

2/19/2019

Peer Review Plan: Florida Grasshopper Sparrow Disease Risk Analysis Workshop Report

About the Document

Subject and Purpose: At the request of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) a workshop was convened and facilitated by members of the International Union for Conservation of Nature Conservation Planning Specialist Group to develop a Disease Risk Analysis (DRA) for the potential release of captive-reared Florida grasshopper sparrows (*Ammodramus savannarum floridanus*, FGSP). The purpose of the DRA was to assemble existing information and expert opinion to evaluate the risks from disease associated with releasing captive-reared birds to existing wild FGSP populations in 2019.

Due to the timing needs of the program, a Rapid Risk Assessment Protocol was followed for this workshop. This method is aimed at combining existing data and expert opinion into a structured decision-making process rather than development of a full risk model. The goal of the DRA was for the trust agencies (Service and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission) to have a clear understanding of the most recent science with regards to the risk from disease and to capture information regarding the level of (and variance around) uncertainty associated with the risk and how it affected the various options for release. The fundamental question (problem) for the disease risk analysis was defined as, “What is the likelihood that an individual Florida grasshopper sparrow, held or reared in *ex situ* (captive) conditions, is infected with a particular high-risk pathogen that is missed during *ex situ* health screening and is then released as an infected individual into an existing *in situ* (wild) population?”

The relative risk from the discussed pathogens were further evaluated at the DRA and by the trust agencies in the context of the risks of not releasing birds, given the precarious state of the wild population and the likelihood of possible extinction. The information presented at the DRA is summarized in this report. The information from this process will be used by staff from the trust agencies to evaluate the pros and cons of various strategies with regards to captive-rearing and release.

Importance of Scientific Information:

The topic of disease is a difficult one, and the trust agencies expected and received variation in the expert opinions regarding the data, data gaps, associated uncertainty, the risks associated with disease, and how those data might inform a decision regarding potential paths forward. The agencies acknowledge that the state of the science is, and will likely continue to be, incomplete—and fully expect the state of science to continue to evolve. There were no “a priori” decisions made by the trust agencies’ leadership before the DRA. The full suite of potential decisions were on the table—ranging from releasing birds in spring 2019 to ending the captive breeding program if the risk of releasing birds back onto the landscape is too great. The risk from pathogens was just one of the factors the agencies are considering with regards to moving forward with potential releases. It is, however, a foundational and pivotal factor.

The goals of the DRA were to (1) present and discuss the current state of knowledge regarding several points of contention during the rapid assessment process, (2) clearly articulate the risks

and associated uncertainty regarding the current state of knowledge with regards to disease, (3) to assess/capture the level of consensus among the working group regarding risks associated with these critical points and capture level of risk tolerance around those points when consensus was not reached, (4) outline further data/research needs aimed at major data gaps, and (5) to assess the level of consensus and risk tolerance among participants regarding whether birds should be released in 2019 under current protocols.

About the Peer Review Process

Type of review: Independent Peer Review – The Service will solicit comments from independent scientific reviewers. Reviewers will submit individual responses to questions posed to all invited reviewers, and any additional comments they have in writing.

Number of reviewers: The Service will use three or more independent expert reviewers. The Service will solicit a minimum of three peer reviewers requesting their participation as soon as possible.

Reviewer Expertise: Any one or combination of the following: grasshopper sparrow biology and ecology, avian diseases (including coccidians and microfalarids), wildlife reintroduction, and decision analysis.

Selection of Peer Reviewers: The Service will select peer reviewers based on their expertise with the subject matter and as described in the Office of Management and Budget Peer Review Guidelines ([Final Information Quality Bulletin for Peer Review](#)), including having not been involved in the Florida grasshopper sparrow working group, Florida grasshopper sparrow DRA process or directly affiliated with DRA workshop participants.

Management of Peer Reviewer: The Service will manage the peer review process. Peer reviewers will be given 14 days to complete their reviews. The estimated start of the review is February 2019. Peer review comments and Service responses to those comments will be made available to the public on a Service website: <https://www.fws.gov/southeast/science/peer-review/>.

About Public Participation

The public is invited to submit comments on this peer review plan by sending emails to southeastscience@fws.gov (please state Florida Grasshopper Sparrow Disease Risk Analysis in the subject line) or by mail to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Science Applications, Attn: Florida Grasshopper Sparrow Disease Risk Analysis peer review, 1875 Century Blvd, Atlanta, GA 30345. The deadline for filing comments on the peer review plan is February 24, 2019. We do not anticipate public review of the DRA workshop report. We estimate the final version of the report will be available in April 2019.

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