

**COMMUNICATING A CONSISTENT MESSAGE TO  
STATES AND OTHER PARTNERS  
ABOUT THEIR ROLES IN THE SSA PROCESS**

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
July 2015

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has adopted an integrated and conservation-focused analytical approach, the Species Status Assessment (SSA) Framework, to assess a species' biological status for the purpose of informing decisions and activities under the Endangered Species Act. When applying the SSA Framework, the Service will collaborate fully and appropriately with our State partners, as well as Tribes and other governmental and nongovernmental partners, to ensure that we are using the best available information and valid analytical methods.

We emphasize that SSAs are strictly science-based. They provide the scientific foundation for subsequent ESA decisions (which also incorporate policy considerations) such as listing determinations and recovery recommendations. Given the focus on science, with each SSA we are aiming for a *structured* collaboration that centers on working with species experts and other scientific experts to produce rigorous analyses using consistent and transparent procedures.

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:  
Talking Points for All SSAs**

July 2015

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The following talking points have been prepared to convey a clear and consistent message to our conservation partners regarding their prospective involvement in status assessments using the SSA Framework.

- The SSA process is focused exclusively on a scientific analysis of a given species' viability using empirical data, expert opinion, and forecasting (using conceptual and/or mathematical models) that incorporates best available biological and threats-based information.
- SSA results will inform ESA decisions, but decision making with regard to threatened or endangered species is not a component of the SSA Framework.
- Our objectives with respect to expert involvement in the SSA process are to:
  1. Solicit knowledge (information and judgment) from the most qualified experts with regard to the species' current and future status;
  2. Represent the diversity of expert judgment within the scientific community;
  3. Facilitate open discussion and independent input in a cooperative manner;
  4. Ensure timeliness and efficiency in conducting the assessment; and
  5. Safeguard the objectivity, neutrality, and scientific rigor of the assessment.
- Given these objectives:
  1. We will seek the participation of scientists who can provide the best available information on those aspects of species' biology, ecology, and/or environmental conditions that are likely to influence viability at the population and species levels.
  2. At certain points in the assessment, we may need the input of those experts who are most qualified to characterize the effects of various threats or stressors on the species and its habitat over given future time frames and in given portions of the range (i.e., help with cause-effect analyses).

3. If needed to assess past management efforts and the species' response to those efforts, we may engage professionals with on-the-ground management experience.
  4. Consistent with best practices for expert elicitation, we will limit the number of participants (both experts and observers) in order to meet deadlines, avoid redundancy, and foster open, technical discussions among all participants.
  5. Participation may take a variety of forms, including group meetings, individual meetings, conference calls, one-on-one discussions, or written correspondence.
  6. The SSA will be conducted transparently, with both expert input and assessment results being made available for informational purposes and, as appropriate, agency and peer review. We should note that the name and affiliation of participating experts will be on record, although individual input may be kept anonymous to facilitate candid responses.
  7. We will seek individual input knowledge on specific topics but will not seek or obtain any group consensus from the participants.
  8. Based on expertise and need, the role of each expert and the input solicited from each individual may vary at different times during the SSA process.
- We intend to structure involvement in each SSA to achieve the most scientifically rigorous analysis possible in the time available. This requires active support from both the Service and our partners. In general, SSAs will involve:
    1. Participants from the Service who are experts on the species and other relevant subjects;
    2. Service and/or USGS facilitators who are trained in the SSA process and expert elicitation; and
    3. Invited participants from outside the Service who are experts on the species and other relevant subjects.
  - We invite States and other partners to suggest individuals who may have relevant expertise. Selection of experts will be transparent and geared toward engaging a diversity of qualified expert judgment. Selection criteria will relate to scientific qualifications, familiarity with relevant subject matter, and diversity of scientific expertise.
  - Along with direct input from experts, the Service will coordinate closely with States and other partners during the SSA process. The form of this coordination will be determined on a case-by-case basis.
  - We look forward to working with the States and other partners during the SSA process and as SSA results are applied to future ESA decisions.

## **Specific Talking Points for the Canada Lynx SSA**

July 2015

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In addition to the general talking points provided above, the following points apply specifically to the Canada lynx SSA:

- The lynx SSA is time-sensitive in that it must be completed as a precursor to making decisions about the appropriate listing classification of the DPS and, if called for, completing a recovery plan by the court-ordered deadline of January 2018. We are therefore endeavoring to complete the SSA this calendar year.
- To achieve the most rigorous analysis possible in the time available, we have structured involvement in the lynx SSA as follows:
  1. A core team of Service biologists representing the geographic areas occupied by the lynx DPS will provide information and expertise for the assessment, identify experts, and act as liaisons with their respective States and other partners;
  2. An SSA facilitation team that is highly conversant in the SSA process will ensure that the assessment conforms to the SSA framework and that project time frames are met; and
  3. Invited experts, both within and outside the Service, will provide information and/or expert opinion at various points of the process, depending on need.
- As core team members identify and select experts using explicit selection criteria, we will be receptive to suggestions regarding individuals who may have strong expertise in the scientific questions surrounding lynx conservation. We reiterate, however, that we reserve the right to make final selections for expert involvement in the assessment.
- Along with direct expert input, the lynx SSA will include close coordination among the Service, States, and other partners. With regard to all involved States, we have scheduled monthly conference calls and/or webinars to provide updates and answer questions. The first monthly call with States has been scheduled for July 29<sup>th</sup>, and subsequent calls will be held on the last Wednesday of each month until the SSA report is completed and distributed for agency and peer review.