



Strategic Habitat Conservation and the Power of Partnerships

Strategic Plan for the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, 2007 - 2011
Southeast Region
August 2007

Arkansas

Florida

Georgia

Kentucky

Louisiana

Mississippi

North Carolina

Puerto Rico and

the Virgin Islands

South Carolina

Tennessee



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Message from the Regional Director

Dear Southeast Region Partners and Stakeholders:

I am pleased to present the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) Partners for Fish and Wildlife (Partners) Program Strategic Plan (Fiscal Year 2007-2011) for the Southeast Region. Our Regional Plan is based on the Service's 2006 Vision Document for the Partners Program that provided a national overview and established the five Program goals that are comprehensively addressed in this Regional Plan. These goals are:

- 1) Conserve Habitat
- 2) Broaden and Strengthen Partnerships
- 3) Improve Information Sharing and Communication
- 4) Enhance our Workforce, and
- 5) Increase Accountability

During 2007, the Partners Program is celebrating its 20th year anniversary of dedicated efforts in providing technical and financial assistance to private landowners for the delivery of on-the-ground habitat conservation projects. In 2006, Congress and the President recognized the value of the Partners Program by enacting the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act. This Act specifically authorizes the Service to provide for the restoration, enhancement, and management of fish and wildlife habitats on private lands through the Partners Program, and to continue to work cooperatively with voluntary private landowners to conduct cost-effective habitat projects for the benefit of fish and wildlife resources in the United States.

In collaboration with our partners and stakeholders, this Strategic Plan identifies priority habitats, selected geographic focus areas and focal species, and specific action strategies (Goal One) for each Southeastern State and the Caribbean that will guide our partnership efforts over the next five years. Although most of the Program's efforts will be directed to the designated focus areas identified in this Plan, the Program maintains the flexibility to identify and develop new focus areas as significant partnership opportunities arise.

The Service and the highly skilled, locally-based staff of the Partners Program will take a leadership role in implementing the strategies and actions identified in this Plan. However, to achieve our goals will require a shared and mutual commitment from all of our partners as we focus on priority needs and the efficient delivery of habitat conservation on private lands. Working together, we can promote and develop trust and lead new innovations and change for the benefit of our Nation's fish and wildlife resources.

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A 2004 National Poll of Hunters and Anglers conducted by the National Wildlife Federation reported that 87 percent of those surveyed favored expanding the Partners program to continue helping private landowners restore and conserve fish and wildlife habitat on their property.



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Protected and restored streambank with in-stream structures.

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Introduction

“...every landowner is the custodian of two interests, not always identical, the public interest and his own. What we need is a positive inducement or reward for the landowner who respects both interests in his actual land practice.”

Aldo Leopold, 1934

On October 3, 2006, President Bush signed into law the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act that provides Congressional authorization for the Partners for Fish and Wildlife (Partners) Program within the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) (U. S. Congress 2006). This Act recognizes the past contributions of the Partners Program, and specifically directs the Partners Program to continue to provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners to restore, enhance, and manage private lands to improve fish and wildlife populations and their habitats.

The Partners Program in the Southeast Region uses its staff to develop and carry out a voluntary, cooperative conservation partnership approach in helping to achieve the mission of the Service, which is *“working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.”* The primary focus of the Partners Program is on the conservation of Federal Trust Resources (e.g., migratory birds; threatened, endangered and candidate species; inter-jurisdictional fish; and other species of conservation concern).

The Partners Program is based on the premise that fish and wildlife conservation is a responsibility shared by citizens and their government. Our approach is to engage willing private landowners and other partners through non-regulatory incentives that conserve and protect valuable fish and wildlife habitat. We do this by providing technical assistance and leveraging the funding support needed to make on-the-ground conservation affordable, feasible and effective.

About this Document

This document represents Part 2 of a three part national strategic planning process. Part 1, “the Vision Document,” was completed in 2006 (U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2006). The Vision Document provides a national overview of the Partners Program and the five Program goals that will be comprehensively addressed in Parts 2 and 3. Part 2 represents the regional strategic plans, and Part 3 will be the national summary document.

This document is the Partners Program Strategic Plan for the Southeast Region, covering the time period from fiscal year (FY) 2007 through FY 2011. This document addresses each of the five Program goals established in the Vision Document, which are:

- Goal One: Conserve Habitat
- Goal Two: Broaden and Strengthen Partnerships
- Goal Three: Improve Information Sharing and Communication
- Goal Four: Enhance Our Workforce
- Goal Five: Increase Accountability

To achieve these goals efficiently and effectively, three overarching strategies will be implemented. These are:

- Cooperative Conservation: Seeking and promoting voluntary cooperative efforts to achieve conservation goals.
- Strategic Habitat Conservation: A framework for setting and achieving conservation objectives at multiple scales, based on the

best available information, data, and ecological models all within the context of a strategic focus (USFWS and USGS 2006).

