiveness of our ongoing efforts to help people protect and enhance plant and animal communities on private lands, NRCS will facilitate the adoption of landscape-scale habitat protection plans that provide at-risk and declining species access to water, food, and shelter, as well as corridors for seasonal migration and provide funds to help develop and implement such area-wide plans.

The NRCS Strategic Plan can be accessed by visiting:
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/strategicplan/index.html>

In order to provide direction to the State and local levels for implementing WHIP to achieve its objective, NRCS has established the following national priorities:

- Promote the restoration of declining or important native fish and wildlife habitats;
- Protect, restore, develop or enhance fish and wildlife habitat to benefit at-risk species;
- Reduce the impacts of invasive species on fish and wildlife habitats;
- Protect, restore, develop, or enhance declining or important aquatic wildlife species’ habitats; and
- Protect, restore, develop, or enhance important migration and other movement corridors for wildlife.

The 2008 Farm Bill authorized the Secretary of Agriculture to encourage “the development of habitat for native and managed pollinators; and the use of conservation practices that encourage native and managed pollinators” during administration of any conservation program.

More information about NRCS Pollinators can be accessed by visiting:
<http://www.plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/pollinators.html>

National or Regional conservation plans and initiatives to which Utah NRCS can contribute through conservation planning and project implementation are summarized below:

A. North American Landbird Conservation Plan (Partners in Flight)

This plan provides a continental synthesis of priorities and objectives that will guide landbird conservation actions at national and international levels. The scope includes the 448 species of native landbirds that regularly breed in the United States and Canada. The plan also highlights the need for stewardship of the species and landscapes characteristic of each portion of the continent, identifying 158 species that are particularly representative of large avifaunal biomes, and whose needs should be considered in conservation planning.

The North American Landbird Conservation Plan can be accessed by visiting:
http://www.partnersinflight.org/cont_plan/default.htm

B. North American Waterfowl Management Plan (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

The North American Waterfowl Management Plan, developed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), is an international action plan for a partnership of government, non-government, and private organizations to conserve migratory birds throughout the continent by conserving landscapes, guided by sound science. Plan projects contribute to the protection of habitat and wildlife species and its goal is to restore waterfowl populations to their 1970s levels by conserving habitat.

The North American Waterfowl Management Plan can be accessed by visiting:
<http://www.fws.gov/birdhabitat/nawmp/index.shtm>

C. United States Shorebird Conservation Plan (FWS)

This plan was developed by state and federal agencies and non-governmental organizations to conserve migratory shorebirds and their habitats. The plan provides a scientific framework to determine species, sites, and habitats that most urgently need conservation action. Goals of the plan are to ensure that shorebird habitat, adequate in quantity and quality, is maintained at the local level, and to maintain or restore shorebird populations at the continental and hemispheric levels.

The United States Shorebird Conservation Plan can be accessed by visiting:
<http://shorebirdplan.fws.gov/USShorebird/downloads/USShorebirdPlan2Ed.pdf>

D. Bird Conservation Regions (North American Bird Conservation Initiative)

Initiated by the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI), Bird Conservation Regions (BCRs) are ecologically distinct regions in North America with similar avian

communities, habitats, and resource management issues. BCRs were established to assist in range-wide bird conservation by dividing the United States into distinct conservation units. Their purposes include facilitating communication among bird conservation initiatives, facilitating regional bird conservation, promoting partnerships, and identifying and resolving conflicting conservation priorities. Utah is covered by three BCRs:

- Colorado Plateau Bird Conservation Region (BCR 16) includes the Wasatch and Uinta Mountains to the west and the Southern Rocky Mountains to the east, separated by the Colorado Plateau;
- Great Basin Bird Conservation Region (BCR 9) includes the Northern Basin and Range, Columbia Plateau, and the eastern slope of the Cascade Range; and
- Northern Rockies Bird Conservation Region (BCR 10) includes the Northern Rocky Mountains and outlying ranges in both the United States and Canada, and also the intermontane Wyoming Basin and Fraser Basin.

More information about BCRs can be accessed by visiting:

<http://www.nabci-us.org/map.html>

E. Coordinated Bird Conservation Plan (Intermountain West Joint Venture)

Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) promotes the restoration and maintenance of all bird populations by fostering the protection, restoration, and enhancement of wetlands, riparian habitats and the widely diverse uplands characteristic of the region. This plan coordinates the needs of all priority birds in the Joint Venture. It identifies planning focal points, which are key geographies where priority birds and priority habitats come together. Conservation projects will be generated within these areas to promote effective and efficient conservation expenditures. This plan is a summary of the eleven State Coordinated Bird Habitat Conservation Plans.

