

# Asheville Field Office Strategic Plan 1.1.2007

## **Contents:**

<b>Overview</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Habitat Conservation Priorities</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Federal Project Review</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Recovery</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Listing</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Candidate Conservation</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Communications</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Partners for Fish and Wildlife</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>GIS/IT</b>	<b>10</b>

## **Appendix**

*Appendix 1: 10-digit Hydrologic Units of Western North Carolina*

# **OVERVIEW**

## **Purpose**

As more houses go up along the mountains, and pavement reaches increasingly into the landscape, the challenge of conserving fish, wildlife and plant resources grows. The upper Southeast is not the same place it was 50 years ago, ten years ago, or even one year ago. A changing landscape calls for a changing approach to conservation. Old methods might not work as well, while new ideas may provide the key to conserving our rich natural heritage.

This strategic plan (Plan) is an effort by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Asheville Field Office (AFO) to reexamine and refine its approach to conservation. The purpose of this Plan is not to say WHAT work we will do, it is not a laundry list of tasks to check off as they are completed. Rather, the purpose of this Plan is to provide guidance on HOW we will work, focusing effort on those issues and on those activities where we can accomplish the most for the highest priority resources.

## **Methodology**

Recognizing that some habitats harbor numerous federal trust resources, the emphasis of the Plan is in focusing the use of limited resources to protect and restore multi-trust resource habitats where the Service has the greatest opportunities for conservation. Drawing from the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission's *North Carolina Wildlife Action Plan*, The Nature Conservancy's *Southern Blue Ridge Ecoregional Conservation Plan*, and the *Classification of the Natural Communities of North Carolina, Third Approximation* by Michael P. Schafale and Alan S. Weakley, this plan identifies natural communities (for terrestrial species) and 10-digit USGS hydrologic units (for aquatic communities) and ranks those habitats based on the federal trust resources present, the degree of threat the habitat faces, and the Service's ability to achieve protection and long-term viability for and/or restore those habitats. Habitats were categorized based on conservation priority.

Each of the primary AFO activities was then examined to determine a) what work is high-priority (either by way of legal mandates or conservation benefit) and should be acted upon regardless of habitat involved; and b) how resources can be used to benefit the highest ranking habitats. Finally, limiting factors are identified that need to be addressed to meet evolving conservation challenges.

The habitat ranking is meant to serve as a guide for activities. In determining specific work activities, other factors will be considered, including Service policy, opportunities, feasibility, partnerships and species-specific conservation needs and priorities. All work will be guided by applicable policies and directives of the Service and the Department of the Interior. This strategic plan adheres to the tenets of our mission by working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

## **Next steps**

The Plan will be reviewed at least annually to ensure continued relevance and meaning to AFO staff, with regular discussion of where resource protection is lacking and how resources can be adjusted and obtained to satisfy those needs. Additionally, in order to help maintain focus on priority habitats, the AFO will outline three measurable conservation targets to be implemented in one or more priority habitats within five years. Stepping it down to the individual level, each staff member will develop an annual Individual Performance Plan (IPP) that reflects the priorities and work loads identified in this Plan. Additionally, Individual Development Plans (IDP) will include measures to address the limiting factors outlined in this Plan that can be addressed through skill or knowledge development.

## **Habitat conservation priorities:**

*Habitats have been ranked on their conservation priority in order to determine where discretionary resources can be most efficiently used. Higher-tiered habitats will receive more discretionary resources as outlined in the program-area descriptions below. (Note: While this list reflects habitats where the vast majority of AFO work is done, some AFO biologists work outside these habitats due to their biological expertise, position descriptions, and/or cooperative arrangements with other Service offices and partners)*

