



CENTER FOR LARGE LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION

**The Obama Administration's Progress on Federal Policies for  
Wildlife Corridor and Ecological Connectivity Conservation  
January 2009 through December 2012**

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**THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S  
PROGRESS ON WILDLIFE CORRIDOR AND ECOLOGICAL CONNECTIVITY POLICY  
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**Introduction**

This briefing summarizes recent policies that the Obama administration has completed to increase attention to conserving ecological connectivity in his first term in office. It includes policy initiatives, memoranda, orders, plans, strategies and other administrative avenues of promoting the conservation of both structural and functional connectivity. The focus of this summary is on administrative policy, it does not cover Administrative action taken on behalf of federal legislation, such as on U.S. House Resolution 2454, which included Section 481, the National Wildlife Habitat and Corridors Information Program or Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (MAP-21), the recent transportation Act signed by President Obama in July 2012. MAP-21 had a host of new provisions for wildlife, including improving habitat connectivity and fish passage.

Some of the new administrative policies focus on wildlife movement and migration, others on large landscapes and yet others on private lands. Many of these efforts are wrapped within the context of larger programs such as adaptation strategies for climate change, others are in reaction to fragmentation brought on by human development such as oil and gas development, while others seek to create private land incentives or inform land use planning. Some of the policies, particularly by the federal agencies, were finalized by the Obama Administration even though they were initiated under the George W. Bush Administration. For example, the U.S. Forest Service's "National Roadmap to Responding to Climate Change" was issued in July 2010 which was based on an earlier report in 2008. Overall, there are eleven connectivity policy efforts described in this report, from 2009 through 2012. Some policies are general in nature, while others have a higher degree of specificity.

## **1. Responding to the Western Governors' Association and its Wildlife Corridors and Crucial Habitats Initiative.**

The Western Governors' Association (WGA) passed policy resolutions, Conserving Wildlife Corridors and Crucial Wildlife Habitat in the West, both in 2007 (Policy Resolution 07-01) and then to renew the Initiative in 2010 (Policy Resolution 10-10). The governors sought to further the identification and protection of wildlife corridors and crucial habitats in the 18 western states (Hawaii elected not to participate).

The Western Governors' Association signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) on June 15, 2009 to improve "*coordination among federal agencies and states in identification and uniform mapping of wildlife corridors and crucial habitat*". This was signed under the Bush Administration, however, since Obama assumed the presidency the following agreements have been worked out between the federal government to help the governors with implementing their wildlife corridor initiative:

On 20 June 2011 a State-Federal Implementation Group (SFIG) Agreement, tiered to the MOU, was signed to detail how the federal land management agencies could make extensive use of information about crucial wildlife habitats and important wildlife corridors that is expected to become available from state-level analyses and mapping.

On 13 December 2011 the Director of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) issued an Instructional Memorandum to all BLM field officials providing guidance to his employees to use state- and regional-level data and maps identifying wildlife corridors and crucial habitat that is/was being developed by member states of the Western Governors' Association.

## **2. Department of Interior, Secretarial Order 3289. Addressing the Impacts of Climate Change on America's Water, Land, and Other Natural and Cultural Resources. Signed by Secretary Salazar on 14 September 2009 (Amendment 1 signed on 22 February 2010).**

Purpose Section:

- Shifting wildlife and habitat populations may require investment in new wildlife corridors
- Department must conserve and manage fish and wildlife including 800+ species of migratory birds
- This SO also gave us Landscape Conservation Cooperatives for coordinated landscape level management responses for "...wildlife migration and related needs for new wildlife corridors..."

### **3. Presidential Memo: A 21st Century Strategy for America's Great Outdoors. Signed by President Obama on 16 April 2010.**

The America's Great Outdoors Initiative was launched via a Presidential Memorandum and included in the goals portion of the initiative was to “[b]uild upon State, local, private, and tribal priorities for the conservation of land, water, wildlife, historic, and cultural resources, *creating corridors and connectivity across these outdoor spaces...*”

The memo by President Obama called for a series of listening sessions around the country, a report which included an action plan and annual reports for the Initiative in 2011 and 2012.

### **4. US Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Memorandum on Reducing Wildlife Vehicle Collisions, signed on 1 June 2010.**

The FHWA's Associate Administrator of the Office of Safety and Planning and Associate Administrator for Environment and Realty sent a memo to Directors of Field Services, Division Engineers and Division Administrators regarding their new Wildlife Vehicle Collision (WVC) Reduction Training Course. In the memo the Associate Administrators encourage their agency leaders to incorporate wildlife movement data and, thereby, accommodate WVC mitigation strategies and wildlife connectivity needs into all environmental review processes. They pointed out that information is available and that many states have worked with non-governmental organizations to develop regional and local wildlife corridors and connectivity priorities.

### **5. USDA-Forest Service, “National Roadmap to Responding to Climate Change”, issued in July 2010.**

This was based on the Forest Service's “Strategic Framework for Responding to Climate Change” that was completed in October 2008.

In the National Roadmap it was recommended in the section for “immediate initiatives”:

**Connect habitats** to improve adaptive capacity.

- Collaborate with partners to develop land management plans that establish priority locations for maintaining and restoring habitat connectivity to mitigate effects of climate change.
- Seek partnerships with private landowners to provide migration corridors across private lands.
- Remove or modify physical impediments to the movement of species most likely to be affected by climate change.
- Manage forest and grassland ecosystems to decrease fragmentation.
- Continue to develop and restore important corridors for fish and wildlife.

## **6. National Park Service, “Climate Change Response Strategy”, September 2010.**

Under the Park Service’s Strategic Plan for climate change, in the Adaptation Section, it was stated:

### **Goal 6**

Implement adaptation strategies that promote ecosystem resilience and enhance restoration, conservation, and preservation of park resources.