More information about the Coordinated Bird Conservation Plan can be accessed by visiting:

<http://iwjv.org/6/iwjv-state-plans.html>

F. Intermountain West Regional Shorebird Plan (FWS)

The intermountain west is North America's most important region for several shorebird species for breeding and other life history stages. The most important issue facing shorebird conservation in the intermountain west is competition for water. The plan addresses this and other issues through five goals including habitat management, population monitoring and assessment, research, outreach, and planning for regional cooperation in conservation.

More information about the Intermountain West Regional Shorebird Plan can be accessed by visiting: <http://shorebirdplan.fws.gov/RegionalShorebird/downloads/IMWEST4.doc>

G. Framework for Strategic Conservation of Desert Fishes (Desert Fish Habitat Partnership)

The Desert Fish Habitat Partnership (DFHP) was formed in 2005 to conserve native desert fish. To meet this goal, their strategy calls for the protection, restoration, and enhancement of desert fish habitats in cooperation with, and in support of state and tribal fish and wildlife agencies, federal resource agencies, research and private organizations, and engaged individuals. The Partnership seeks to address critical fish and aquatic habitat conservation needs. By identifying priority species and habitats, integrating and applying the best available science, and promoting community involvement, the Partnership will help ensure that conservation actions and funds are expended efficiently in those locations, and on those actions, most likely to yield the greatest results in arresting the decline of desert fishes.

Information regarding the Desert Fish Habitat Partnership can be accessed by visiting:
http://www.nature.nps.gov/water/Fisheries_Partnership/Documents/dfhp_final_LOWRES.pdf

H. Habitat Management Guidelines for Amphibians and Reptiles – Northwest and Southwest (Partnership for Amphibian and Reptile Conservation)

Habitat alteration, fragmentation and loss are collectively considered to be the primary challenge in the conservation of amphibians and reptiles. With herpetofaunal populations declining, and human populations expanding and using more land, Partnership for Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (PARC) has developed a series of regionally specific best management practices, or Habitat Management Guidelines (HMGs) to provide proactive guidance for improving the compatibility of land management practices with these animals. The HMGs are directed toward resource managers and private landowners who have a desire to help protect amphibians and reptiles.

Habitat Management Guidelines for Amphibians and Reptiles can be accessed by visiting:
http://www.parcplace.org/habitat_management_guide.html (SW HMG In Press, due 2011)

III. State Fish and Wildlife Priorities

A. Utah Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy

A Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CWCS) for Utah was developed by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR) and their partners to satisfy requirements of the State Wildlife Grant program. The CWCS provides a wealth of information on the abundance, distribution, current knowledge, conservation, and priority status of Utah's fish and wildlife. The NRCS strives to use its programs to assist in a coordinated effort to help implement Utah's CWCS within the context of NRCS national priorities, local priorities, program objectives, and program capabilities.

A team approach was used to prioritize habitats for the Utah CWCS. The team consisted of DWR employees, representatives from other government agencies, conservation organizations, an agricultural group, and a sportsman's group. Five criteria were used for prioritizing habitats as follows:

- Abundance of the habitat in Utah;
- Threats to the habitat in Utah;
- Trends of the habitat in Utah;
- Importance of the habitat to Tier I, II, and III species in Utah; and
- Importance of the habitat to Utah's overall vertebrate biodiversity.

Key habitats types identified in the CWCS for conservation, restoration, and management in Utah are listed below in priority order. Complete descriptions of the habitat types are provided in the CWCS.

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|----------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Lowland Riparian | 6. Flowing Water (Lotic) |
| 2. Wetland | 7. Wet Meadow |
| 3. Mountain Riparian | 8. Grassland |
| 4. Shrubsteppe | 9. Standing Water (Lentic) |
| 5. Mountain Shrub | 10. Aspen Forest |

For the CWCS, UDWR adopted a three-tiered system to group species in order of greatest conservation need. Tier I includes federally listed Threatened and Endangered, federal Candidate, and Conservation Agreement species. Most Tier I species have recovery plans or conservation agreements and associated strategies; a recovery plan is not required for federal Candidates. In cooperation with agency and private partners, UDWR has initiated conservation agreements for a few of the federal Candidate species. Recovery plans and conservation agreements have been developed by multiple parties indicating the breadth of support among agencies and other interested parties for the actions required in these documents. The recovery plans and conservation agreements include recommended conservation actions that are based on the best science available at the time of preparation. These actions have been vetted by partners and are reviewed at regular intervals.

The species on the Tier II list are Utah Species of Concern, which is a subset of the State Sensitive Species List. The State of Utah rule establishing the Sensitive Species List requires justification of the Species of Concern in individual species accounts. A panel of expert biologists from the UDWR was convened to develop the State Sensitive Species List. The information they considered included:

- Species biology, life history;
- Population – abundance, conditions;
- Distribution; and
- Threats.

The panel developed a list of native species that were believed to be of greatest conservation need based on these parameters. Agency reports, published peer-reviewed literature, and personal knowledge were all used to support the list. Once this list was completed, it was cross-referenced with the Utah Natural Heritage rankings and a very high degree of correlation was observed. The correlation with the independently developed Natural Heritage rankings provided some measure of confirmation that the Species of Concern List was accurate.