	<b>Terrestrial Systems</b>	<b>Aquatic Systems (River basins)</b>
<b>Tier 1</b>	Mountain bogs and fens	Upper Little Tennessee
<b>highest priority habitats</b>	Cave/karst/mines	Lynches
	Riparian forests	Upper Dan
	Balds	Lower Catawba
	Mountain wetlands other than bogs or fens	Nolichucky
		Tuckasegee
<b>Tier 2</b>	Floodplain forest	Upper French Broad
	Piedmont longleaf forest	Pigeon
	Canebrakes	Lower Little Tennessee
	Piedmont wetlands	Rocky
	Montane rock outcrops	Hiwassee
		Upper Pee Dee
<b>Tier 3</b>	Spruce-fir forest	Watauga
	Montane early successional	Upper Catawba
	Piedmont hardwood forest	Lower Pee Dee
	Northern hardwood forest	Lower Yadkin
	Montane hardwood forest	Seneca
		Upper Broad
<b>Tier 4</b>	Mixed hardwood-coniferous forest	Upper New
<b>lowest priority habitats</b>	Piedmont rock outcrops	South Yadkin
	Piedmont early successional	Upper Yadkin
	Dry coniferous woodlands	Tugaloo
	Cove forest	Ocoee
	Boulder forests and talus slopes	

## **Federal Project Review**

*Goal: To take advantage of opportunities in the federal project review process to maximize conservation benefits in areas that present the greatest opportunity to accomplish the greatest amount of conservation for the greatest number of federal trust resources.*

### **High-priority activities**

- Carry out interagency consultation under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) section 7
- Review Federal projects under Federal Power Act (FPA)
- Respond to requests for trial-type hearing for mandatory conditions and perform Alternatives Analysis under the Energy Policy Act of 2005
- Coordinate project review activities with listed species assessment and recovery, Partners for Fish and Wildlife, communications, and GIS programs
- Coordinate project review activities with internal and external partners, including, but not limited to, the Raleigh Field Office, Raleigh Fisheries Assistance Office, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, and the N.C. Plan Conservation Program
- Coordinate with other AFO programs to develop specific, measurable 5-year conservation targets, and develop IPPs that include steps toward achieving them
- Notify the N.C. Plant Conservation Program, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, and appropriate Natural Heritage Programs of new discoveries of endangered, threatened, candidate species and species of concern or habitats that they would be interested in tracking.
- Search for ways to improve efficiency in addressing resource concerns

### **Other activities based on habitat priority ranking**

#### **Tier 1 habitats**

- Seek to engage federal action agencies to:
  - Actively survey for these habitats and associated federal trust resources
  - Incorporate the protection and management of these habitats into action agency's pre-decisional planning and management activities
  - Adequately analyze the impacts to these habitats in their National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) scoping and decision documents
  - Protect endangered, threatened, proposed, or candidate species under the provisions of section 7(a)(1) and (2) of the ESA
  - Develop conservation banks for endangered, threatened, proposed or candidate species in these habitats
  - Improve or protect these habitats to the maximum extent practical
  - Encourage action agencies to notify the appropriate Natural Heritage Programs (North Carolina, Tennessee Valley Authority, Great Smoky Mountains, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia) of the location of rare species and habitats
- Seek to engage non-federal entities that may be able to contribute conservation gains through the consultation process, such as local governments and NGOs, to:
  - Identify and report locations of these habitats and associated federal trust resources
  - Incorporate the protection and management of these habitats into planning and management
  - Improve or protect these habitats
  - Develop conservation banks for endangered, threatened, proposed or candidate species in these habitats
- Fully review/comment on projects under all applicable federal laws [including, but not limited to, ESA, FPA, Fish & Wildlife Coordination Act (FWCA), Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), NEPA, Magnussen Act (MA), Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act (IFA), Striped Bass Act (SBA), and Water Resources Development Act (WRDA)], stridently working to eliminate impacts.

- Through the consultation process, seek ways to permanently protect and manage these habitats through conservation ownership, conservation easements, or other protective mechanisms. During this process coordinate with the N.C. Natural Heritage Program, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, the N.C. Plant Conservation Program, local land trusts, and other NGOs to protect these significant resources.

