



United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE Mountain-Prairie Region



IN REPLY REFER TO:

MAILING ADDRESS:
Post Office Box 25486

Denver Federal Center
Denver, Colorado 80225-0486

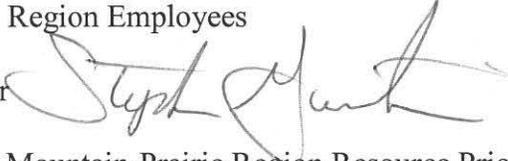
STREET LOCATION:

134 Union Boulevard
Lakewood, Colorado 80228-1807

NOV 16 2011

Memorandum

To: Mountain-Prairie Region Employees

From: Regional Director 

Subject: Fiscal Year 2012 Mountain-Prairie Region Resource Priorities

We face many challenges, including energy development, water allocation issues, invasive species, fire, agricultural development, and population growth. All of these challenges are intertwined with changing climatic conditions. At the same time, we face a tough economic situation that has led to a tightening budget.

I believe we need to focus our efforts on where we can make the most difference on these western landscapes where we live and work. Our very mission calls on us to "work with others" and our strategy needs to be one of forming strategic alliances with other organizations, partnering up with private landowners, finding common ground with state, tribal and other federal agencies, and leveraging funding at all times.

Like many of you I grew up in the crowded east. My Dad worked in the "canyons" of New York City and on opening day of the trout season they would blow a whistle at 8:00 a.m. and we'd be lined up shoulder to shoulder to haul in cookie-cutter fish. Because of that perspective, I can see the conservation opportunities we have with these western landscapes and am convinced the time is now for us to prioritize our efforts where we can make the most difference for landscape scale conservation.

Even though there are uncertainties surrounding our ultimate funding levels for FY 2012 and beyond, we have identified the following Regional operational objectives. We have prioritized our Regional operations against the policy objectives of the Secretary and Director. I am going to ask each of the Assistant Regional Directors to brief me on how they plan to address these Regional priorities within their allocations. We can tackle these natural resource challenges at a landscape level using the Strategic Habitat Conservation model to set priorities and drive conservation delivery. We can rely on the network of Landscape Conservation Cooperatives to provide needed information to inform these priorities.

We accomplished significant milestones last year under the Administration's Great Outdoors Initiative, supported many ongoing priorities, and managed two unanticipated natural resource events with historic flooding and an oil spill. Working together, in concert with our partners, I know we can accomplish great things again this year.

Resource Conservation Priorities

Develop a Strategic Approach to Energy Development

We continue to recognize the importance of wind and other renewable energy to the Nation's economy and energy security. We also recognize the opportunity that we have to assist those developing these resources. We want to do so in a way that is least harmful to our trust resources and to unique western landscapes that support economically important viable fish and wildlife populations. We will continue to develop and implement a strategic approach to energy development throughout our Region, building on the prototype "Landscape Energy Action Plan" that has been led by Ecological Services. Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs) may provide important scientific information for use in our approach. All programs are expected to work collaboratively, sharing information and approaches across program boundaries, to implement a strategic approach and consistent policies.

Strategic Engagement on Significant Stressors

In addition to energy development, food production, water use, and climate change will no doubt continue to have significant impacts on fish and wildlife resources in our Region. While the Fish and Wildlife Service does not necessarily have a nexus in all decisions on these fronts, we need to strategically approach these issues by forecasting trends, developing the best information to address threats, and engaging in the dialogue on these issues when and where appropriate. Landscape Conservation Cooperatives will continue to be focal points for our involvement on all landscape scale stressors.

Conserve and Restore Native Grassland Ecosystems

Native grassland ecosystems provide for many of our trust species and their conservation and restoration remain a high priority for the Mountain-Prairie Region. Service programs are expected to seek opportunities for cross program coordination to leverage our conservation efforts. When engaging in restoration, we will make every effort to use and support others in restoring to native vegetation species. We will utilize the principles of strategic habitat conservation to drive acquisitions of native grasslands in our two newest refuge projects: the Dakota Grasslands Conservation Area and the Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area. Service programs shall identify science needs relative to our various types of grasslands and share those needs, via the LCC sharepoint site:

(<http://sharepoint.fws.net/regions/r6/LCC/default.aspx>)

so that those needs can be considered holistically and raised to the appropriate LCC Steering Committees. We will work closely with states, other federal agencies, Tribes, and the Department on long-term strategies for bison conservation in America's grasslands.

Conserve Sage Steppe Ecosystem

The sage steppe ecosystem supports not only the Greater sage-grouse, a candidate species, but also many other migratory bird species dependent on sagebrush. We will continue to prioritize our cooperative efforts to work with the western states, through the Western Association of State Wildlife Agencies, and with the Bureau of Land Management, to reduce threats to this ecosystem and species. We will support the Intermountain West Joint Venture's key involvement in the NRCS' Strategic Watershed Action Team for the Sage Grouse Initiative. Through their leadership, additional biologists on the ground will deliver technical and financial assistance for sage-grouse restoration efforts. We will work to ensure all relevant LCCs are coordinating in their approach to providing answers to priority questions that will support sage-grouse conservation. All programs shall contribute expertise where needed to these cooperative efforts to conserve sage-grouse.