The Species of Concern list was reviewed by an internal Utah Department of Natural Resources committee and edited in accord with their direction (especially to clarify and further support species accounts). The list was then approved by the Wildlife Board.

Tier III species were identified in the same process as that for Tier II species. The Tier III list includes species that are of conservation concern because they are linked to an at-risk habitat (e.g., mule deer), have had a substantial decrease in population size, or there is little information available, especially information regarding the species' life history, population status, and threats. Accordingly, the primary action currently described for the Tier III species is to gather more information regarding their status and any threats to them or their habitats. The lack of information itself was deemed of sufficient importance to constitute a threat.

The full list of species in Tiers I, II, and III may be found in the Chapter 5, Table 5.1 of the Utah CWCS.

The Utah Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy can be accessed by visiting: <http://wildlife.utah.gov/cwcs/>

B. Utah Avian Conservation Strategy (Partners in Flight)

Utah Partners in Flight (UPIF) was organized in 1993 for the purpose of addressing the status of avian populations within the state and to provide data relevant to issues raised concerning the status of neotropical migratory birds in the Western Hemisphere. Utah NRCS and conservation partners recognize attempts to reverse or at least curb declining population trends will require a coordinated and cooperative effort. Utah's Avian Conservation Strategy, completed in 2002, lists 24 priority bird species and six priority habitats for conservation efforts. The Strategy also recommends appropriate conservation actions required to accomplish stated objectives.

1. UPIF Priority Species

The UPIF Rankings Committee employed these criteria in prioritizing Utah bird species: relative abundance; breeding distribution; winter distribution; threats in breeding range; other threats not related to breeding; importance of Utah to breeding range or habitat; and population trend data. Species are listed below in priority order:

1. Lewis's Woodpecker
2. Abert's Towhee
3. American Avocet
4. Mountain Plover
5. Lucy's Warbler
6. Sage-grouse (Greater and Gunnison)
7. American White Pelican
8. Bobolink
9. Virginia's Warbler
10. Gray Vireo
11. Bell's Vireo
12. Black Rosy-finch
13. Long-billed Curlew
14. Sharp-tailed Grouse
15. Brewer's Sparrow
16. Black Swift
17. Black-necked Stilt
18. Broad-tailed Hummingbird
19. Ferruginous Hawk
20. Yellow-billed Cuckoo
21. Black-throated Gray Warbler
22. Three-toed Woodpecker
23. Sage Sparrow
24. Gambel's Quail

2. UPIF Priority Habitats

Riparian (Lowland and Mountain Riparian) and Wetland habitats are the most important to avian diversity in the state. These categories combined are used by Utah's birds as either breeding or wintering habitat almost twice as much as any other habitat category. Lowland Riparian habitat provides breeding or winter habitat for 107 birds, eight of which are Priority species. Lowland Riparian is followed by Mountain Riparian (46 total and one Priority species) and Wetland (35 total and four Priority species) in importance as breeding or wintering habitat. Because of their importance to avian diversity, Lowland Riparian, Mountain Riparian and Wetland habitats are considered UPIF Priority Habitats.

In contrast, Shrubsteppe habitat (sagebrush/grassland) does not support a wide variety of species (only eight species use Shrubsteppe as primary or secondary breeding or winter habitat, three of these are Priority species). However, several species are considered "sagebrush obligates" and can survive only in Shrubsteppe and the closely related High Desert Scrub habitat (28 total and four Priority species). Also, Utah provides a significant proportion of the world's sagebrush-grasslands making Utah vital to the survival of birds such as sage-grouse, sage thrashers, Brewer's sparrows and sage sparrows. Because shrubsteppe grades into High Desert Scrub and because both habitats are important to "sagebrush obligates" and associated species, these two habitats are considered UPIF Priority Habitats.

Pinyon-Juniper habitat is also considered a UPIF Priority Habitat for much the same reasons as Shrubsteppe and High Desert Scrub. It supports relatively few (22 total species), highly habitat specialized birds (four Priority species) and Utah contains a significant portion of Pinyon-Juniper range.

More information about the Utah Avian Conservation Strategy can be accessed by visiting: http://www.wildlife.utah.gov/publications/pdf/utah_partners_in_flight.pdf

C. Coordinated Implementation Plan for Bird Conservation in Utah (IMJV)

The Utah State Steering Committee of the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IMJV) includes representatives from the UDWR, FWS, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), US Forest Service (USFS), NRCS, Ducks Unlimited Inc., National Audubon Society, and The Nature Conservancy of Utah. The group started meeting in 1994 primarily as a wetlands and waterfowl group, but moved to an all-bird focus in 2001. The group is a statewide forum for the discussion and implementation of projects to identify, protect, and restore key wetlands and associated upland habitats.

