

## Fish, Wildlife, and Environmental Compliance In Conservation Planning

May 2009  
By Paul Obert

- Refer to the NRCS **National Planning Procedures Handbook** for the 9 steps in the planning process. Start with determining landowner objectives, inventory existing resources, and identify resource problems, opportunities and concerns in the planning area. While doing so, talk with the landowner, because many times they know more than we do, especially about their place.
- Go to [www.wy.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.wy.nrcs.usda.gov), select the **Technical Resources** tab top center of page, and then click on **Wildlife Biology**. Here you will find links to pertinent fish, wildlife, environmental compliance, and technical guide information.
- Use the **WY-CPA-52**/environmental evaluation as a checklist to help you remember things to consider like SWAPA+H and special environmental concerns. The WY-CPA-52 is required documentation for all types of NRCS assistance.
- Assuming one of the objectives is to improve the area for fish and wildlife. Determine what species the landowner wants to have. See what's available for food, cover, water and space for the desired species. Refer to NRCS state and national fish and wildlife/biology technical notes, habitat evaluation guides, Wyoming Game and Fish Department Habitat Extension Bulletins, and fish and wildlife biologists with partners in your local area for help with habitat needs of the species determined to be the objective. What's there in terms of grasses, forbs, weeds, shrubs, trees, crops, and wetland plants? Where's the closest water source? How far is it to the nearest cover? Are there grassy or woody corridors running through the property and connecting different land uses/types of vegetation that wildlife can use for cover and travel lanes?
- Don't forget to look beyond the property lines. What's the land use and management adjacent to the spot you are working on? This may be important in meeting the habitat needs to reach the objective and helps to identify different habitat types/requirements, their location on the landscape and how they relate to each other. Maybe there's a sage grouse lek on another ranch a mile away and grouse are nesting on the property you're working on. The hen may be rearing her brood on another persons place and then wintering in a completely different area.
- What's the land use and management on the property you are considering? Is the area plowed, burned, grazed, or cut for hay? When does the plowing, burning, grazing, or cutting occur? How much of the existing vegetation is removed? How much vegetation is left for wildlife to use? Is there time for regrowth for winter protective cover, or next years nesting season? Is there any waste grain left for food? Are there other disturbances like heavy use of the site by big game animals? Are you in a big game migration route?

- What are the soils, what does the soil survey tell you, what's the land capability, and the range site/ecological description? How much moisture is there in an average year, what's the aspect and slope of the land? Does the property you're looking at have any special concerns (inclusions not identified by soil survey) you need to know about like high salt content, and so on?
- What are the known fish and wildlife species in the area? Are there state and/or federal sensitive species, candidate, proposed, threatened, or endangered species? Use **WIRL** (Wildlife Inventory Resource Locator), or go to **Wildlife Biology** under **Technical Resources** on the Wyoming NRCS home page and you will find a link to **Section II** of the eFOTG. This link will take you to information on federal (Endangered Species Act) and state species of concern. Another way of getting to **Section II** is going to the Wyoming NRCS home page, select **Technical Resources**, then click on **eFOTG** in the top left of the screen, next select **Wyoming** in the map of the United States, and click on a **county** in the Wyoming map. Under **eFOTG** in the left side of the screen select **Section II**. Click on folder **E, Threatened and Endangered Species**. Next click on **References** and you will find the federal and state species information.
- Wildlife requires food, shelter/cover, water, and enough space to provide these life requisites. Cover/shelter provides protection from predators and weather as well as a place for nesting, roosting and loafing. Water is very important, but remember some species can meet their water requirements through the foods they eat and don't need a direct source of water. The space needed varies greatly by individual species. It can be from under an acre to thousands of miles. The size depends on the area needed to provide the necessary life requisites. Look for opportunities to restore, create, enhance and/or protect habitats providing for the seasonal needs of the species you have identified.
- Ask about and look for any odd areas or places that aren't being utilized much because of field shape, the equipment used, it's hard to get water to it, or whatever. Maybe some places exist that can provide wildlife habitat without needing to take the most productive land out of agricultural use?
- Knowing something about the use and management of the place, try to find practices that benefit wildlife and fit into the overall operation. Perhaps there's a place that can provide nesting habitat for birds during the spring/summer and offer some fall/winter grazing by livestock? Try and find ways to provide a benefit to the landowner from what they choose to do for wildlife. Maybe a woody shelterbelt can provide habitat and livestock protection from wind/winter weather, help protect a calving area, etc.?
- When the main objective is wildlife and we are providing cost-share through programs like WHIP and WRP, remember that we need to be implementing legitimate practices for the **primary benefit of wildlife**. Fall/winter grazing may be okay so long as the plants are not over utilized and there's enough cover left for wildlife nesting in the coming spring and summer. Winter food and cover may be needed and in this case the grazing schedule will be different. Keep in mind practices that benefit one species can be harmful to others. In eastern Wyoming