### ***Tier 2 habitats***

- Seek to engage federal action agencies to:
  - Actively survey for additional locations of these habitats and associated federal trust resources
  - Incorporate the protection and management of these habitats into the action agency's pre-decisional planning and management activities
  - Adequately analyze the impacts to these habitats in their NEPA scoping and decision documents
  - Protect and manage for endangered, threatened, proposed or candidate species under the provisions of section 7(a)(1) and (2) of the ESA
  - Develop conservation banks for endangered, threatened, proposed or candidate species in these habitats
  - Improve or protect these habitats to the maximum extent practicable
- As opportunities arise, seek to engage non-federal entities that may be able to contribute conservation gains through the consultation process, such as local governments and NGOs, to:
  - Identify and report locations of these habitats and associated federal trust resources
  - Incorporate the protection and management of these habitats into planning and management
  - Improve or protect these habitats
  - Develop conservation banks or habitat conservation plans for federally listed species in these habitats
- Fully review/comment on projects under all applicable federal laws (including, but not limited to, ESA, FPA, FWCA, MBTA, NEPA, MA, IFA, SBA, and WRDA), working to eliminate impacts.
- As opportunities arise, seek ways to permanently protect and manage these habitats through conservation ownership, conservation easements, or other protective mechanisms. During this process coordinate with the N.C. Natural Heritage Program, the N.C. Plant Conservation Program, local land trusts, and other local conservation groups to protect these significant resources.

### ***Tier 3 habitats***

- Seek to engage federal action agencies to:
  - Actively survey for additional locations of these habitats and associated federal trust resources
  - Incorporate the protection and management of these habitats into action agency's pre-decisional planning and management activities
  - Improve or protect these habitats beyond what is legally required
  - Protect and manage for federally listed species in these habitats under the provisions of section 7(a)(1) and (2) of the ESA
  - Develop conservation banks for federally listed species in these habitats
- As time permits, review/comment on projects under applicable federal laws (including, but not limited to, ESA, FPA, FWCA, MBTA, NEPA, MA, IFA, SBA, and WRDA), working to eliminate impacts.
- As opportunities arise, seek ways to permanently protect and manage these habitats through conservation ownership, conservation easements, or other protective mechanisms. During this process coordinate with the N.C. Natural Heritage Program, the

N.C. Plant Conservation Program, local land trusts, and other local conservation groups to protect these significant resources.

#### ***Tier 4 habitats***

- Seek to engage federal action agencies to:
  - Protect and manage for endangered, threatened, proposed, or candidate species in these habitats under the provisions of section 7(a)(1) and (2) of the ESA
  - Develop conservation banks for endangered, threatened, proposed, or candidate species in these habitats

#### **Limiting factors**

- An ongoing assessment of threats, including trends and cumulative impacts, and the most effective means of tracking, analyzing and addressing them
  - Documentation of species distribution, trends and potential habitats
  - Ready access to appropriate literature
  - Lack of a federal nexus to sanction involvement in most development
  - Funding and personnel (*note: the AFO recognizes that this limiting factor is shared across the Service and is unlikely to be fully addressed for reason's outside of Service control*)
- 

### ***Recovery of listed species***

*Goal: To take advantage of opportunities in listed species recovery in order to maximize conservation benefits for the greatest number of federal trust species.*

#### **High-priority activities**

- Coordinate recovery activities with other Service programs, including federal project review, Partners for Fish and Wildlife, communications, and GIS
- Annually assess progress of recovery efforts and current species' status
- Conduct 5-year reviews on schedule
- Update recovery plans as needed
- Ensure effective and frequent communication within and external to the Service, so all of the above actions are based upon the best available and most current information
- Coordinate with other AFO programs to develop specific, measurable 5-year conversation targets, and develop IPPs that include steps toward achieving them
- Respond to requests for technical assistance on recovery actions from various Service programs, including federal project review, Partners for Fish and Wildlife, communications, GIS and environmental contaminants
- Respond to requests for technical assistance from non-Service partners actively implementing recovery actions
- Coordinate recovery activities with internal and external partners, including, but not limited to, the Raleigh Field Office, Raleigh Fisheries Assistance Office, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, and the N.C. Plan Conservation Program