The planning objectives of the Utah Steering Committee of the IWJV are to: 1) create a planning forum, through which representatives of state and federal conservation agencies and wildlife conservation groups work collaboratively to develop coordinated habitat goals, objectives, and projects that address the conservation needs of all bird species in Utah; and 2) review, merge, and synthesize the habitat goals and objectives of existing bird conservation plans into a

coordinated planning document that reflects the habitat priorities of all bird conservation programs in Utah.

The Plan lists all the priority species from the various National, Regional, and State Bird conservation plans described above. In addition, the Utah Steering Committee ranked 24 major habitat types into three categories of priority. Three criteria were used to rank these habitat types: 1) statewide importance to birds; 2) degree of threat; and 3) opportunities (funding, partnerships, and feasibility for habitat protection, restoration, and enhancement.) The three categories were defined as:

- Priority A: High threat, high opportunity, and high value to birds statewide;
- Priority B: One criterion may be high, but generally the habitat is of moderate concern; and
- Priority C: Relatively low threat, low opportunity, and low value as habitat statewide.

Priority A Habitats are: Lowland Riparian, Mountain Riparian, Wetlands and Associated Uplands, Shrubsteppe, Wet Meadow, and Playa. Complete descriptions of the habitat types are provided in the CWCS.

More information regarding the Coordinated Implementation Plan for Bird Conservation in Utah can be accessed by visiting: <http://iwjv.org/6/iwjv-state-plans.html>

D. Utah Rare Plant Guide (Utah Native Plant Society)

The Utah Native Plant Society (UNPS) was formed in late 1978 out of a growing concern for imperiled rare plant species. The UNPS is a non-profit conservation and educational organization with programs and committees focused around the protection of Utah's rare native plants. The Utah Rare Plant Guide (URPG) converts and updates the Utah Endangered, Threatened, and Sensitive Plant Field Guide to an on-line, electronic version available to the public. The URPG does not prioritize plant species, however it does list them by status and by habitat type.

Although plants are not generally considered "wildlife" in NRCS programs, USDA Fish & Wildlife Policy does state as a goal of the Department "...to ensure the presence of diverse, native and desired non-native populations of wildlife, fish, and plant species...." Also, plants are included in the Healthy Plant and Animal Communities Mission Goal in the current NRCS Strategic Plan.

Therefore, NRCS will look for opportunities to use Farm Bill programs to protect, maintain, and where feasible, enhance or restore populations of rare native plants. Top priority will be given to currently listed plants or candidates for listing under the ESA, and secondary priority will be given to other identified at-risk plant species in the URPG.

The Utah Rare Plant Guide can be accessed by visiting: <http://www.utahrareplants.org/>

E. Utah Bat Conservation Plan – Draft (Utah Bat Working Group)

This plan provides an overview of the bats of Utah, summarizes threats to bats in Utah, identifies conservational objectives, recommends needed actions, and it provides tools for conserving bat species.

There is conservational concern for nearly all bat species. Great declines have been observed in some populations of even the most widespread and abundant bat species in America. The biology and life histories of most bat species that occur in Utah remain poorly and incompletely known, and this lack of knowledge impedes effective efforts to manage and to conserve their populations. Protection of roosting habitats, foraging habitats, and water are obvious conservational needs. To guide appropriate management, improved knowledge of the distributions (geographic inventory) and populations (monitoring of population trends) of bat species inhabiting Utah is needed. To acquire the understanding needed for informed management, inventory and monitoring must be undertaken and accomplished in a systematic way.

More information regarding the Utah Bat Conservation Plan can be accessed by visiting: https://www.utahbats.org/batbase_folders//public_documents/General/UtahBatConservationPlan_13Sep2009_Draft.pdf

IV. Local Fish and Wildlife Priorities and Special Project Areas

Along with its conservation partners, NRCS continues to identify where priority conservation problems or opportunities exist. Prioritization of specific areas of concern is needed to identify which species or habitats warrant immediate attention in the context of NRCS program applicability.

Currently, prioritization at the local level is coordinated through the Utah Partners for Conservation and Development (UPCD) Regional Action Teams. Focus Areas have already been mapped by these Teams for shrubsteppe habitat restoration. Additional Focus Areas for riparian habitat restoration will be mapped in the near future. Eligible applicants within or bordering these designated Focus Areas receive additional environmental points during ranking of applications submitted for WHIP, EQIP and GRP.

Focus Areas for WRP have been developed with the input of the State Technical Advisory Committee and wildlife agency partners. The WRP Focus Areas include priority sites identified by the Intermountain West Joint Venture, those within the Great Salt Lake – Utah Lake Ecosystem, and those that could provide habitat for the Least Chub or Columbia Spotted Frog.

