



March 25, 2019

State Wildlife Plan 2019 - 2022 NRCS New Mexico

Introduction

This plan replaces the 2014-2017 New Mexico NRCS state wildlife plan (SWP) and defines a conservation implementation strategy used by NRCS to apply wildlife conservation program funding. Furthermore, this plan outlines a strategy to include priority at risk fish and wildlife species in addition to concerns with pollinating insects and common fish and wildlife.

The 2014-2017 NRCS state wildlife plan reflects the Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CWCS) of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMDGF). The NM NRCS State Technical Committee recommended this strategic plan in 2014 with subsequent NRCS State Conservationist approval. The CWCS has been a guiding document used in NRCS conservation program delivery.

The NMDGF updated the strategic plan in 2016, now called the [State Wildlife Action Plan \(SWAP\)](#). The locally lead effort, directed by numerous stakeholders helped define priority species and habitats. The involvement of resource professionals, conservation organizations, commodity interests, private individuals, tribal interests, municipal governments, and others aided in this assessment to construct a better wildlife conservation overview for New Mexico.

USDA Conservation Programs

The Farm Bill is the largest source of federal funding for private lands conservation, and provides opportunities for producers to benefit wildlife habitat on working lands. NRCS administers or provides technical support to many USDA Conservation Programs which benefit wildlife.

The 2018 Farm added no new NRCS programs and none were eliminated. The Conservation Title increases funding for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), and direct funding for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). Support for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) remains despite a reduction of funding levels. Additional highlights include:

- ACEP will provide entities who will hold easements more flexibility and control over land stewardship requirements and other management actions.
- Regional Conservation Partnership Program contains improvements to make it more efficient and effective. Impediments are removed, enabling NRCS and partners to better manage funding throughout the duration of projects.
- Grasslands receive some focus through the new Grassland Conservation Initiative within CSP and the continued incentives to protect grasslands of special environmental significance within ACEP.
- **Wildlife** resource concerns are supported through the Working Lands for Wildlife effort, through ACEP-WRE, and through increased funding levels through EQIP.

Farm Bill programs are administered to provide for National, State, and Local priorities. All program applications are accepted, evaluated, and administered in a fair, transparent, and consistent process. Screening and ranking criteria in the form of questions are used to establish priority and application scores. Ranking criteria is used to determine applications which provide for the greatest environmental benefit.

National Wildlife Priorities

To promote conservation of at-risk species habitat including development and improvement of wildlife habitat the following national ranking questions are currently utilized:

- Implementing practices benefitting threatened and endangered, at-risk, candidate, or species of concern?
- Implementing practices that retain wildlife and plant habitat on land exiting the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) or other set-aside program?
- Implementing practices benefitting honey bee populations or other pollinators?
- Implementing land-based practices that improve habitat for aquatic wildlife?

National Wildlife Priorities

NRCS uses targeted landscape-level initiatives to accelerate conservation work where it can net the biggest impacts. The Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has expanded to target conservation on numerous at-risk and their habitat. WLFW now focuses on 24 wildlife initiatives throughout the nation. Dedicated Farm Bill funding for these initiatives primarily comes from the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP).

WLFW in New Mexico:

- Southwestern Willow Flycatcher
- Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative
- Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout

State Wildlife Priorities

The New Mexico State Conservationist has established state priority natural resource concerns using recommendations of the State Technical Committee and tribal Conservation advisory councils.

Inadequate habitat for Fish and Wildlife has consistently been a state level priority. This Plan identifies the New Mexico NRCS state wildlife priorities as to:

- Protect, restore or enhance Key Rare or Declining Habitats.
- Protect, restore or enhance habitat for at-risk species: Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN), pollinating insects, and/or common game species.

This Plan expands the strategy outlined in the 2014-2017 NRCS plan to not only include at risk species but also to include pollinators and common species habitats of a management concern to landowners. This Plan utilizes the 2017 NMDGF's SWP to identify priority habitats.