#### **Other activities based on habitat priority ranking**

##### ***Tier 1 habitats***

- Seek opportunities to facilitate communication and coordination among partners (federal, state, and non-governmental) working to implement recovery actions.
- Seek opportunities to assist partners in the implementation of recovery actions
- Pursue grants to facilitate implementation of recovery actions

##### ***Tier 2 habitats***

- Seek opportunities to facilitate communication and coordination among partners (federal, state, and non-governmental) working to implement recovery actions

- Seek opportunities to assist partners (federal, state, non-governmental) in the implementation of recovery actions
- As time permits, pursue grants to facilitate implementation of recovery actions

### ***Tier 3 habitats***

- As time permits, work to facilitate communication and coordination among partners working to implement recovery actions in these habitats.
- As time permits, seek opportunities to assist partners (federal, state, and non-governmental) in the implementation of recovery actions
- As time permits, pursue grants to facilitate the successful implementation of recovery actions

### ***Tier 4 habitats***

- Conduct only high-priority activities such as conducting five-year reviews, and updating recovery plans

### **Limiting factors**

- An understanding of the locations and nature of additional recovery efforts needed for each species, as well as an inventory of current recovery activities (by federal, state, and NGO partners) and their effectiveness
- An ongoing assessment of threats, including trends and cumulative impacts, and the most effective means of tracking, analyzing and addressing them
- Documentation of species distribution, trends and potential habitats
- Knowledge of species life history
- Ready access to appropriate literature
- Funding and personnel (*note: the AFO recognizes that this limiting factor is shared across the Service and is unlikely to be fully addressed for reason's outside of Service control*)

## ***Listing***

*There are extremely limited funds for listing activities and all decisions about where those funds are spent are made at the regional and Washington office levels. Any listing activities, including responding to listing petitions, designating critical habitat, and listing will be done when the Washington or regional offices designate funds for them, and at that point, these activities will be High-priority.*

## ***Conservation of Species of Concern and Candidates***

### **High-priority activities**

- With partners, strive to preclude the need to list candidate species through Candidate Conservation Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances, and other means
- Seek funding to conduct these activities
- Write candidate elevation packages for appropriate species of concern
- Annually assess the status of all existing candidates for federal listing and ensure their ECOs profiles are up-to-date

### **Other activities based on habitat priority ranking**

- Assess the status of high priority species of concern
- Seek funding for high priority species of concern

- Assist other field offices in pursuing candidate elevation for their species of concern

---

## **Communications**

*Goal: To take advantage of communication opportunities to maximize conservation benefits in areas that present the greatest opportunity to accomplish the greatest amount of conservation for the greatest number of federal trust resources*

### **High priority activities**

#### *Media relations:*

- Respond to media inquiries

#### *Government official relations:*

- Respond to Congressional inquiries
- Meet with Congressional field offices within the AFO work area at least once per year

#### *Other*

- Prepare and help implement outreach packages for federal register actions
- Monitor listing, recovery, candidate conservation, Partners for Fish and Wildlife, and federal project review activities to identify potential controversy and develop and implement outreach plans in those instances.
- Coordinate with other AFO programs to develop specific, measurable 5-year conservation targets, and develop IPPs that include steps toward achieving them

### **Other activities based on habitat priority ranking**

#### **Tier 1 habitats**

##### *Media relations*

- Seek opportunities to gain media coverage of conservation activities and issues in these habitats through the creation and distribution of press releases, public service announcements, news tips, and media advisories, and other media products as well as media field visits

##### *Government official relations*

- Work to inform elected officials of the importance of these habitats
- Keep elected officials informed of conservation issues and developments facing these habitats