Additional areas meriting special consideration can be identified at the state and/or local levels. A requirement for additional special project area designation for NRCS programs should be consensus of need, a well-defined geographic area, local and multi-agency interest, and investment to resolve identified resource concerns.

Audubon has identified special priority areas for bird conservation in Utah:

A. Important Bird Areas (Audubon)

Important Bird Areas (IBAs) are sites that provide essential habitat for one or more bird species, and include sites for breeding, wintering, and/or migrating species. To qualify as an IBA, the site must support species of conservation concern, species with restricted ranges vulnerable because they are not widely distributed, species that are vulnerable because their populations are concentrated in one general habitat type or biome, or species, or guilds vulnerable because they occur at high densities due to flocking behavior.

Utah currently has 10 IBAs: the five major bays on Great Salt Lake - Farmington, Ogden, Bear River, Gilbert (or South Arm), and Gunnison (or North Arm); Provo and Goshen Bay on Utah Lake; Cutler Marsh-Amalga Barrens in Cache County; the Upper Strawberry Watershed in Wasatch County; the Lytle Preserve in Washington County; Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge in Juab County; Ouray National Wildlife Refuge in Uintah County; Deseret Land and Livestock Ranch in Rich County; the Fremont River within Capitol Reef National Park in Wayne County; and Clear Lake Waterfowl Management Area in Millard County. Program applications for privately owned lands within, adjacent, or near these IBAs will be favored in the ranking criteria for Farm Bill program funding.

More information about Important Bird Areas can be accessed by visiting:
<http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba/index.html>

V. Utah NRCS Fish and Wildlife Conservation Targets

The prioritization systems used by the State Plans described above provide a foundation for NRCS to focus conservation efforts on habitats and species of greatest conservation need. National leadership has specifically directed States to utilize their State Wildlife Agency's CWCS to establish species and habitat priorities to be addressed with Farm Bill program funding.

To further identify which Utah fish and wildlife conservation issues can be effectively addressed using NRCS programs, an option paper was developed for consideration by the Utah State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC). Members of STAC were asked to provide recommendations to NRCS on which of the key habitat types and Tier I – III species from the CWCS to focus.

Using these recommendations, along with best professional judgment, and reference literature NRCS drafted a revised State Fish and Wildlife Plan. The STAC Wildlife Subcommittee and other interested STAC members reviewed the draft and provided additional comments which were incorporated into the final plan.

A. Targeted Habitat Types and Species

Utah NRCS will give highest priority for Farm Bill program funding to projects that protect, improve, enhance, or maintain the habitat types listed below in priority order. However, all projects benefiting any habitat type will continue to be considered for eligible funding.

1. Lowland Riparian
2. Wetland
3. Mountain Riparian
4. Shrubsteppe
5. Flowing Water (Lotic)
6. Wet Meadow
7. Grassland

Species listed in all Tiers in Utah's CWCS that use one of the above as their primary, and in some cases, secondary, habitat type will be considered priority species for Farm Bill program funding. Exceptions include species with such limited habitat requirements or distribution that NRCS programs have little opportunity to affect them and species that are extirpated or experimental in Utah. Other exceptions are species with threats beyond the jurisdiction of NRCS programs and those that have too little information available on their habitat needs for NRCS programs to address. Priority species may change over time as more information becomes available on species' status and habitat needs.

Targeted habitat types and associated species are listed in Table 1 below. Note that not all of the species occur in the associated habitat types statewide. Some are limited geographically as well as by habitat type. Targeted species will be used primarily to rank Farm Bill program applications. Tier I species are given highest priority, Tier II species second highest, and Tier III species third priority. In addition, special conservation efforts are progressing through established partnerships for the greater and Gunnison sage-grouse and the Utah prairie-dog.

Table 1. Utah NRCS Targeted Habitat Types and Associated Species

Habitat Type	Priority 1 Species	Priority 2 Species	Priority 3 Species
Lowland Riparian	Bald Eagle, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Virgin Spinedace, Virgin River Chub	Arizona Toad, Lewis's Woodpecker, Allen's Big-eared Bat, Big Free-tailed Bat, Western Red Bat, Cornsnake, Western Threadsnake	Canyon Treefrog, Abert's Towhee, Bell's Vireo, Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Lucy's Warbler, Northern River Otter, Yuma Myotis, Cornsnake
Wetland	Columbia Spotted Frog, Least Chub, Fat-whorled Pondsail, Kanab Ambersnail	Western Toad, Short-eared Owl	Northern Leopard Frog, American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt
Mountain Riparian	Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, Bluehead Sucker, Bonneville Cutthroat Trout,	Western Toad, Leatherside Chub, Smooth Greensnake	Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Northern River Otter