Conserve Native Cutthroat Trout

We will continue to emphasize this unique western resource in all appropriate Service-led actions - including Endangered Species Act (ESA) recovery, land protection planning, habitat restoration, fish propagation, partnerships and communications. Cutthroat trout represent an important indicator of water quality, aquatic ecosystem health, and ecological integrity, including resilience in light of climate change impacts. They also represent an important avenue to connect American citizens to nature because of their significance as sport fish.

In Fiscal Year 2012, we will work with the Colorado Division of Parks and Wildlife and university partners in resolving taxonomic questions surrounding Colorado River and greenback cutthroat trout, which will allow us to resolve parallel questions of conservation status. We will also continue efforts to restore streams on Rocky Mountain National Park and in other areas for the benefit of all subspecies of cutthroat trout, and we will continue to stock Snake River cutthroat trout into their native range to help augment existing natural stocks and provide recreational fishing opportunities. In addition, fish passage in the west is critical to the recovery of native cutthroat trout. We plan to complete approximately three projects involving fish passage for native cutthroat trout in Colorado, Montana and Wyoming.

Threatened and Endangered Species Recovery

Black-footed Ferret

We just celebrated the 30-year anniversary of the rediscovery of this iconic species of the Great Plains. Our commitment to recovery of this species has never been stronger, and all programs are expected to contribute expertise, advice, and support for the recovery efforts. Our approach uses the strategic habitat conservation model to design conservation delivery on the ground to achieve specific population objectives, addressing limiting factors, and testing our assumptions. All Service programs will focus on working with our partners, particularly through the Black-footed Ferret Executive Committee, to bring to fruition the development of a strong landowner incentive program. We will also continue to support the process of finalizing an oral bait vaccine that will allow much more efficient control of plague, a primary threat to recovery. Refuges will work to complete habitat planning processes that will allow us to plan for eventual reintroduction of ferrets at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge. In addition, all employees are asked to work cooperatively as ambassadors and communicators in support of ferret recovery.

Grizzly Bear

We will continue to make recovery progress on grizzly bears throughout the Northern Rockies. The grizzly is a keystone species and by meeting the needs of grizzlies for habitat security and ecosystem linkage, we address the needs of multiple species. There are approximately 1,700 grizzlies in the lower 48 states today and approximately 95% of these bears live in populations that are expanding in numbers and range. We continue to work with our state, federal, tribal, and Canadian partners, principally through the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee and local working groups, to assure the long-term health of grizzlies across their range in the trans-boundary Rockies. In the future, large blocks of public land could host a single trans-boundary grizzly population. We will be continuing to work with the states and other partners within the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) on the conservation strategy necessary to remove the protections of the ESA for this population. We will focus our work to complete the strategy by the end of 2012 and we hope to begin the development of the proposed rule to delist the NCDE population in late 2012.

Colorado River Endangered Fish

The four endangered fishes (Colorado pikeminnow, humpback chub, bonytail, and razorback sucker) in the Colorado River represent a conservation priority in this Region. The Colorado River Fishery Project and the Upper Colorado River Fish Recovery Program will work together to understand fish responses to the near-record high spring flows experienced throughout the Green River in 2011. With partners, we will determine overwinter survival of young razorback suckers that were swept into important nursery habitats on the floodplain last spring. We will partner with the Bureau of Reclamation to experiment with their timing of spring releases from Flaming Gorge Reservoir on the Green River to better assist in endangered fish recovery. We will finalize a Basin-wide Nonnative Fish Management Strategy, which will coordinate extensive, ongoing nonnative fish control efforts with much needed commitments to prevent future introductions of aquatic invasive species. We will also continue stocking hatchery reared razorback sucker and bonytail; using mark / recapture techniques to estimate population size; providing technical assistance to manage flows; and providing information and outreach to the public.

Conservation Delivery in America's Great Outdoors

Region 6 will continue to lead the nation in support of the President's America's Great Outdoors (AGO) initiative. The Region has a rich history of collaborative land protection with a focus on maintaining intact systems by planning at the landscape level. In recognition of this work, the multi-bureau Large Landscape Work Group has identified five large-scale priority geographic areas nationwide to help prioritize efforts under AGO. Two of these large landscapes, the Grasslands of the Northern Great Plains and the Crown of the Continent have been priorities for this Region and will continue to be a focus for us moving forward.