**Objective 6.3:** Collaborate to develop cross-jurisdictional conservation plans to protect and restore connectivity and other landscape-scale components of resilience.

Protecting and restoring corridors (passageways that connect habitat patches) and connectivity across landscapes will require strong collaboration with partners and programs to share knowledge, develop repositories of genetic resources, and, where appropriate, develop cross-jurisdictional conservation.

## **7. US Fish and Wildlife Service, “Rising to the Urgent Challenge: Strategic Plan for Responding to Accelerating Climate Change,” issued in September 2010.**

Under the USFWS strategic plan is the following goal and objective:

**Goal 3:** We will plan and deliver landscape conservation actions that support climate change adaptations by fish and wildlife of ecological and societal significance.

**Objective 3.2:** Promote Habitat Connectivity and Integrity

Climate change is contributing to the loss, degradation, and fragmentation of current habitats and will likely create novel habitats as species redistribute themselves across the landscape. In addition, climate change is interacting with non-climate stressors — such as land-use change, wildfire, urban and suburban development, and agriculture — to fragment habitats at ever-increasing rates. Protecting and restoring contiguous blocks of unfragmented habitat; and using linkages and corridors to enhance connectivity between habitat blocks (in particular, protected areas such as National Wildlife Refuges) will likely facilitate the movement of fish and wildlife species responding to climate change. Novel conservation measures that address the dynamic nature of climate change effects on habitat may also be needed, among them, long-term climate refugia; protected habitat areas with dynamic boundaries; or other conservation entities, such as land facets (p. 14).

Through conservation designs developed by LCCs [Landscape Conservation Cooperatives], we will work with partners to identify needed habitat protection and landscape scale habitat linkages and corridors. By joining the habitat protection and management capacities of the Service (e.g., National Wildlife Refuge System, Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, Endangered Species Program, National Fish Habitat Plan, National Fish Passage Program, Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, and North

American Wetlands Conservation Act) with those of our partners, we will help build this connectivity within and between landscapes.

We must also strive to maintain ecosystem integrity and resilience by developing new and innovative ways of protecting and restoring key ecological processes to sustain fish and wildlife. Processes such as pollination, seed dispersal, nutrient cycling, natural disturbance cycles, predator-prey relations, and others must be part of the natural landscapes we seek to maintain or restore. These processes are likely to function more optimally in landscapes composed of large habitat blocks connected by well-placed corridors.

#### **8. Secretarial Order (SO) 3308 regarding National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS) Management. November 2010.**

Secretary of the Interior, Ken Salazar, signed the Secretarial Order on 15 November 2010 to give new direction to the Bureau of Land Management regarding the NLCS. Its focus was on wilderness management and it established a new directorate, called the National Landscape Conservation System and Community Partnerships that replaced the Office of the National Landscape Conservation System and Community Partnerships.

Under the policy section (4) of the SO, it was stated:

b. The NLCS components shall be managed as an integral part of the larger landscape, in collaboration with the neighboring land owners and surrounding communities, to maintain biodiversity, and promote ecological connectivity and resilience in the face of climate change.

#### **9. USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Final Rule for the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), November 2010.**

WHIP had been reauthorized in the 2008 Farm Bill. The NRCS issued its final rule on the new regulations for the WHIP under 7 CFR 636 on 23 November 2011. This included an addition for wildlife corridors in the national priorities list in 7 CFR, Section 635.5:

(a) The following national priorities will be used in WHIP implementation:

- (1) Promote the restoration of declining or important native fish and wildlife habitats;
- (2) Protect, restore, develop, or enhance fish and wildlife habitat to benefit at-risk species;
- (3) Reduce the impacts of invasive species on fish and wildlife habitats;

- (4) Protect, restore, develop, or enhance declining or important aquatic wildlife species' habitats; and
- (5) Protect, restore, develop, or enhance important migration and other movement corridors for wildlife.

(b) NRCS, with advice of other Federal agencies, will undertake periodic reviews of the national priorities and the effects of program delivery at the State, tribal, and local levels to adapt the program to address emerging resource issues. NRCS will:

- (1) Use the national priorities to guide the allocation of WHIP funds to the State offices;
- (2) Use the national priorities in conjunction with State, tribal, and local priorities to assist with prioritization and selection of WHIP applications; and
- (3) Periodically review and update the national priorities utilizing input from the public, Indian tribes, and affected stakeholders to ensure that the program continues to address priority resource concerns.

#### **10. National Fish, Wildlife and Plants National Climate Adaptation Strategy (Draft). January, 2012.**

Although still in draft status, the *Strategy* is being developed by federal, state, and tribal partners with input from stakeholders to develop a common approach to respond to the challenges of climate change. The first goal in the *Strategy* describes the importance of providing linkages and corridors to facilitate connectivity while working to monitor and manage the movement of invasive species, pests, and pathogens. It also seeks to “conserve, restore, and as appropriate and practicable, establish new ecological connections among conservation areas to facilitate fish, wildlife, and plant migration, range shifts, and other transitions caused by climate change.” There are many other references to the importance of physical and functional connectivity throughout the document.

#### **11. USDA, Forest Service. Finalization of new the federal regulations for Forest Planning, under a Final Rule, March 2012.**

The US Forest Service published its final rule for how national forest and grasslands will conduct the revisions of their land resource management plans. For the first time since the National Forest Management Act was passed in 1976, regulations now specifically state that connectivity must be incorporated into plans. The new rule includes a definition of connectivity and states, “the plan must include plan components, including standards or guidelines, to maintain or restore the ecological integrity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and watersheds in the plan area, including plan components to maintain or restore structure, function, composition, and connectivity ...” There are several other sections of the rule that also address terrestrial and aquatic connectivity.