	Colorado River Cutthroat Trout		
Shrubsteppe	Gunnison Sage-grouse	Ferruginous Hawk, Greater Sage-grouse, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Pygmy Rabbit	Brewer's Sparrow, Sage Sparrow, Sage Thrasher, Mule Deer
Flowing Water (Lotic)	Bluehead Sucker, Bonneville Cutthroat Trout, Bonytail, Colorado Pikeminnow, Colorado River Cutthroat Trout, Flannelmouth Sucker, June Sucker, Humpback Chub, Razorback Sucker, Roundtail Chub, Virgin Spinedace, Virgin River Chub, Woundfin	Desert Sucker, Leatherside Chub	Canyon Treefrog
Wet Meadow	Columbia Spotted Frog	Bobolink, Smooth Greensnake	
Grassland	Utah Prairie-dog	Burrowing Owl, Grasshopper Sparrow, Long-billed Curlew, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Short-eared Owl, Gunnison's Prairie-dog, White-tailed Prairie-dog	Great Plains Toad

Note: This table is subject to additions and changes. Please ensure you are using the most current information.

B. Target Habitat Threats and Conservation Actions

Programs of NRCS can be used to address some of the threats and implement some of the conservation actions identified in Utah's CWCS. Other threats and conservation actions are beyond NRCS' jurisdiction. Threats and actions to be addressed with NRCS programs are summarized below by targeted habitat type.

1. Lowland and Mountain Riparian Habitats

Threats include habitat degradation through stream channelization, habitat loss and fragmentation, invasion by non-native species, and improper grazing management. Priority conservation actions to be implemented with NRCS programs are restoration and improvement of habitat by restoring meanders and planting native vegetation, habitat protection through rental and easement programs, control of non-native invasive vegetation, and implementation of prescribed grazing systems that include use exclusion where appropriate.

2. Wetland and Wet Meadow Habitats

Threats include habitat loss and fragmentation (including loss of adjacent upland habitat), contamination with pollutants, improper grazing management, and invasion by non-native plant species. Priority conservation actions to be implemented with NRCS programs are wetland restoration, enhancement, and creation; habitat protection through rental and easement programs; promotion of conservation practices that reduce soil erosion and improve water quality; control of non-native invasive vegetation; and implementation of prescribed grazing systems, including use exclusion where appropriate.

3. Shrubsteppe Habitat

Threats include habitat loss and degradation, brush eradication, fire cycle alteration, improper grazing management, and invasion by non-native plant species. Priority conservation actions to be implemented with NRCS programs are habitat protection through rental and easement programs; restoration using brush management and range seeding practices planned to improve brush, grass and forb cover; control of non-native invasive vegetation and native encroaching conifers; and implementation of prescribed grazing systems.

4. Flowing Water (Lotic) Habitat

Threats include habitat degradation through stream channelization, habitat loss and fragmentation, contamination with pollutants, nutrient and sediment loading, invasion by non-native species, and improper grazing management. Priority conservation actions to be implemented with NRCS programs are restoration and improvement of habitat by restoring meanders and planting native vegetation; in-channel habitat improvement through removal of barriers to fish passage, screening of irrigation diversions, and addition of large wood; habitat protection through rental and easement programs; promotion of conservation practices that reduce soil erosion and improve water quality in the watershed; control of non-native invasive vegetation; and implementation of prescribed grazing systems, including use exclusion where appropriate.

5. Grassland Habitat

Threats include habitat loss and degradation, fire cycle alteration, improper grazing management, and invasion by non-native plant species. Priority conservation actions to be implemented with NRCS programs are habitat protection through rental and easement programs; restoration using brush management, range seeding, and prescribed burning where appropriate; control of non-native invasive vegetation; and implementation of prescribed grazing systems.

C. Targeted Species Recovery and Management Plans

There are numerous species in Utah that are associated with specific plans. Primarily, the FWS and DWR have produced these plans. As appropriate, NRCS will facilitate with the implementation of these plans.

Federally Listed Species, by County, with links to Recovery Plans, if available can be accessed by visiting: <http://www.fws.gov/utahfieldoffice/EndSppCounty%20Map.html>

Utah Species-Specific Management Plans can be accessed by visiting: <http://wildlife.utah.gov/dwr/> (different species at various locations on website)

VI. Farm Bill Program Opportunities

Fish and wildlife achieved co-equal status with other resource concerns (e.g., soil, water, and air) with authorization of the 1996 Farm Bill. Co-equal status was re-affirmed during re-authorization of the Farm Bill in 2002. The 2008 Farm Bill reauthorized and expanded fish and wildlife conservation programs. Therefore, Farm Bill programs are expected to use their authorities to address fish and wildlife resource concerns when applicable. In order to maximize fish and wildlife conservation opportunities using the full complement of NRCS administered Farm Bill program authorities, it is imperative that aggressive outreach concerning program opportunities be exerted by NRCS and conservation partners.