In Fiscal Year 2012, the Region will complete final land protection plans for the proposed Bear River Watershed Conservation Area, proposed San Luis Valley Conservation Area, and for a major expansion of the Rocky Flats NWR. The Region will also make substantial progress on an interagency land protection plan to explore additional opportunities in the Ponca Bluffs and Niobrara segments of the Missouri River. These projects represent solid examples of how the Region is utilizing strategic habitat conservation to achieve results relative to our objectives. For example, we are selecting species representative of the San Luis Valley's important wetlands and

other habitats and will build our acquisition strategies around population objectives for these species. If the plan is finalized, we will prioritize acquisition of interests in lands which provide habitat for these representative species in present and future environmental conditions. Data on the success of management for sustainable populations of these species, and new information on the trajectory of regional climate change, will be used to adapt management and acquisition priorities in the San Luis Valley in the face of a dynamic environment.

In addition, we will contribute to other AGO priorities like developing the next generation of conservationists by engaging youth in the work of the Service; making the federal government a more effective conservation partner; and continuing our strong tradition of working cooperatively with farmers and ranchers to keep working landscapes and wildlife habitat intact.

I have been so impressed and humbled by the stewardship of the American citizens and landowners that we serve in this Region, particularly those that have worked shoulder to shoulder with us to create grass-roots partnerships like in the Blackfoot Valley of Montana and the Flint Hills of Kansas. We will expand our successful Private Lands Day to include leaders from Service programs beyond Refuges and Partners for Fish and Wildlife, so that all of our programs can better understand the perspectives of these partners.

We will look to the future and accomplish a cross-program ecological evaluation designed to illuminate areas that are in the greatest need of conservation planning to evaluate their inclusion in the Refuge system. Based on the principles of strategic habitat conservation, we will evaluate our trust species and resources, scarce resources that might become trust species, the underlying biological objectives, and the distribution of habitats across the Mountain-Prairie landscape, to forecast priorities for potential future Refuge planning.

Operational Priorities

Capitalizing on the Strength of our Landscape Conservation Cooperatives

We will continue to implement strategic habitat conservation at a landscape scale, and the establishment and maintenance of Landscape Conservation Cooperatives will continue to be a top priority in Fiscal Year 2012. We lead the Great Northern and Southern Rockies LCCs, and we are also involved heavily in the Great Plains, Plains and Prairie Potholes, and Great Basin LCCs. We will begin this year to work also with the Tallgrass Prairie LCC. We will work with our all conservation partners to align LCCs with other landscape-level programs and conservation delivery initiatives. We can really demonstrate this with our emerging partnership with the Provinces of British Columbia and Alberta and the federal agencies in Canada as we move forward with the Great Northern LCC. At the same time, we all need to reach out to our Tribal partners to engage them in the LCC process.

My expectation for all employees and especially Project Leaders is that you will share your thoughts about the high priority information needs you need met to be able to accomplish even more effective on-the-ground conservation delivery. You should share those thoughts and needs with us via the Sharepoint tool we have designed to capture your input:

(<http://sharepoint.fws.net/regions/r6/LCC/default.aspx>).

My commitment to you is that the Regional Directorate will discuss your input, prioritize your needs, and carry Service needs to each of our LCC Steering Committees.

Diversity for Strength in Achieving our Mission

Region 6 is committed to an equal opportunity and a diverse and inclusive workplace. Adhering to EEO laws and valuing diversity are necessary to ensure we maintain a talented and committed workforce that can accomplish the mission effectively and efficiently. The term "diversity" is a broad term that moves beyond qualities of race and gender; it is the mosaic of people who bring a variety of backgrounds, styles, perspectives, values, and beliefs as assets to the groups and organizations with which they interact. We recognize the unique contributions that our differences make in support of the mission of the Service. Our long term goal is to create a workforce that reflects the population that we serve. To this end, we will continue work on several fronts:

utilize effective, targeted outreach efforts to maximize the pool of highly qualified applicants for available positions;

introduce targeted groups (women, minorities, persons with a disability, and veterans) to the Service and natural resource sciences;

continue to develop our Special Relations Program with several Colleges, Universities, and organizations;

utilize our Student Career Experience Program (SCEP) hiring to meet our diversity goals;

partner with Denver's Arrupe Jesuit High School corporate work-study program to provide entry level work experience for high school students and introduce them to possible careers within the Service; and

utilize non-competitive hiring authorities to provide opportunities for veterans and people with disabilities.

Our diversity awareness and activities are part of our overall mission and contribute to our future vitality in mission accomplishment. We want our agency to be free from barriers and discrimination, for our employees, and for the public whom we serve. My expectation is that each of you create an inclusive and welcoming environment for all Service employees.

Safety and Occupational Health

Nothing is more important than doing our jobs safely. Each employee must be aware and become educated about the risks they may face. Together, we must challenge each other to operate safely in all of our activities. Our Collateral Duty Safety Officers fill a priority role at each of our stations and I expect that each will be supported 100% in their work by their supervisors and Project Leaders.

In Summary

As we embark on a new fiscal year, I send my personal gratitude to each and every Mountain-Prairie Region employee for the work you do. Each of you contributes to the Service mission, and we are stronger because of our diversity of thought, backgrounds, perspectives, and type of position. I know that because of your dedication, we continue to make progress conserving fish, wildlife, and habitat for future generations of Americans.