

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
SOUTH CAROLINA ECOLOGICAL SERVICES FIELD OFFICE
CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

OFFICE WORK PLAN

FISCAL YEAR 2015



CAROLINA BIRDS-IN-A-NEST (*MACBRIDEA CAROLINANA*)

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CHARLESTON, SC 29407

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INTRODUCTION - MISSION

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) mission is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are the only agency of the U.S. Government with that primary mission. Federal trust resources under the purview of the Service include threatened and endangered species, migratory birds, National Wildlife Refuges interjurisdictional fish, marine mammals, wetlands, and species of international concern. Because Federal trust resources are ubiquitous in South Carolina, the species and habitats we work with are found statewide.

The Service's geographic jurisdiction is the United States and its territories. It operates under a host of Federal legal mandates that explicitly and implicitly refer to endangered species, migratory birds, and wetlands. These mandates include: the Coastal Wetlands, Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act; Coastal Zone Management Act; Emergency Wetlands Resources Act; Endangered Species Act of 1973 as amended (ESA); Federal Water Pollution Control Act; Clean Water Act; Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act; Land and Water Conservation Fund (Public Law 88-578); Lacey Act; Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act; Migratory Bird Treaty Act; National Environmental Policy Act; National Wildlife Refuge Act; National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act; North American Wetlands Conservation Act; Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act; Rivers and Harbors Act; Federal Power Act (16 U.S.C. 791 *et. seq.*); Electric Consumers Protection Act of 1986 (Pub. L. No. 99-495, 100 stat. 1243); Energy Policy Act of 2005 (Pub. L. 109-58); and Wetlands Loan Act.

OFFICE OVERVIEW

The Service has a strong presence in South Carolina, commensurate with the diversity and abundance of fish and wildlife resources in the State. The Service has one Ecological Services Office located in Charleston. Established in 1973, the South Carolina Field Office (SCFO) has 17 dedicated employees and an annual budget of approximately \$2 million. The SCFO primarily focuses on protection and recovery of threatened and endangered species while also actively supporting conservation of migratory birds, diadromous fish, and wetlands. The SCFO covers 46 counties spanning over 31,000 square miles with 187 miles of general coastline, and works with 13 threatened or endangered animal species, 19 threatened or endangered plant species, and approximately 70 other animal and plant species deemed to be "At Risk Species". "At Risk Species" (ARS) are those species that have either been proposed for listing, are candidates for listing, or have been petitioned for listing. The SCFO also coordinates closely with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) to address priority species outlined in their South Carolina Wildlife Action Plan.

The SCFO works in partnership with the National Wildlife Refuges and National Fish Hatcheries in the State. There are six National Wildlife Refuge units in the State, encompassing over 192,000

acres of fish and wildlife habitat that provide exceptional recreational opportunities for the public. The State has two National Fish Hatcheries, which are Bears Bluff and Orangeburg National Fish Hatcheries. In addition to the 17 SCFO staff, other co-located staff include: a Service Law Enforcement Special Agent that enforces Federal wildlife protection laws and international conventions and treaties, a Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program Coordinator, who administers grant program funds to State agencies, and the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture Coordinator, who works with partners for the conservation of native bird species in the Atlantic Flyway.

PROGRAM PRIORITY AREAS

The SCFO has developed this Work Plan (Plan) utilizing the four priority areas outlined by the Directorate:

- 1) At-risk species conservation,
- 2) Recovery of federally listed threatened and endangered species,
- 3) Strategic partnerships, and
- 4) Legal obligations and other Administration mandates.

This Plan focuses our efforts on those activities where we are most effective in fulfilling our mission and vision within South Carolina. The fish and wildlife resources of South Carolina face numerous challenges. Although the SCFO could engage in countless activities to meet those challenges, this Plan explicitly acknowledges that the SCFO does not have the resources, authority, or expertise needed to accomplish everything that we wish to accomplish. Therefore, our efforts focus on making the best use of our resources and capabilities by focusing on high profile conservation activities related to significant trust resources or where significant benefits to trust resources are likely to result.

Looking into the future, the SCFO will not likely increase in size and in fact, may face future reductions in the workforce due to a decrease in discretionary spending. In recent years, the office has experienced a flat or declining budget while our workload continues to increase. To accomplish our goals, we have no alternative other than to **work smart**. Identifying essential ecosystems and actions will help us prioritize and promote landscape-level cooperative management, research, and monitoring, enabling us to more effectively conserve listed species and ARS.

With an emphasis on both species specific and landscape scale outcomes, this Plan is intended to assist us with the difficult task of determining which activities we will not implement in this challenging time of budget cuts and hiring restrictions. The SCFO should re-evaluate our involvement in, and commitment to, any program activities that do not directly support these priority areas. Questions we will consider when evaluating our involvement include:

- 1) To which of our desired future conditions or conservation outcomes is this work essential?
- 2) What is the risk of not achieving our desired future conditions or conservation outcomes if we do not act — high, medium, or low?
- 3) What is the likelihood of severe legal consequences of not acting or delaying action?
- 4) What is the return on investment to our desired future conditions or conservation outcomes — high, medium, or low?

