

Introduction

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game (Department) has completed a comprehensive review and revision of the Idaho State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP; formerly known as the Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy), first completed in 2005 pursuant to the creation of the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Account under the Federal Aid in Wildlife Conservation Act, Pub. L. No. 106–553, appendix B–H.R. 5548, title IX (Wildlife, Ocean and Coastal Conservation), §§ 901–902, 114 Stat. 2762A– 118–124 (Dec. 21, 2000).

Approximately 98% of Idaho's native fish and wildlife species held in public trust by the State of Idaho are not hunted, fished, or trapped and have limited sources of funding. These species are often referred to as “nongame.”

In 2000, Congress created the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program and State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program (SWG), which for the first time, provided funding to state fish and wildlife agencies primarily for the conservation and management of nongame species. The funding was distributed to the states with the condition that each state develop a SWAP—the strategic direction to implementing proactive, nonregulatory, action-based solutions to conserve fish and wildlife. Congress also required that all states commit to reviewing and, if necessary, revising their Wildlife Action Plans within 10 years.

Approximately 98% of Idaho's native fish and wildlife species held in public trust by the State of Idaho are not hunted, fished, or trapped and have limited sources of funding. State and Tribal Wildlife Grants funding is critical to sustaining the Idaho Department of Fish and Game's (IDFG) overall Wildlife Diversity Program budget and programs. Idaho currently receives approximately \$550,000 annually through this program, and in the last decade since developing the original SWAP in 2005, has received more than \$6.5 million dollars of SWG funding. The Idaho SWAP provides strategic guidance on how to invest these funds with an emphasis on preventing future listings under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (16 USC 1531 et seq.; ESA) thus maintaining state-led management authority for wildlife.

The “Eight Required Elements”

Congress identified eight required elements to be addressed in these wildlife conservation plans (see below). Further, the plan must identify and be focused on the “species in greatest need of conservation,” yet address the “full array of wildlife” and wildlife-related issues. They must provide and make use of:

1. The distribution and abundance of species of wildlife, including low and declining populations as each state fish and wildlife agency deems appropriate, that are indicative of the diversity and health of wildlife of the state (these species are now referred to as species of greatest conservation need or SGCN);
2. The location and relative condition of key habitats and community types essential to the conservation of each state's SGCN;

3. The problems [that] may adversely affect SGCN or their habitats, and priority research and surveys needed to identify factors [that] may assist in restoration and improved conservation of SGCN and their habitats;
4. The actions necessary to conserve SGCN and their habitats and priorities for implementing such conservation actions;
5. The provisions for periodic monitoring of SGCN and their habitats, for monitoring the effectiveness of conservation actions, and for adapting conservation actions as appropriate to respond to new information or changing conditions;
6. Each state's provisions to review its plan at intervals not to exceed 10 years;
7. Each state's provisions for coordination during the development, implementation, review, and revision of its plan with federal, state, and local agencies and Indian tribes that manage significant areas of land or water within the state, or administer programs that significantly affect the conservation of species or their habitats; and
8. Each state's provisions to provide the necessary public participation in the development, revision, and implementation of its plan.

Although the Department is the state's lead wildlife manager, it is not a major land management agency and does not administer significant regulatory programs other than regulating the take of wildlife. By necessity, the Department's ability to conserve wildlife will depend on its effectiveness in working cooperatively with others.

The 2005 plan (formerly known as Idaho Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/public/wildlife/cwcs/>) largely focused on species, and included a species account for each of the 229 species of greatest conservation need (SGCN). Although the plan included ecological section summaries, it did not specifically develop section-level plans by considering the uniqueness of each section or the local conditions. For the 2015 revision, we aimed to be more dynamic and to create plans for each of Idaho's 14 ecological sections that acknowledges both what we will do and what we will not do. The process we used for the revision—the Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation (<http://cmp-openstandards.org/>) as implemented in Miradi Software (<https://www.miradi.org/>)—gives us a tool for assessing status/condition (species or habitats), identifying and prioritizing critical threats, and prioritizing conservation actions—all essential components of the State Wildlife Action Plan.

Planning efforts at the scale of a state the size of Idaho have something of a "Goldilocks problem." On one hand, conditions are varied enough across the state that it is difficult to plan or implement conservation actions for a habitat or species across all of Idaho—the planning unit is "too big." On the other hand, it's also challenging to develop plans for thousands of individual conservation areas or sites—the planning unit is "too small." We thus needed a planning unit that was small enough to capture variation, but large enough to be efficient. It is also helpful to have a planning unit that represents an area managed by a defined group of agencies/organizations/stakeholder groups and the individuals within them—the people who will allocate time and resources to conservation work in the area over the coming decade. Although we considered doing planning by watershed or by IDFG Region, in the end we

decided to use the same 14 ecological sections from the 2005 plan because (1) they met the Goldilocks just right criterion, (2) are the product of an established external framework (Bailey's ecoregions <http://www.fs.fed.us/land/ecosysmgmt/>), (3) represent a neutral framework that all agencies can use, (4) link to work done in neighboring states, and (5) make use of existing work in the 2005 plan.