NM NRCS Wildlife Initiative (state level EQIP):

The purpose of the Wildlife Initiative EQIP Fund Pool is provide financial and technical assistance to agricultural operators who want to create, improve or enhance fish or wildlife habitat for species of greatest conservation need, pollinator, or common species on farms, ranches and non-industrial forestlands.

The SWAP provides NRCS one component in the overall strategy to assist in delivery of this plan. This Plan expands this strategy to include Pollinators and Common species. At-risk or common species and their habitats are identified through the planning process to determine the beneficial outcomes of a proposed conservation plan alternative. Priority habitats identified from the SWAP have been adopted in the delivery of this strategy. Appendix A provides a summary of the priority habitat categories with reference to associated SGCN.

A SGCN list for each county can be downloaded by a query within the NMDGF database system, Biota Information System of New Mexico (BISON-M; www.bison-m.org). Within the SWAP (2016), SGCN are further identified as declining, vulnerable, endemic, disjunct, or keystone species.

Appendix B: NM State Wildlife Initiative fund pool description

Appendix C: NM State Wildlife Initiative ranking questions

Note: Funding pool description and ranking questions are subject to annual change dependent on the program need.

Local Wildlife Priorities (Local Work Groups)

Fish and wildlife priorities are identified in the “conservation needs assessment” completed through the annual Local Work Group Meetings. Meetings generally occur on a county-level from August to October of each year. The NRCS programs staff and the NRCS state biologist will review the conservation needs assessments annually and incorporate any identified wildlife-related items into the local ranking questions.

Common species at the local level may include those fish and wildlife species and their habitat that are a local concern and by which specific conservation program recommendations are provided by the local work group. The recommendations may provide for local funding within a conservation implementation strategy (EQIP-local proposal) focused on measurable outcomes.

Members of the LWG may prioritize management of small or big game wildlife as Common species to focus local conservation efforts. Wildlife habitat conservation opportunities may also present themselves because of natural resources being present on lands (i.e. riparian areas) which may focus on a holistic approach that benefits many wildlife species.

Historically approximately one half of the local work groups have identified fish or wildlife as a concern within their annual workgroup proposals (webpage link to [LWG Proposals](#)) which identifies priority resource concerns. Examples of identified fish and wildlife resource concerns include:

- Population Imbalance, Inadequate Food/Water, T&E Species, Wetlands
- Rangeland - Inadequate Food/Water and Shelter
- Playa Restoration/Wildlife Habitat
- Inadequate Habitat and T&E Plant Species

Often wildlife has perceived and real detrimental effects to agricultural producers. Crop and livestock depredation are of economic concern, although the NRCS does not provide technical nor financial assistance to address these concerns. USDA-Animal Plant Health Inspective Services-Wildlife Service and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish employ specialists to provide the public with programs to address these concerns.

Other Farm Bill Conservation Programs

Conservation Programs are utilized to promote conservation of at-risk species habitat. The primary financially assisted program utilized is EQIP. Various initiatives such as WLFW or RCPP have utilized EQIP as the funding source program.

- NRCS provides technical assistance to the Farm Service Agency in the delivery of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Lands enrolled in CRP continue to support wildlife habitat.
- The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) strives to provide incentive to landowners willing to target specific management alternatives for wildlife benefit.
- The Agricultural Land Easement program (ALE) provides opportunities to landowners who decide preserving working agricultural lands or wetlands is a legacy they wish to leave for their children and the wildlife which depend on these open spaces.

Regardless of program, a conservation planning procedure to inventory habitat and associated at-risk species is provided by the NMDGF State Wildlife Action Plan. The plan provides the most current statewide strategy used and adopted by practitioners in wildlife conservation.

Conservation Planning

Conservation planners utilizing NRCS programs must have knowledge of the NMDGF State Wildlife Action Plan as it provides a foundation to wildlife conservation efforts employed by NRCS.

Wildlife habitat maps are developed for planned land units. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) have become a critical tool to assess landscapes for multiple purposes. For wildlife conservation one purpose is to identify habitat types across planned management units. Habitat categories provided in the SWAP and used by NRCS in planning processes are further classified utilizing GIS data sets; US National Vegetation Classification System (USNVC) and Southwest Regional Gap Analysis (SWReGAP). Species of greatest conservation need are correlated with the GIS habitat inventory of planned land units.