##### *Environmental education/interpretation*

- Seek opportunities to support educator training in support of conserving these habitats
- Seek opportunities to develop and distribute informational materials concerning these habitats and the species found there
- Seek opportunities to support citizen monitoring of these habitats
- As time allows, participate in student field days, public presentations, classrooms visits, etc. in support of these habitats

##### *Partnership development*

- Establish partnerships with NGO's and other federal, state, and local agencies working towards the conservation of these habitats and the species that depend on them

#### **Tier 2 habitats**

##### *Media relations*

- Seek opportunities to gain media coverage of conservation activities and issues in these habitats through the creation and distribution of press releases, public service announcements, news tips, and media advisories, and other media products as well as media field visits

##### *Government official relations*

- Work to inform elected officials of the importance of these habitats
- Keep elected officials informed of conservation issues and developments facing these habitats

*Environmental education/interpretation*

- As time allows, seek opportunities to support educator training in support of conserving these habitats
- As time allows, seek opportunities to develop and distribute informational materials concerning these habitats and the species found there
- As time allows, seek opportunities to support citizen monitoring of these habitats

*Partnership development*

- As time allows, work to establish partnerships with NGO's and other federal, state, and local agencies working towards the conservation of these habitats and the species that depend on them

### **Tier 3 habitats**

*Media relations*

- Seek opportunities to gain media coverage of conservation activities and issues in these habitats through the creation and distribution of press releases, public service announcements, news tips, and media advisories, and other media products as well as media field visits

*Government official relations*

- As time allows, work to inform elected officials of the importance of these habitats
- As time allows, keep elected officials informed of conservation issues and developments facing these habitats

### **Tier 4 habitats**

*Media relations*

- Take advantage of opportunities to gain media coverage of conservation activities and issues in these habitats through the creation and distribution of press releases, public service announcements, news tips, and media advisories, and other media products as well as media field visits.

### **Limiting factors**

- An understanding of Congressional organizations, including committee make-up, responsibilities, as well as typical Congressional office staff organization; and Congressional process, including introducing legislation and moving it through committee
- Internet capabilities to establish and support our own web site and respond quickly via the web to information needs
- An ongoing assessment of threats, including trends and cumulative impacts, and the most effective means of tracking, analyzing and addressing them

## **Partners for Fish and Wildlife**

*Note: The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program has developed a draft strategic plan addressing their program across the Southeast, with specific priorities and actions for each state -- Strategic Habitat Conservation and the Power of Partnerships: Strategic Plan for the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, 2007-2011, Southeast Region, December 2006. This AFO Strategic Plan defers to the existing Partners for Fish and Wildlife strategic plan, adding only the high-priority activities:*

- Coordinate private lands activities with recovery, federal project review, and communications programs

- Coordinate private lands activities with external partners including the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, NGOs, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, appropriate Natural Heritage Programs, and the N.C. Plant Conservation Program
  - Coordinate with other AFO programs to develop specific, measurable 5-year conservation targets, and develop individual work plans that include steps toward achieving them
- 

## ***GIS/IT Support***

### **High-priority activities**

- Make sure all office computers have standardized, up-to-date, IT and GIS software as new versions come available
- Maintain a standard set of up-to-date GIS data for N.C. and acquire other GIS data as requested by biologists
- Maintain and upgrade all IT hardware and peripherals as needed
- Ensure server backups are completed as scheduled and make certain staff is aware of how to back up data
- Provide tech support and advice on the use and acquisition of GIS and IT equipment and software
- Coordinate with other AFO programs to develop specific, measurable 5-year conservation targets, and develop IPPs that include steps toward achieving them

### **Other activities based on habitat priority ranking**

- Complete GIS projects submitted by biological staff (project priority determined during regularly scheduled GIS meetings)
- Provide assistance with field data collection for projects as needed

# Western North Carolina River Basins

0 15 30 60 90 120 Miles