- 5) Are there others within the Service or outside the agency who are doing/could be doing this work?
- 6) Based on the answers 1–5 above, is this work a high, medium, or low priority?

The SCFO priority ecosystems and associated species are:

- Coastal Plain Ecosystem
 - T&E species = wood stork, red knot, piping plover, West Indian manatee, shortnose sturgeon, Atlantic sturgeon, Kemp's ridley sea turtle, leatherback sea turtle, loggerhead sea turtle, green sea turtle, and seabeach amaranth.
 - ARS = MacGillivray's seaside sparrow, black rail, black-capped petrel, bald eagle, swallow-tailed kite, black bear, Eastern diamondback rattlesnake, rare skipper, blueback herring, American eel (, Carolina pygmy sunfish, southern hog-nosed snake, Long Beach seedbox, spathulate seedbox, wire-leaved dropseed, Ocmulgee skullcap, Carolina bishopweed, yellow pond lily, Godfrey's stitchwort, bog spicebush, raven's seedbox, Boykin's lobelia, evergreen quillwort, Godfrey's privet, Harper's fimbriatylis, bay boneset, Elliott's croton, ciliate-leaf tickseed, Carolina birds-in-a-nest, Thorne's beakrush, and Hall's bulrush.

- Longleaf Pine Ecosystem
 - T&E species = red-cockaded woodpecker, flatwoods salamander, American chaffseed, eastern indigo snake, pondberry, and Canby's dropwort.
 - ARS = Carolina gopher frog, gopher tortoise, Florida pine snake, southern hog-nosed snake, and eastern diamondback rattlesnake.

- Mountain/Piedmont/Slatebelt Stream Systems
 - T&E species = Carolina heelsplitter, bunched arrowhead, dwarf-flowered heartleaf, Schweinitz's sunflower, swamp pink, mountain sweet pitcher plant, smooth coneflower, relict trillium, Miccosukee gooseberry, little amphianthus, and small-whorled pogonia.
 - ARS = white fringeless orchid, patch-nosed salamander, Chamberlain's dwarf salamander, green salamander, Chauga crayfish, Saluda crayfish, mimic crayfish, Broad River spiny crayfish, Mountain River skimmer, Appalachian snaketail, Calvert's emerald, robust redhorse sucker, brook floater, Savannah lilliput, Waccamaw fatmucket, brother spike, Altamaha arc mussel, Georgia aster, white irisette, Sharp's leafy liverwort, gorge leafy liverwort, golden-winged warbler, northern long-eared bat, eastern small-footed bat, spotted turtle, Piedmont barren strawberry, Carolina hemlock, Mountain purple pitcher plant, sun-facing coneflower, Georgia lead plant, ravine sedge, and purple baldwinia.

The SCFO priority actions are:

- Conducting consultation, habitat conservation planning activities, and candidate conservation activities under the Endangered Species Act;

- Reducing impacts to fish, wildlife, and their habitats in the State from federally funded or authorized projects (e.g. - Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) activities);
- Restoring habitat through the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife and Coastal programs;
- Conserving wetlands through the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act;
- Identifying, reducing, and preventing contamination of fish and wildlife resources through technical assistance, investigations, monitoring, and technical reviews of environmental contaminant issues;
- Conducting surveys on various ARS species (diamondback rattlesnake, black rail, Carolina birds-in-a-nest, etc.);
- Protecting the ecological integrity of our National Wildlife Refuges and supporting the conservation efforts of the National Fish Hatcheries;
- Conserving migratory birds; and
- Conducting education and outreach activities in support of fish and wildlife conservation.

In addition, the SCFO needs to **work together**, as an office, as an agency, with our partners in State and local government, and with our stakeholders. No single entity has enough money, people, or authority to accomplish its mission. As stated by the Service Director, "We can't do all the things we've done in the past, because those demands exceed our resources and we have new demands that require our attention." However, by working together, and only by working together, we can make a difference...**we can accomplish our goals.**

The SCFO Plan presents the Service's Strategic Habitat Conservation approach to ecosystem conservation and recovery in South Carolina. It identifies activities that focus on conservation, management, and restoration of Federal trust resources that are integral to ensuring long-term biodiversity. We address these activities in individual performance plans. The Plan recognizes that the issues and threats facing Federal trust resources today are, in many cases, extremely complex. However, we can address these issues and threats by working closely with our partners, such as State natural resource agencies, other Federal agencies, local governments, industry, private conservation groups, and the citizens of South Carolina.

PRIORITY AREA 1: AT-RISK SPECIES CONSERVATION

Desired Future Condition: To achieve landscape-level cooperative management, monitoring, and research of targeted species and selected habitats by the Service with the States and other partners that delivers effective conservation and minimizes threats such that listing under the ESA is precluded.

Work Plan Activities:

- Develop a communication strategy to provide pro-active transparency with States and the public on all legal issues and Service decisions related to ARS and listed species.
- Continue to provide SCFO Representation on Service Regional ARS Workgroup.
- Continue to add/update our endangered, threatened, and ARS county-by-county species list on the office's Web site and be proactive in the protection of these species.
- Create an ARS Work Plan in partnership with SCDNR based on a completed categorization of multi-district litigation and petitioned species.