- Adaptive Management: Using information gained from our monitoring efforts and supporting information from our partners to adapt or modify our approach; learning by doing. On the ground actions are based on planning and design and measured through monitoring and research (US DOI 2007).

For each of the five Program goals, our Regional Strategic Plan will also describe:

- objectives for the Southeast Region,
- specific five-year performance measures that are tied to each of the goals,
- and key strategic activities that will be pursued to meet our objectives,

In addition, for Goal One (Conserving Habitat) we will:

- describe those geographic focus areas and associated priority habitats that we will focus most of our partnerships efforts over the next five years (FY 2007-2011),
- and provide our estimated five-year performance outputs based on the FY 2006 funding level (e.g., acres and miles of habitat conserved) for each geographic focus area described.

The information for Goal One is provided for each State and the Caribbean in Appendix A, and is also summarized for the Southeast Region.

Recommendations provided in this Plan will be followed up by a commitment to carry out specific actions. Implementation strategies included in this Plan will be clarified as needed in subsequent Program and policy guidance to our field staff.

This Plan has been developed in collaboration with our many partners. A list of Partners is provided with each State summary of Goal One (Conserving Habitat) in Appendix A.

Our mission is to efficiently achieve voluntary habitat conservation on private lands, through financial and technical assistance, for the benefit of Federal Trust Species.



Strategic planning with our partners



Service biologist offers technical assistance to a private land owner.

Overview of the Partners Program: Southeast Region

The Partners Program was established in 1987 with a core group of biologists and a small budget, directed primarily to voluntary wetland restoration projects on private lands and the associated benefits for waterfowl and other migratory birds. This successful, results-oriented program has garnered support through the years and has grown into a larger and more diversified habitat improvement program assisting thousands of private landowners across the Nation.

The Partners Program in the Southeast Region has experienced modest increases in the Program budget allocation every year since 1995, with the Program budget increasing from approximately \$2.6 million in FY 1995 to approximately \$5.6 million in FY 2007. In FY 2006, approximately 47 percent of the Program funds were used to cover the salary and support of the 32 strategically located staff positions throughout the Region (Appendix B) that provide technical assistance to private landowners and other partners, while 53 percent were provided as direct funding support to priority on-the-ground habitat improvement projects.

Migratory birds, inter-jurisdictional fish, federally-listed endangered and threatened species, federal candidate species, or other declining or imperiled species are public resources, which by their migratory nature or declining numbers have been identified as federal trust species. The single most important factor leading to the endangerment of species is habitat destruction; thus, the habitat types (e.g., wetlands, longleaf pine, native grasslands, aquatic systems) that provide the life needs for these federal trust species are also often imperiled (e.g., significant degradation and/or historic loss of habitat type of 70 percent or greater), and continue to be at risk for further degradation or loss as a result of natural or human activities.

The Partners Program provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners and Tribes who are willing to work with us and other partners on a voluntary basis to help meet the habitat needs of our federal trust species. It is estimated that 73 percent of our nation's land is privately owned and that the majority of our fish and wildlife resources occur on those lands. Based on 2000 census information, approximately 22 percent of the population of the United States resided within the Southeast Region, while approximately 89 percent of the land area was privately owned (U.S. Census Bureau 2005; Natural Resources Council of Maine 2005).

Consequently, the conservation lands held by Federal and state agencies and other conservation groups in the Southeast Region cannot completely provide for fish and wildlife needs. Because the habitat needs of all trust species cannot be met solely on public lands, public funds are also expended on private lands to accomplish habitat improvements through cooperative conservation programs such as the Partners Program.

The Partners Program can assist with projects in all habitat types that conserve or restore native vegetation, hydrology, and soils associated with imperiled ecosystems, or otherwise provide an important habitat requisite for a rare, declining or protected species.

The locally-based field biologists within the Partners Program work one-on-one with private landowners and other partners to plan, implement, and monitor habitat improvement projects. Partners Program field staff also help landowners find other sources of funding (including U.S. Department of Agriculture conservation programs) and help them through the project development and application process by providing helpful, accurate and timely assistance. This personal attention and follow-through is a significant strength of the Program that has led to national recognition and wide support.

“No rounded program for wildlife is possible unless it is applied on private as well as public lands...”