For more information about Utah's NRCS Programs can be accessed by visiting:
<http://www.ut.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/>

A. Financial Assistance Programs

1. Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

The EQIP has the greatest potential of all NRCS programs to directly address fish and wildlife resource needs on working agricultural land. One of four national priorities identified in the 2002 EQIP rule is conservation of at-risk species. Any of the priority targets and associated issues identified in this action plan can be addressed by agricultural producers through contracts lasting from two to ten years. Fish and wildlife habitat enhancement can be a primary or secondary objective of applicants to this program and management incentive payments may be made under EQIP. Particularly suited to EQIP are projects that support conservation of species like Sage-grouse and Utah Prairie-dog while also improving livestock forage and those that minimize impacts on water quality and water quantity from agricultural pursuits.

EQIP also provides funding to the Colorado River Salinity Control Program (CRSCP). The CRSCP provides cost share and technical assistance to apply salinity control practices and wildlife habitat replacement. The CRSCP is led by Bureau of Reclamation, NRCS, and the Colorado River Salinity Control Program Forum through the State Agriculture Department and Soil Conservation Districts.

2. Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

The Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) is a voluntary program for conservation-minded landowners who want to develop and improve wildlife habitat on agricultural land, nonindustrial private forest land, and Indian land.

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 reauthorized WHIP as a voluntary approach to improving wildlife habitat in our Nation. The Natural Resources Conservation Service administers WHIP to provide both technical assistance and up to 75 percent cost-share assistance to establish and improve fish and wildlife habitat. WHIP cost-share agreements between NRCS and the participant generally last from one year after the last conservation practice is implemented but not more than 10 years from the date the agreement is signed.

WHIP Priorities

In order to provide direction to the State and local levels for implementing WHIP to achieve its objective, NRCS has established the following national priorities:

- Promote the restoration of declining or important native fish and wildlife habitats.
- Protect, restore, develop or enhance fish and wildlife habitat to benefit at-risk species
- Reduce the impacts of invasive species on fish and wildlife habitats; and
- Protect, restore, develop or enhance declining or important aquatic wildlife species' habitats

3. Sage-Grouse Habitat Improvement Initiative (SGI)

The USDA has made financial assistance available through EQIP and WHIP, in the 11 western states with sage-grouse, to help landowners willing to work to reduce threats to Sage-grouse on their land. The overarching goals of this initiative are to improve or restore Sage-grouse habitat and demonstrate that sage-grouse conservation is compatible with the sustainability of working ranches.

The Utah SGI, developed collaboratively with UDWR and the sage-grouse Local Working Groups around the state, focuses on making measurable and significant progress toward treating a specific threat to sage-grouse on private lands through strategic use of conservation programs. This approach is based on the principle that focusing resources on a specific problem in the most critical locations on the landscape results in the highest likelihood of affecting sage-grouse populations in the shortest amount of time. Details can be found in the Utah Implementation Plan.

At a minimum, applicants and their land must meet the eligibility requirements for EQIP or WHIP. Eligible applications are ranked and compete against other projects for funding based on the proposed projects benefits to sage-grouse.

B. Easement and Long-Term Rental Programs

1. Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRLPP)

The FRLPP provides matching funds to State, Tribal, or local farmland protection programs to purchase conservation easements from privately owned farms. The function of this program is to preserve land that contains prime or unique soil, historical, or archaeological resources. The FRLPP ranking process is required to give priority to parcels that provide special social, economic, and environmental benefits to an area. This program provides an opportunity to maintain open space and habitat important to many wildlife species.

2. Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)

The GRP offers permanent and 30-year easements and rental agreements lasting 10, 15, 20, or 30 years. The primary program focus is to preserve grazed native grasslands, pasturelands, and

shrublands that are under threat of conversion to other land uses. Maintaining and improving plant and animal biodiversity on actively grazed land is a program emphasis. Enrolled land may require periodic manipulation to maximize wildlife habitat and preserve grassland functions and values. Protection of grassland bird breeding habitat is mandated. In addition, this program has the potential to contribute toward conservation and preservation of habitat suitable for other open land wildlife such as the Utah Prairie-dog.

3. Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)

The Wetlands Reserve Program is a voluntary program offering landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on their property. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides technical and financial support to help landowners with their wetland restoration efforts. The NRCS goal is to achieve the greatest wetland functions and values, along with optimum wildlife habitat, on every acre enrolled in the program. This program offers landowners an opportunity to establish long-term conservation and wildlife practices and protection.

C. Stewardship Program

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is a voluntary conservation program that encourages producers to address resource concerns in a comprehensive manner by:

- Undertaking additional conservation activities; and
- Improving, maintaining, and managing existing conservation activities.

CSP is available on Tribal and private agricultural lands and non-industrial private forest land in all 50 States and the Caribbean and Pacific Islands Areas. The program provides equitable access to all producers, regardless of operation size, crops produced, or geographic location. The Secretary of Agriculture has delegated the authority for CSP to the NRCS Chief.