- Develop and implement conservation strategies and actions for ARS in the SCFO work area.
- Explore incentives/resource programs that help landowners (public and private) manage habitat for ARS.
- Demonstrate and document progress toward precluding the need to list species by developing and implementing conservation strategies and actions for priority ARS with partners. Include benchmarks (e.g. improved status, reduced threats, lowered Listing Priority Number, and other measurable criteria) and clear partner roles.
- Coordinate a Plant Society Meeting in 2015 for South Carolina (similar to North Carolina) to assist with the ARS species surveys and the 12-month findings if proposed for listing in the future.
- Continue to research ARS in the SCFO work area and work with SCDNR Heritage Trust Program to update SCFO's database for these species.

PRIORITY AREA 2: RECOVERY OF FEDERALLY LISTED THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES

Desired Future Condition: Landscape level cooperative management, research, and monitoring of listed species and their habitats by the Service, in coordination with the States and other partners, that delivers effective conservation, preventing the extinction of and leading to the recovery (i.e., down-listing and de-listing) of listed species.

Work Plan Activities:

- Implement priority actions to prevent the extinction of, and to recover listed species in South Carolina.
- Continue to provide technical assistance through Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) activities, addressing imperiled aquatic species (e.g. – American eel, American shad, blueback herring, etc...)
- Provide technical and personnel assistance to National Wildlife Refuges and National Fish Hatcheries in South Carolina that are supporting management and recovery of threatened and endangered species on their lands.
- Provide technical and personnel assistance to other Federal land management agencies in South Carolina that are supporting management and recovery of threatened and endangered species on their lands.
- Provide technical and personnel assistance to State resource agencies in South Carolina that are supporting management and recovery of threatened and endangered species on their lands.
- Provide technical and personnel assistance to private landowners in South Carolina that are supporting management and recovery of threatened and endangered species on their lands through the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and Coastal Program.
- Explore incentives/resource programs that help landowners (public and private) manage habitat for threatened and endangered species.
- Engage in outreach to the public with a focus on showing successes and building relationships that promote the conservation of federally listed species.

PRIORITY AREA 3: STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Desired Future Condition: Develop and maintain strategic partnerships within the Service, with Federal and State wildlife agencies, and with other stakeholders to conserve federally listed species, at-risk species, and other vulnerable trust resources established as high priority by the Service. Strategic partnerships support the latest understanding and principles of Strategic Habitat Conservation (including surrogate species as appropriate).

Work Plan Activities:

- Demonstrate leadership in maintaining and strengthening relationships with National Wildlife Refuges and National Fish Hatcheries in South Carolina to achieve common conservation goals.
- Demonstrate leadership in maintaining and strengthening relationships with other Federal land management agencies in South Carolina to achieve common conservation goals.
- Demonstrate leadership in maintaining and strengthening relationships with State resource agencies in South Carolina to achieve common conservation goals.
- Demonstrate leadership in maintaining and strengthening relationships with non-government organizations (and other partners in the private sector) in South Carolina to achieve common conservation goals.
- Provide leadership and maintain a high level of engagement in the longleaf pine ecosystem restoration initiatives, ensuring that these efforts continue to benefit trust species.
- Work with the South Atlantic Landscape Conservation Cooperative to address resource priorities in the SCFO work area.

PRIORITY AREA 4: LEGAL OBLIGATIONS AND OTHER ADMINISTRATION MANDATES

Desired Future Condition: Continue to find the most efficient ways to meet our legal obligations and other Administration mandates.

Legal Obligations and Administration mandates are not intended to cover/address “all things National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act (FWCA), Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), etc...” In other words, this is not a catchall category where the SCFO justifies doing everything it has always done that does not meet its other priorities listed above.

Rather, this section is intended to address actual legal obligations — things the SCFO is obligated to do in statute or via litigation (e.g., settlement agreements, ESA section 7 consultations, and section 10 permits, Candidate Notice of Review, listing actions, Freedom of Information Act, and activities mandated by higher level executive leadership within the Administration - DOI or the Service Directorate (e.g., DOI Renewable Energy, Youth/Diversity Initiatives, Congressional Inquiries, and other DOI and Service Directorate priority activities).

Work Plan Activities:

- Carry out listing and critical habitat actions affecting our Region.

- Implement the revisions to the Regional procedures for responding to Freedom of Information Act requests.
- Engage Federal agencies in programmatic consultations to streamline workload and focus efforts toward Service priorities.
- Continue to provide technical assistance to high priority renewable energy projects such as offshore wind development along the Atlantic Coast.
- Continue to report and track program accomplishments - at all levels (i.e., Field Office and Regional Office) - in corporate data management systems (e.g., TAILS, HabITS, TESS, PRS, ROAR, etc.).
- Provide strategic review of Clean Water Act Section 404 activities where significant trust species benefits are likely to result and directly support the priorities identified in this Plan.
- Provide technical and personnel assistance to National Wildlife Refuges and National Fish Hatcheries in South Carolina that are supporting management and recovery of threatened and endangered species.