Aldo Leopold, 1936

Since the Partners Program began in 1987, habitat improvement projects have been carried out on approximately 345,000 acres of private lands in the Southeast Region, and assistance has been provided to over 3,000 landowners. These accomplishments have included:

- Over 207,000 acres of wetlands, including approximately 104,000 acres of bottomland forest. Projects that benefit declining migratory birds and the threatened Louisiana black bear have been a priority;
- Over 80,000 acres of uplands, including approximately 55,000 acres of longleaf pine (an endangered ecosystem with from 85-98 percent historic decline). Focal species include the red-cockaded woodpecker, indigo snake, and the gopher tortoise;
- Over 950 miles of riparian and in-stream habitat projects restored or enhanced along imperiled streams with benefits to many protected and declining aquatic species;
- Since 1996, over 1,400 acres of native prairie and grasslands reestablished;
- Since 2000, approximately 30,000 acres have been treated for the elimination or control of exotics and invasive species with a goal of restoring the native vegetation types.

- Promote and implement habitat improvement projects that benefit federal trust species
- Provide conservation leadership and promote partnerships
- Encourage public understanding and participation
- Work with U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and other partners to implement conservation programs

The Strategic Model for the Partners Program (Fig. 1) includes the Program’s five strategic goals that are measured by Program Outputs (e.g. Activity-based objectives such as acres/miles) and Program Outcomes (a focus on biological response outcomes).

Trained Partners biologists understand the habitat needs of priority target species, and make the assumption that if the habitat needs of these species or groups of species with similar needs are met, then the target species will benefit. To support this assumption, and to help evaluate species biological responses to specific habitat improvement actions, Partners Program staff will collaborate and work closely with other Service programs (e.g., Refuges and Wildlife, Migratory Birds, Fisheries, Threatened and Endangered Species) and other partners to identify, develop, and pursue priority monitoring and research activities. Partners biologists will also rely on the published results from research studies carried out mostly by other programs, agencies, universities, industry, or other available sources. Partners Program regional policy for monitoring is provided in Appendix C.

The Partners Program policy has established national priority ranking factors to help guide project selection. The national priorities are stepped down to the state and local levels as field staff collaborate with stakeholders to further refine habitat priorities, target species, and geographic focus areas, as described in Goal One of this Strategic Plan.

The Partners Program has also assisted the U.S. Department of Agriculture with the implementation of the conservation programs authorized under the various Farm Bills since 1985, and has provided an average of about 2,000 technical assistance consultations every year.

Partners Program Policy and Strategic Model

The Partners Program is guided by the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act of 2006 (U.S. Congress 2006), National policy standards (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2006), and a Strategic Model (Fig. 1) that includes these objectives:



Young threatened Louisiana black bear in native bottomland forest habitat.