Through CSP, NRCS will provide financial and technical assistance to eligible producers to conserve and enhance soil, water, air, and related natural resources on their land.

- cropland
- grassland
- prairie land
- improved pastureland
- rangeland
- nonindustrial private forest lands
- agricultural land under the jurisdiction of an Indian tribe

- and other private agricultural land (including cropped woodland, marshes, and agricultural land used for the production of livestock) on which resource concerns related to agricultural production could be addressed.

D. Grant Opportunities

1. Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI)

The CCPI is a voluntary program established to foster conservation partnerships that focus technical and financial resources on conservation priorities in watersheds and air sheds of special significance. The CCPI is established to encourage the formation of partnerships to devise and implement watershed or regional solutions to pressing natural resource priorities associated with agriculture and rural settings. Terrestrial and freshwater aquatic habitat is a conservation priority for CCPI. Under CCPI, funds are awarded to State and local governments and agencies, Indian Tribes, and non-governmental organizations that have a history of working with agricultural producers.

1. Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)

The CIG is funded under authority of EQIP and is an attractive alternative for agricultural producers that allow greater flexibility and use of innovative approaches to treat pressing environmental concerns and to ensure compliance with Federal, State, and local regulations. Although wildlife habitat is currently not a targeted natural resource concern for the CIG National component, fish and wildlife may be secondary beneficiaries of actions to improve soil, water, atmospheric resources, and health of grazing lands. States with a CIG State component can add a wildlife habitat resource concern at the discretion of the State Conservationist.

VII. WHIP Applicant Ranking and Evaluation

All NRCS programs require an evaluation process to prioritize proposed projects in order to maximize environmental benefits. For most NRCS programs a ranking process which awards points for anticipated environmental benefits is mandated. As previously stated, national oversight and evaluation reviews for WHIP and EQIP have recommended screening and/or ranking processes that facilitate achievement of clearly defined national, regional, state, and local priorities and cost-effective program delivery. The NRCS will continue to work with national, regional, state, and local entities to refine program ranking and evaluation processes for all natural resources, including fish and wildlife. The National Ranking Tool has improved consistency in addressing national priorities. Future guidance on the National Ranking Tool from NRCS National Headquarters may necessitate changes to the ranking process.

The NRCS recognized a need to provide more biological input for WHIP planning to maximize effective implementation of the program. In support of this need, Utah NRCS requires a biologist

(NRCS or partner staff) to be involved in the application ranking and early planning phases of all WHIP projects.

VIII. Criteria for Measuring Success

The NRCS employs periodic national program reviews, annual state program reviews, and annual conservation planning quality assurance reviews to ensure programs and conservation technical assistance are achieving their intended purpose. In addition, well designed program ranking tools can be used to track whether program outreach is effectively attracting high value conservation projects.

Although environmental monitoring of individual projects is desirable, NRCS does not have staffing to support such an effort. Therefore, NRCS must rely on established long term monitoring efforts (e.g., Christmas Bird Counts and waterfowl surveys) or on the efforts of partners and volunteers to document whether program implementation is benefiting intended targets. It is essential that selected projects, especially those involving state and/or federally listed species and restoration of natural communities, be monitored to evaluate success in order to be able to employ adaptive management. Along with its conservation partners, NRCS will strive to develop specific monitoring protocols and to explore whether non-Farm Bill programs and/or Farm Bill program financial and technical assistance money can be used to selectively monitor priority projects. Projects with a monitoring or research component provided by partners will receive higher priority for Farm Bill program funding.

IX. Partner Involvement

Utah NRCS will continue to work with a variety of conservation partners to effectively deliver Farm Bill Programs in a manner which benefits fish and wildlife resources and which focuses efforts to help solve priority national, regional, state, and local fish and wildlife issues. In addition, Utah NRCS is an active member of the Utah Partners for Conservation and Development and its Watershed Restoration Initiative.

Four Farm Bill Program Biologist positions, jointly funded by NRCS and UDWR and located in NRCS Field Offices, will soon be filled in Utah. These biologists will increase the effectiveness of this partnership and help coordinate programs of both agencies to further mutual fish, wildlife, and habitat goals.

The following is a list of conservation partners supporting NRCS Fish and Wildlife Action Plan:

1. Federal Agencies

- USDA - Farm Service Agency
- USDA - Forest Service
- USDI - Bureau of Land Management
- USDI - Bureau of Reclamation

- USDI - National Park Service
- USDI - Fish and Wildlife Service

2. State Agencies

- School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration
- Utah Department of Agriculture and Food
- Utah Division of Wildlife Resources
- Utah State University Extension Service

3. Non-Profit Organizations

- Audubon Society
- Environmental Defense
- The Nature Conservancy
- Trust for Public Lands
- Utah Association of Conservation Districts
- Utah Farm Bureau
- Utah Resource Conservation & Development Councils Association

X. Contact

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