Deciding Criteria for Selecting Emphasis Areas

Gulf Coast - The Gulf Coast Region of Texas includes some of the most productive marshes and estuaries in North America. It encompasses near-coastal bottomland hardwood forests and oak mottes important to millions of migrating songbirds, shorebirds, wading birds and other wetland dependent species; coastal prairies supporting the only population of endangered Attwater's prairie-chicken; and islands and saline marsh which provide for the entire wild wintering population of endangered whooping cranes in the mid-coast. The large expanse of the lower coast hosts a mix of Tamaulipan thorn-forest surrounding one of the world's only hypersaline bay systems which along with the nearby Laguna Madre de Tamaulipas, Mexico, is used by 80% of the continental population of redhead ducks, along with endangered aplomado falcons and ocelots. This Emphasis Area is the year-round home of nearly the entire Western Gulf Coast population of mottled duck. Additionally, 95% of the commercially and recreationally important fish species in the Gulf of Mexico rely on the Gulf's bays and estuaries. The Service has a large conservation presence (about 450,000 acres) along the Texas Gulf Coast which protects many of the best wildlife habitats in Texas. These lands are threatened by petrochemical, wind energy, commercial and residential development and sea level rise.

Priorities Supported: Workforce Planning, SHC (Research/Monitoring, Adaptive Management), Large Landscape Conservation Planning, Partnerships, Leveraging Funding, Cross-Program Results, Response to Climate Change, Urban Initiatives

Great Plains - The Southwest Region has three of the eight states that encompass the Great Plains geography: New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma. Some of the most compromised fish and wildlife habitats in the United States are found in this area, along with a number of imperiled species, including the recently listed lesser prairie-chicken. This landscape and the associated plant and animal communities are impacted by urbanization and development. Six Great Plains' habitat types within the Southwest Region Emphasis Area are in need of conservation attention: short grass and mixed grass prairies; playa wetlands; riparian streams; prairie rivers; cross-timbers and savannahs; and shrub lands and sand dune systems. Temperate grasslands represent one of the most altered ecological systems on earth; their biodiversity and ecological processes are threatened by habitat conversion and degradation. Despite these issues, grasslands in this Emphasis Area still include an assemblage of over 2,000 native plant and animal species. The Great Plains region provides vital habitats for grassland birds and shorebirds. In any given year up to a million northern pintails use the Great Plain's Central Flyway for migration. Playas, one of the most valuable wetland ecosystems in the United States, are also found in this Emphasis Area. Playa habitats serve as biodiversity centers, hosting more than 200 species of birds and other wildlife annually, including an estimated 90+ percent of wintering waterfowl in the Texas panhandle. The Great Plains also overlay the world's largest aquifer (the High Plains [Ogallala] Aquifer) which is recharged by playa wetlands. It is the single most important water source in this region and is critical to the health and survival of human populations and wildlife in the heartland of America. The Great Plain's saline lakes and playas are also a significant habitat,

providing valuable habitats for imperiled species such as piping and snowy plovers and least terns.

Priorities Supported: Workforce Planning, SHC (Research/Monitoring, Adaptive Management), Large Landscape Conservation Planning, Partnerships, Leveraging Funding, Cross-Program Results, Response to Climate Change, Urban Initiatives, Coordination and Collaboration with Tribes

Rio Grande - The majority of the 182,200 square-mile Rio Grande watershed occurs in the Southwest Region. In New Mexico, the Rio Grande watershed is home to 63 percent of the state's human population. Beginning in the Colorado Rocky Mountains, the Rio Grande flows south through New Mexico, where it supports the fragile middle Rio Grande bosque ecosystem in its floodplain. The river continues moving south and east as it traverses a broad variety of landscapes and habitats through Texas and serves as the boundary between the United States and Mexico. Finally, it crosses the Chihuahuan Desert and Tamaulipan Brushlands before it joins the Gulf of Mexico. The Rio Grande supports valuable wetlands, the largest remaining continuous cottonwood woodland in the Southwest, and ecologically rich but fragmented stretches of sub-tropical riparian forest. Ten Southwest Region National Wildlife Refuges are located within the Rio Grande watershed. There are 27 historically native fish species, of which only 14 remain. New Mexico has identified 53 Aquatic Species of greatest conservation need and Texas has identified 33 species of fish and 15 species of aquatic mollusks and crustaceans as priority conservation species. Over 450 species of birds use the river corridor during breeding, migration or winter seasons, including 50 species of birds on the United States' watch list. The Rio Grande watershed provides overwintering habitat for many avian species including Central Flyway ducks and geese and 90% of the overwintering Rocky Mountain population of sandhill cranes. Portions of the Rio Grande also support remnant populations of threatened or endangered species such as the New Mexico meadow jumping mouse, the Rio Grande silvery minnow, the Southwestern willow flycatcher and the yellow-billed cuckoo.

Priorities Supported: Workforce Planning, SHC (Research/Monitoring, Adaptive Management), Partnerships, Leveraging Funding, Cross-Program Results, Response to Climate Change, Urban Initiatives, Coordination and Collaboration with Tribes

Mogollon Rim - The Mogollon Rim is a rugged escarpment that forms the southern limit of the Colorado Plateau. It extends from northern Yavapai County in Arizona, eastward to near the Arizona/New Mexico border across heavily forested land and into New Mexico. Much of the land south of the Mogollon Rim lies 4,000 to 5,000 ft. (1,200 to 1,500 m) above sea level, with the escarpment rising to about 8,000 ft. (2,400 m). Extensive ponderosa pine forests are found both on the slopes of the Rim and on the plateau north of it. These forests are of critical importance for nine species of declining western forest birds and essential for maintaining populations of many others, especially ponderosa pine obligates. The Mogollon Rim is a major floristic and faunal boundary, with species characteristic of the Rocky Mountains living on the

top of the plateau, and species native to the Mexican Sierra Madre Occidental on the slopes below. It is home to the Mexican gray wolf and several threatened fish species, including the Apache and Gila trout, which are found only in the headwaters of the rivers in this area. Native amphibians and spring snails, in the area would also benefit from conservation attention.

East Texas/Oklahoma - East Texas and Oklahoma are home to the one of the largest limestone aquifer systems in the world, with essential riverine habitat. The Edwards Aquifer lies within this Emphasis Area and is hugely important to the region. The importance of water in the arid southwest cannot be overstated. Focusing on this area, gives the Southwest Region an opportunity to get out ahead of endangered species issues by working proactively to implement conservation actions. The status of several species of mussels is currently under review and the species are being considered for state and federal listing. Here, priorities center on six freshwater mussels. These mussel species are of key interest to state as well as federal agencies. In addition, there are endemic fish, cave/karst species and bat populations. There are also three species of listed birds and 62 avian species of conservation concern in these water corridors. Water quality and quantity in systems ranging from artesian wells to reservoirs are compromised by a wide variety of human activities and environmental conditions, and the effects of these threats are compounded by climate change.

Priorities Supported: Workforce Planning, SHC (Planning, Research/Monitoring, Adaptive Management), Partnerships, Leveraging Funding, Cross-Program Results, Response to Climate Change, Urban Initiatives, Coordination and Collaboration with Tribes