



Partners in Flight



26 October 2012

Dan Ashe, Director
US Fish and Wildlife Service
4401 N. Fairfax Dr., MBST-4107
Arlington, VA 22203

Dear Director Ashe,

The Partners in Flight (PIF) Steering Committee and Council met in Hilton Head South Carolina in September 2012 and discussed the new USFWS surrogate species guidance. PIF recognizes the importance of surrogate species as an approach that can be complementary to and supportive of both Strategic Habitat Conservation and the efforts of partner conservation initiatives. It overlaps well with PIF's proven partner-based approach to conservation and our mission of keeping common birds common and helping species at risk. In fact we believe this concept has been fundamental to PIF's successful planning process and our use of birds as indicators for establishing measurable ecosystem conservation objectives, evaluating conservation actions, and doing adaptive management.

PIF is eager to help in the process of establishing the guidelines that will be used for selecting surrogate species. We recommend that such guidance allow for the selection of suites of species that are:

- 1) Cost effective to monitor,
- 2) Responsive to management actions,
- 3) Partner-friendly (non-regulatory), and
- 4) Representative of desired future conditions for healthy ecosystems.

We offer our extensive network of experienced conservation partners to aid the Service in developing guidance for surrogate species selection at national and regional scales. Many of our current resources – bird conservation plans, technical documents, and species assessment databases – will help in establishing guidelines that assure excellent candidates for surrogate species.

PIF has repeatedly demonstrated that we can deliver effective conservation to both public and private land managers by managing for, and monitoring, suites of bird species that represent the desired ecological conditions and functions of particular habitat types. Recently, we have been using selected suites of bird species that represent key habitat elements to develop population targets and implementation strategies for USFWS North American Joint Ventures and to evaluate the ecological success of USDA Farm Bill programs.

Birds are ideal surrogate species for the following reasons that should also be considered as criteria for surrogate species guidance:

- 1) They segregate at the micro-habitat level and have habitat relationships that are well known.
- 2) Most species are diurnal and sing repeatedly, they are exceptionally cost effective to monitor, quantify, and show to partners; typically a dozen or more species can be detected by a single method on a single visit.

- 3) Highly standardized data gathering protocols have been established for birds, and they are used throughout the continent.
- 4) Numerous long-term databases on birds and habitat currently exist and are cooperatively stored, managed, and easily accessible through the Avian Knowledge Network.
- 5) Birds are perhaps the best group of species to compare across multiple geographic scales (project-level, state, regional, and continental).
- 6) Coexisting suites of bird species can include both 'indicator' and 'umbrella' species that are known to represent habitat conditions, ecosystem functions, and other difficult to monitor species.

In summary we recommend that the USFWS consider the criteria listed above. Partners in Flight has used these criteria to select suites of "focal" species as indicators for establishing measurable ecosystem conservation objectives, evaluating conservation actions, and achieving strategic habitat conservation within and across landscape scales. We also request that the USFWS invite PIF representatives to fully participate, both nationally and regionally, in the process that has been outlined for establishing surrogate species guidance and in the process of selecting surrogate species.

Please don't hesitate to contact us at any time to further our common interests.

Sincerely,



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