

Species of Concern New Mexico NRCS

Background

The Natural Resource Conservation Service's (NRCS) programs and planning guidance refer to several descriptive words referring to species status: *federal, state, or tribal threatened and endangered; at-risk; proposed or candidate plant or animal species; species of concern; rare species; species of greatest conservation need; beneficial insects (pollinators); and common species*. Many agencies and organizations maintain species status or conservation priority lists. It is therefore necessary to draw a distinction between these descriptive words to draw clarity to how they are being utilized in NRCS programs and planning efforts.

"Species of concern" is an informal term that refers to those species which appear to be in need of concentrated conservation actions. Species of concern receive no legal protection and the use of the term does not necessarily mean that the species will eventually be proposed for listing as a threatened or endangered species. Species of concern are commonly declining, but insufficient information is available to begin the listing process under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

A plant or animal is considered "At-Risk" when it is proposed for listing as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act, it is a candidate species for listing, or it has been petitioned by a third party for listing. A "Candidate" species is one for which enough scientific evidence exists that warrants legal protection, and therefore may be "Proposed" for listing as threatened or endangered under Section 4 of the ESA.

New Mexico NRCS Strategy

New Mexico NRCS adopted the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish's (NMDGF) 2006 Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (November 2016 update, State Wildlife Action Plan) as a guiding document to incorporate into NM NRCS's State Wildlife Plan. The species conservation priority list in the NMDGF State Wildlife Plan is referred to as Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN). The SGCN list includes protected, at-risk, and species of concern.

Species of Greatest Conservation Need are species that meet at least one of these conditions: declining, vulnerable, endemic, disjunct and keystone. The SGCN list does not include beneficial insects (pollinators), rare plants, and common species. Insects apply important influences on wildlife habitat suitability and wildlife population sustainability, including their direct and indirect effects on wildlife health. Equally important is the role they play in food production.

Native plant communities are the foundation to ecosystem functioning of which providing animal habitat is one key function. It should go without saying the fundamental importance of placing a high priority on restoration of native plant communities within NRCS technical guidance in addition within program delivery.

To maintain a high level of conservation planning and equitable delivery of NRCS programs and technical assistance the following guidance is provided to distinguish the considerations for species of concern from other categories of protection for wildlife species.

- Species of Concern for NM NRCS includes all categories within Table 1, except for common species. Inherently protected species are species of concern.

Table 1. NM NRCS Species Conservation Priorities.

<u>Category</u>	<u>Flora/ fauna</u>	<u>Includes</u>
Protected (federal, state, or tribal)	Flora and fauna	Threatened, Endangered, Candidate, Proposed
Species of Greatest Conservation Need	Fauna	Species of Concern, At-risk, includes but not all Threatened, Endangered, Candidate, Proposed
Beneficial insects (pollinators)	Fauna	Species of Concern, Rare, At-risk, Common
Rare Plants	Flora	Species of Concern, At-risk
Common Species	Flora or fauna	Presently not Species of Concern

NRCS Conservation Programs

Given program funding opportunities and direction on obligations which target wildlife conservation, common species have been added to the NM NRCS State Wildlife Plan. Common species which a landowner wishes to target management may have beneficial outcomes to species of concern but is not necessarily a requirement depending on program. Landowners have program opportunities through general Environmental Quality Incentives Program fund accounts to address resource concerns associated with common species.

A program fund account can target a species or habitat type for funding and limit contracted practices to activities that will address the targeted species or habitat. In more general fund accounts the ranking may give priority to species that the state has identified as warranting special consideration for funding. In many cases a federally protected species may receive more ranking points than activities that will only benefit a common species.

There are enhancements in the Conservation Stewardship Program that specify that the action must benefit a species of concern. For these enhancements the planned action cannot solely benefit a common species. Planners must determine how the planned action could also benefit a species of concern. Species of concern are not typically the focus of many landowners. Planners may need to adapt the habitat restoration treatments that landowners wish to implement for common species so that there will also be a benefit to other species of concern.

Summary

It is apparent that focusing conservation efforts on the sustainability of protected or species of concern has many challenges. A project that focuses on protected species habitat restoration requires a person with knowledge on that species. These projects require long term planning, communication with regulatory agencies and management. Focusing on protected species may not motivate a landowner to adopt conservation projects that they would be willing to do for a common species that provides hunting or other values to the landowner. For these reasons, as well as others, it is often preferable to focus on habitat condition (“health”) in relation to a specific guild of animals or surrogate species of specific habitat types.