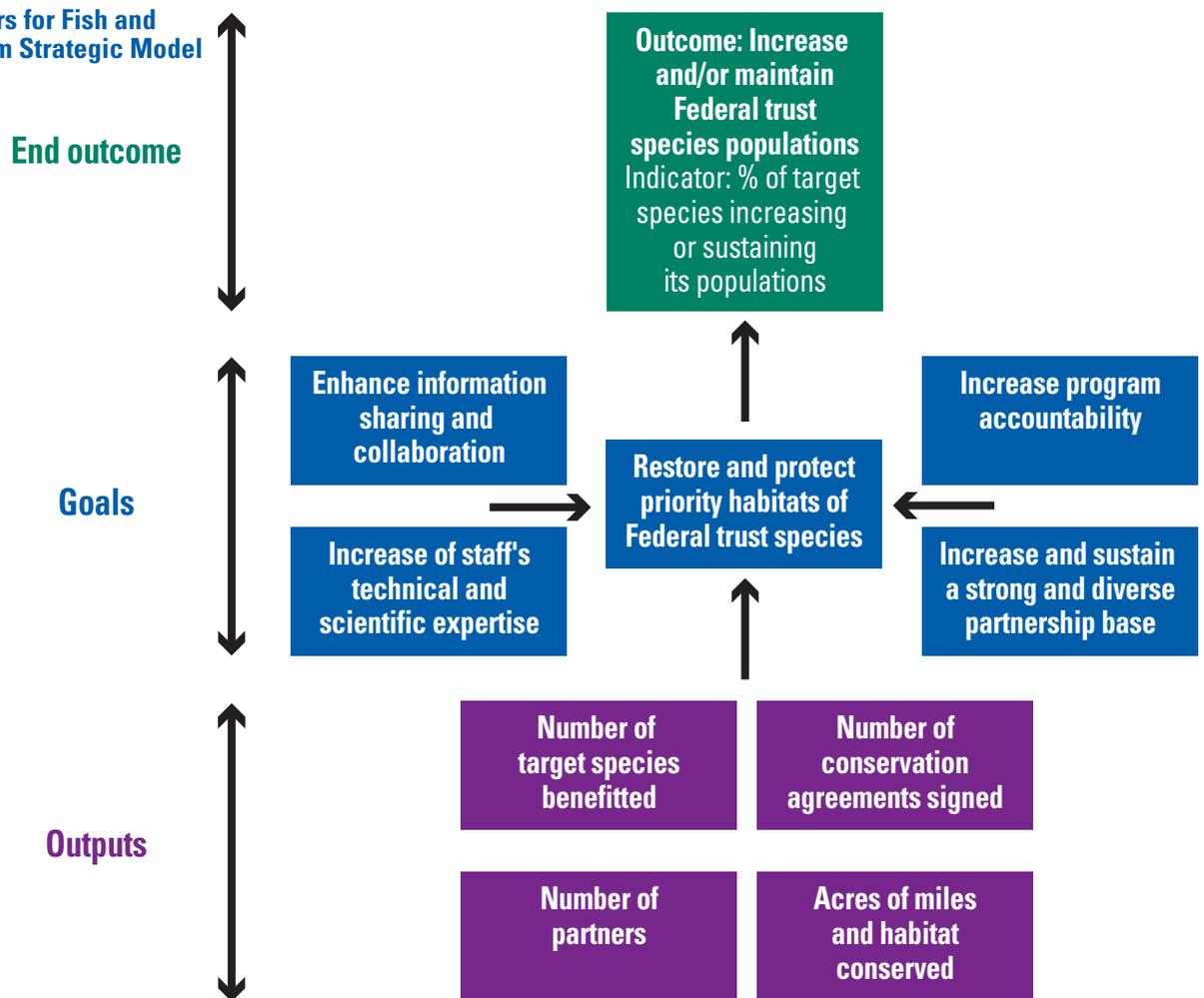


North Carolina Suther prairie flowers

USFWS

USFWS

Figure 1. Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program Strategic Model



The Partners Program also utilizes the recommendations found in other strategic plans (e.g., State Wildlife Action Plans, recovery plans for individual protected species, North American Waterfowl Management Plan, Migratory Birds Strategic Plan, Fisheries Strategic Plan, etc.) in developing priorities and geographic focus areas.

National priority ranking factors for the Partners Program are used to assign funding priority status to proposed projects that meet these conditions:

- Improve habitat for federal trust species, including migratory birds; threatened, endangered, and candidate species; inter-jurisdictional fish; marine mammals; and, other declining species;
 - Complement activities on National Wildlife Refuge System lands, or contribute to the resolution of problems on refuges that are caused by off-refuge practices;
 - Address species and habitat priorities that have been identified through Service collaboration with our partners, including state fish and wildlife agencies;
 - Reduce habitat fragmentation or serve as buffers for other important Federal or state conservation lands;
 - Result in self-sustaining systems that are not dependent on artificial structures.
- If other considerations are generally equal, then priority is directed to those projects that link private lands to important Federal lands or State Wildlife Management Areas, have cooperative agreements of longer duration, multiple partners, cost sharing, and the greatest cost effectiveness.

“Without the assistance and attention provided to me by the Partners for Fish and Wildlife biologist, I would not have signed up for any of the existing conservation programs.”

Harold May, private landowner; MS

Ten Guiding Principles

In carrying out habitat improvement projects within the Southeast Region, we are guided by the following 10 principles:

- To the extent possible or knowable, projects will attempt to restore the ecological integrity of habitat—i.e., restore the structure, function, composition, and natural processes of the ecosystem.
- Project plans are envisioned within the relative context of a watershed or ecosystem and anticipated future changes: other activities throughout the watershed or ecosystem may impact the project.
- To the extent possible, project plans will address the causes of habitat degradation: restoration efforts are likely to fail if the sources of degradation persist.
- Clear, achievable and measurable goals are developed for each project. Is the project feasible?
- To the extent possible, projects are designed to be self-sustainable: minimize the need for continuous maintenance of the site.
- When appropriate, a passive restoration approach is used: before actively altering a site, determine if simply reducing or eliminating the sources of degradation will be enough to allow the site to recover naturally.
- Native species appropriate to the site are always used: invasive, non-native species should never be used.
- Provide trained and knowledgeable staff: habitat restoration is a complex undertaking that requires the integration of a wide range of technical disciplines.
- For comparative purposes, a reference site is used: a reference site should be comparable in structure and function to the proposed project site, and can serve as a model for the project.

- All projects are monitored before, during and after the project, and based on our monitoring we adapt our approach as needed (Modified from U.S. EPA 2000).



Youth Conservation Corps volunteer plants an endangered cactus in Puerto Rico.



Gopher tortoise emerging from its burrow.