Wildlife habitat assessments are conducted in the field and may be land use or species-specific assessments. Field inventories are essential to determine actual benchmark habitat conditions, threats, or otherwise limiting habitat factors influencing wildlife species.

Proposed conservation practices shall address the identified limiting habitat factors. Core conservation management practices are planned with facilitating practices to achieve the desired wildlife conservation goals and objectives of the landowner. A general list of these conservation practices is provided in *Appendix D*.

Implementation requirements for conservation practices are developed based on the practice standards and specifications ([Conservation Practices | NRCS](#)). Consideration is given to site conditions, design alternatives, and knowledge and ability of landowners to implement the practices. There are apparent needs associated with addressing special environmental concerns. Many of the SGCN and their habitats are protected resources.

PARTNERSHIPS

Partners are essential to the success of NRCS conservation programs and in the conservation of our nation's biodiversity. NRCS strives to build and maintain partnerships at all levels; from international agreements to national/regional partnership initiatives. However, special emphasis is placed upon local partnership with the acknowledgement that effective conservation cannot be achieved unless the people who live and rely on those lands are an integral part of the conservation process.

New Mexico's wildlife partners represent a wide array of special interests which help to bring diversity and new ideas to our program. Provided below are partnerships that have essential roles in the implementation of the NRCS conservation programs.

Conservation Districts

Conservation Districts and Tribal Conservation District responsibilities may include: assisting with program outreach activities, accepting applications to forward to NRCS, providing technical assistance, administrative support for contracts, and working with NRCS on issues. (M_440_517_517.5)

Tribal Conservation Advisory Council

Their role is to provide recommendations concerning the implementation of the program and to establish program direction on applicable tribal land. (M_440_517_517.7)

Local Working Groups

Are a subset of the State Technical Committee, their role is to facilitate locally led conservation and to provide advice to NRCS on implementation of conservation programs. (M_440_517_517.8)

State Technical Committee

Their role is to provide recommendations concerning the implementation of the program and to establish program direction within the State. Specifically, in regard to the Wildlife State Plan, the state priorities, and the ranking criteria. (M_440_517_517.6)

A wildlife subcommittee has formed to specifically provide wildlife-related recommendations. Refer to *Appendix E* for a listing of committee members.

Other Agencies and Tribes

Other Federal, State, local agencies, and Tribes responsibilities may include:

- serves as a member of the State Technical Committee, local working group, or both,
- provide input and recommendations to NRCS for developing program guidelines,
- assist with outreach activities, and
- providing technical assistance

Performance Measurement and Accountability

Performance Measurement. NRCS uses the Performance Results System (PRS) to report 'performance measures' which show how planned and applied conservation activities link to wildlife priorities. This reporting system is available to the public online at: [USDA-NRCS PRS - Menu](#).

Accountability. The NRCS employs periodic national program reviews, annual state program reviews, and annual conservation planning quality assurance reviews to ensure programs and conservation technical assistance are achieving their intended purpose.

Additional Reporting. When requested, specific program and implementation information will be collected at the field level and submitted to the state office. These special requests are often the result of congressional reviews, Endangered Species Act reporting requirements, FOIA requests, or national program reviews. Field level requests will only be made when the information cannot be obtained by querying PRS or other data sources.

Approval

This plan was developed with recommendations provided by the New Mexico State Technical Committee.

Date _____

State Conservationist for New Mexico

Natural Resources Conservation Service

END

Appendix A - Summary of Habitat Categories and associated SGCN

Appendix B - NM State Wildlife Initiative fund pool description

Appendix C - NM State Wildlife Initiative ranking questions

Appendix D - List of Conservation Practices

Appendix E - State Technical Committee members

Literature Referenced

New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. 2016. State Wildlife Action Plan for New Mexico.

New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA.

Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy For New Mexico. February 2006

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