For the 2015 State Wildlife Action Plan revision, we took a “coarse filter–fine filter” approach to both address the “full array of wildlife” and “wildlife-related issues” in Idaho, but also to focus on actions that benefit multiple species and the habitats they depend on. Many threats to species are habitat-based so we started by identifying the threats to these habitats and considered the system as a whole by including nested targets (e.g., sagebrush-obligate birds nested under the Sagebrush Steppe system). Where species had threats that weren't habitat-based, or they had special conservation needs, we identified the species as a target in its own right. For example, some species, such as Bighorn Sheep or bats, are impacted by disease threats and focusing on the habitat isn't going to solve the problem. In those cases, the species became the target so that we could appropriately address the threat(s). We also started with more generic habitat types but then looked at specific manifestations of that habitat in each section. In some cases, mosaics of multiple habitats become the target.

As stated above, we looked at species in an ecological systems context and did not distinguish between game and nongame. That said the plan focused on species of greatest conservation need—regardless of how they're classified.

We identified key partners and stakeholders for each of the 14 ecological sections that compose ongoing Adaptive Management (and implementation) teams for each section. Our long-term goal is to convene these groups at least 1 to 2 times per year for a 3 to 4 hour meeting to be held in a central location for that section. Although we initially grouped approximately 4 sections into a single workshop for training and teaching efficiencies, moving forward, each section's group will meet individually. We've also created dynamic information systems for each section recognizing that the initial knowledge captured for each section can be improved over time.

In developing materials for the State Wildlife Action Plan, we considered how identified threats and associated actions relate to other agency plans (both internal IDFG management plans as well as partner plans, e.g., US Forest Service forest plans, Idaho Forest Action Plan, BLM Resource Management Plans, etc.). We also considered the implications of our work to affected stakeholders, e.g., the livestock industry, timber industry, mining industry, etc. It's critical to the success of the State Wildlife Action Plan—and the conservation of Idaho's wildlife—that we find ways to resolve potential conflicts. To this end, our planning process explicitly recognizes not only ecological targets in each section, but also the human values that these resources provide. In addition, by making our assumptions and strategies for conservation clear, this enables us to have specific and meaningful conversations with our resource management partners to find appropriate solutions for managing these resources.

Concurrent to the ecological section planning in Miradi described above, we updated the conservation status of all Idaho species (vertebrate and invertebrate). The updated status (S-rank) was used as a criterion in a suite of criteria used to derive the revised species of greatest

conservation need list for the State Wildlife Action Plan. We provide individual assessments for 205 species of greatest conservation need.

The first of the eight elements required of the plan addresses designation of priority species, stating "The distribution and abundance of species of wildlife, including low and declining populations as each state fish and wildlife agency deems appropriate, that are indicative of the diversity and health of wildlife of the state (referred to as SGCN)." Additionally, the plan must identify and be focused on the "species in greatest need of conservation." Although the criteria do not stipulate eligible species necessarily be characterized by low and declining populations, the implication, and Idaho's approach, is that abundant or increasing populations would be of a lower priority. Idaho designated SGCN using a suite of criteria, including distribution, abundance, trends, and viability threats as reflected by the updated status (S-rank).

We also placed considerable emphasis on the element of need, relative to the SWG program. Idaho's approach to SWAP is based on the premise that the product will primarily serve as a basis for prioritizing SWG funding for important work on rare or declining species where few to no other funding mechanisms exist. In describing the focus for these plans, Congress emphasized that priority should be placed on the most critical needs, on those species with the greatest conservation need, and that funds should be used to address the life needs and habitat requirements of those species to preclude the need to list them as threatened or endangered under ESA. To that end, we focused on currently unmet conservation needs. Whether or not a species relies solely or primarily on the SWG program for conservation funding was a key consideration. Under this approach, the limited funding available in the SWG program will be most effectively directed to the greatest need.

In some cases, the criteria used for development of this plan resulted in changes in SGCN status (either tier or exclusion) from the 2005 plan. Importantly, omission of a previously designated SGCN is not reflective of a diminished concern for the species, lesser importance, or the lack of a conservation commitment. Changes are the result of new information about (or change in) distribution and abundance, implementation of species-specific conservation plans, access to a wider range of funding mechanisms for conservation actions, or a combination of factors.

This plan represents the Department's efforts to complete a comprehensive review and revision of the 2005 plan. Voluntary in nature, the SWAP provides a framework for collaborative conservation in Idaho and helps the Department to fulfill its mission to *preserve, protect, and perpetuate* all wildlife to provide for the citizens of this state. Wildlife management has broad implications to the state of Idaho and therefore the SWAP must be based on the best available science and appropriately balanced taking into consideration the multiple natural resource goals important to Idaho. The Department plans to continue to engage its partners to ensure that viable conservation actions for species outlined in the SWAP are implemented.

Key Messages

- The Idaho SWAP provides voluntary guidance on conservation actions intended to benefit the highest priority “species of greatest conservation need” (SGCN);
- The SWAP revision is a Department-led effort with broad stakeholder involvement, including a public review;
- Implementation of conservation actions in the revised SWAP goes beyond Department staff capacity and resources—it is a truly comprehensive State Plan, not just a Department Plan, that also engages key partners and other interested stakeholders;
- Submission of a revised SWAP to the US Fish and Wildlife Service in February 2016 ensures that the Department remains eligible to receive Congressionally-appropriated State Wildlife Grants funding; and
- Revision and implementation of the SWAP by the Department is paid for using State Wildlife Grants matched with Nongame Trust Fund revenue—no license dollars are used for these efforts.