- Proper grazing use is an important component of conservation plans and wildlife management. Refer to the additional criteria to improve or maintain food and/or cover for fish and wildlife species of concern in the 528 (Prescribed Grazing) Standard and Specification along with appropriate fish and wildlife management standards (i.e., Upland Wildlife Habitat Management, Wetland Wildlife Habitat Management, and Restoration and Management of Declining Habitat). Other disturbances like fire, cutting, mowing and haying are also important to take into consideration. Maybe a riparian project or other practices need to be fenced to protect them from livestock? If some temporary electric fencing can be used to avoid the need for permanent fences that hinder the movement of big game, consider doing so. Remember to keep permanent fences wildlife friendly through fence type (like flexible electric), height and wire spacing.
- If the landowner identifies a specific species as the objective; go to the NRCS FOTG; Technical Notes (TN) on biology, range, agronomy, plant materials, woodland; a fish or wildlife biologist; books/references; sage grouse guidelines; or other sources to understand the habitat requirements of the species. Because here in Wyoming we don't have any individual species habitat evaluation guides and only very general habitat guides that don't even cover all land uses, it is extremely important to utilize the expertise of partner fish and wildlife biologists. Knowing the habitat needs, compare them to the place you are working on. Determine what the most limiting factor is and try to provide it while enhancing all other components of the habitat you are working with. Remember the NRCS fish and wildlife standards refer you to the FOTG Section III Quality Criteria requiring a minimum habitat condition of 0.5. The fish and wildlife standards and specifications are found in **Section IV** of the eFOTG under **A, Conservation Practices**. Technical Notes are found in **Section I**. After you click on **Section I** in the eFOTG, click on **Table of Contents**. Here you will find a list of all the TN. Use the standards, specifications, TN, and biologists to help you determine the best practices and management for fish and wildlife.
- Refer to **Section V** of the FOTG for information on the physical effects of implementing conservation practices. In this section of the FOTG you will find folders with background and guidance. Under folder **A, Conservation Practice Physical Effects (CPPE)** you can go to folders **1 through 5** for effects related to **soil, water, air, plant, and animals**.
- It is a planning requirement for Resource Management Systems (RMS) to meet the minimum fish and wildlife quality criteria of 0.5, as set in Section III of the FOTG. Biology TN 38 and 39 can be used to document existing and planned condition for fish and wildlife. To report wildlife wetland (644) and upland (645) habitat management, these standards in Section IV of the FOTG also require meeting the minimum fish and wildlife quality criteria of 0.5. Biology TN 38 and 39 are found in the eFOTG under **Section I** by clicking on the **Table of Contents**. The quality criteria can be found in **Section III** of the eFOTG. To do so open folder **A, Resource Quality Criteria**. Next select folder **2, Resource**

- Section III also identifies required essential practices for fish and wildlife to meet RMS requirements in all our land uses. Refer to **f, Conservation Planning Guide for RMS Plans, Table 2, Wyoming Conservation Planning Guide - Resource Management System Level Conservation Planning**. This is found by clicking on **Section III** in the eFOTG, then folder **A, Resource Quality Criteria**. Next open folder **2, Resource Management Systems**.
- Often when doing something to benefit one species, other wildlife species are benefited as well. Don't forget you can do something to benefit one species that has a negative impact on another. It is the landowner who is the decision-maker on what species they want to have. They make the choice of what species are most important. If the existing condition for species or habitat that the landowner has identified as the objective already meets a 0.5 or greater and the planned practices won't improve conditions, or will cause only a slight improvement, you need to decide if spending more money is cost effective.
- However, if the landowner's preferred alternative will cause a negative impact to federal candidate species or species federally listed as proposed, threatened or endangered, we in the NRCS can't continue to provide assistance. That is, so long as the landowner insists on causing harm to them or their habitat. We should try to avoid any negative impact to state species of concern, but may continue to provide technical and financial assistance when benefits to other resource concerns warrant. This policy can be found in the **NRCS eDirectives** under the **General Manual, Wyoming State Supplement, Title 190 – Ecological Sciences, Part 410 – Compliance with NEPA, and Subpart B – Related Environmental Concerns**. Make sure planned practices are in keeping with all other laws and regulations.
- Try to achieve as much habitat diversity as possible on the landscape in hopes it will be beneficial to a multitude of species. This may not always be possible if focusing on single species. If it's possible to get a mix of plant species while meeting the objective, do so. A more diverse mix will generally provide habitat for a greater number of wildlife and offer more than a monotypic stand of vegetation. A mix of many plant species in your seeding, for example, may help you reach the objective by providing those plants which end up best suited to the site and environmental conditions compared to putting all your eggs in one basket with only one or two plants.
- If a landowner doesn't have a specific species in mind and says "tell me what you think is best," I recommend trying to establish a plant community based on soil capability and range site/ecological description. There are many opinions on what is natural, but I think trying to mimic the site capability/ecological description, while keeping biodiversity in mind, is best when you don't have a specific species in mind.

- In addition to our Wyoming Game and Fish Department, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, University Cooperative Extension, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, Audubon, and NRCS biologists; good sources of information to help you with beneficial practices for fish and wildlife are:
  - \* NRCS Standards and Specifications in Section IV of FOTG
  - \* WY NRCS Technical Notes in Section I of FOTG and National Biology TN
  - \* Wyoming Game and Fish Department Habitat Extension Bulletins
  - \* National Biology Manual
  - \* National Biology Handbook
  - \* National Range and Pasture Handbook\* Conservation Planting Handbook for Wyoming and Colorado\* Vol. 1-15 of The Birds of North America - Life Histories (In the State Office)
  - \* Wyoming Partners In Flight Bird Conservation Plan
- There may also be individuals in your area with The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, Trout Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Quail Unlimited, National Turkey Federation, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and Mule Deer Foundation who can provide fish and wildlife assistance to you.
- If at all possible, try to use native species. Natives can be costly or not available, but as a rule of thumb, use them if you can.
- In terms of woody species, try to find something to use in the place of Russian olive and Salt Cedar. These two plants are becoming noxious weeds throughout the west and taking over our valuable riparian areas. Think about the potential for plants that you recommend becoming invasive. Don't recommend something that might become a problem.
- Don't forget laws and regulations. Is a 404 Permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) to allow activities under the Clean Water Act required for planned activities? Refer to the **WY-CPA-05** for guidance on Landowner Responsibilities.
- Remember our MOU with the Wyoming Game & Fish Department. Consult on any practice that has a significant impact on fish or wildlife. Use **WY-ECS-42**, Notification of a Proposed Conservation Practice. Provide as much information on the specifics of planned practices to WGFD as possible. If its brush management and chemical applications are planned, tell them what the chemical will be and the planned kill rate. State escape ramps will be placed in the tanks. With fences give fence type, height and wire spacing.

- Last, but not least, is follow up and monitoring. This is most important! The only way to learn what works and what doesn't is to go back and look at what was done according to your recommendations. Talk with the landowner about it, get their thoughts and perspective. If something didn't go the way you thought, try to figure out why. Was the seeding a failure because of lack of moisture, species not adapted to the site, poor germination, seeding depth, or poor soil/seed contact? What? You can't learn without making mistakes, just try not to make the same mistake twice.

**In Summary**, go to [www.wy.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.wy.nrcs.usda.gov) , select the **Technical Resources** tab, and then click on **Wildlife Biology**. Here you'll find information to help you:

- Determine fish and wildlife **objective(s)**
- Identify **essential fish and wildlife practices** (for the land uses working with) referring to Section III FOTG
- Use NRCS Standards and Specifications in Section IV of the FOTG, fish and wildlife habitat evaluation guides/Technical Notes in Section I FOTG, and partner biologists to **develop fish and wildlife alternatives** to meet objectives
- Complete an **environmental evaluation** (WY-CPA-52) utilizing Section II of the FOTG species of concern/**WIRL**, and other biological and environmental information
- Meet **fish and wildlife quality criteria** in Section III FOTG using appropriate fish and wildlife standards, specifications, and habitat evaluation guides
- Ensure the selected alternative(s) is **cost effective** and justified in improving habitat condition
- **Consult** with WGFD per our MOU for any practice(s) with significant impact on fish or wildlife. On Tribal Land contact BIA and USFWS
- With planning brush management by referring to WY **NRCS Brush Management Guidelines**
- Consider **other laws, regulations, easements, and permits**
- **Implement** fish and wildlife practice(s) and management
- **Follow-up and monitor** to determine if objectives were met