

Benton County HCP Prairie Conservation Strategy Technical Advisory Committee Work Session Minutes April 23, 2009



Technical Advisory Workshop on developing the Prairie Conservation Strategy biological goals

The following is a summary of the questions, comments and discussion relating to the meeting presentation, agenda and materials. Dave Vesely and Adam Novick provided separate comments that appear at the end of the document.

Meeting Presentation

Tom Kaye (IAE) presented the technical committee members and members of the public (identified in Table 1) with a summary of how the Prairie Conservation Strategy (PCS) fits into the Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP): it will be an appendix to the HCP and also a stand alone document available for public download on Benton County's website.

Rachel Schwindt (IAE) outlined the meeting goals and the committee discussed aspects of these goals throughout the meeting. The meeting agenda was emailed to the group and is available on the Benton County webpage (<http://www.co.benton.or.us/parks/hcp/tac.php>).

Meeting goals

1. *Review Prairie Conservation Strategy species list*
2. *Review PCS goals and objectives*
3. *Review umbrella species concept*
4. *Review habitat requirements of species*
5. *Determine minimum patch size, patch quality, connectivity needs for each species on list*
6. *Determine which species can serve as umbrella species*

Meeting goal 1: Species list

Discussion: There was a question on how the species were selected for inclusion on the list. Rachel Schwindt explained that species were recommended by the Stakeholder Advisory Committee and that then IAE staff reviewed the Oregon Conservation Strategy document to determine if they occurred in prairie habitat during part of lifecycle. Some species included on the list lack historical records from Benton County. The group

discussed if lack of historical record was relevant if a species range included Benton County. Amy Schoener added that species ranges may shift with climate change. The group recommended to maintain options for including additional species if found in the future. Donna Schmidt recommended adding Dusky Canada goose to the list and Ed Alverson recommended *Haplopappus racemosus*.

Meeting goal 2: Review PCS goals and objectives

Discussion: The committee was asked to discuss the draft goal and objective document, especially Goal 1: “Achieve viable populations of rare or declining prairie dependent species” to address habitat more directly per the Stakeholder committee’s recommendation. The group was asked to rephrase the strategy goal. Tom Kaye suggested “Create diversity of habitat to achieve...”. Mark Wilson asked if we wanted the goal to be measurable because diversity of habitat is difficult to measure. Karen Fleck Harding suggested changing “create” to another less binding objective. The group outlined three objectives of the strategy: 1) provide habitats for a range of species, 2) identify blocks of habitat, and 3) determine number of patches to achieve conservation goals. Ed Alverson noted that the last two were already addressed in the objective tasks. There was considerable discussion on the two approaches to conservation: conserving habitat for habitat’s sake (banking for the future) or having a species specific goal. The group recommended that the document be framed as a habitat approach looking at what the habitat is providing biologically. It was noted that private landowners would be more comfortable with a habitat approach due to some landowner’s fear of regulations stemming from listed species occurring on their lands. Adam Novick said that the strategy could be self defeating if institutional barriers are not addressed. He would like to see social scientists involved in the process because humans are part of the landscape and are managers of the land. It was recommended to add a section on regulatory barriers to private landowner conservation. Rachel Schwindt noted that this could be included under Goal 2 in the strategy.

Meeting goal 3: Review umbrella species concept.

Discussion: Tom Kaye defined the term per a request: “If supply habitat for a species this will provide habitat for multiple additional species”. Ed Alverson noted that if a species is found in multiple habitats then it is not the most appropriate species for umbrella species. Tom noted that this concept can be a tool to help determine reasonable objectives for a site and allows prioritization of sites. There was discussion about the nature of the strategy document as a guiding document or prescriptive. There was a recommendation to keep the information general instead of detailed. Several participants recommended providing a list of each species and its habitat requirements. Tom noted that for scaling and connectivity it is useful to identify species that serve as focal species. It was recommended to have hierarchical umbrellas so that there are multiple habitat benefits. Steve Northway noted that USFWS does not include historical distribution and asked that the PCS utilize historical information on species and habitat when planning restoration activities. It was recommended to not use the

umbrella species terminology and instead use focal species concept so that multiple habitat attributes would be identified.

Instead of covering meeting goals 4-6, the group worked on identifying the needs that the Strategy addressed. Several needs were identified:

1. Needs of the species
2. Identifying areas where species occurred in recent history as part of restoration strategy
3. Help determine site potential
4. Identify potential partnerships

Adam Novick asked that the strategy identify mechanisms to address regulatory barriers to conservation, especially since the Oregon Conservation Strategy Action 6.2 lists that as an action item for resolving conflicting regulations that hinder conservation and restoration. This led to a discussion of regulatory barriers and how the strategy could address this:

1. identify actual barriers
2. identify perceived barriers
3. provide solutions
4. find opportunities for private land owners

The final discussion centered on if the strategy document would be a conceptual framework or toolbox. A group member asked that it be both. It was also requested that the document address barriers and provide tools.

Table 1. Workshop attendees.

Deborah	Clark	OSU Botany
Ed	Alverson	The Nature Conservancy
Tom	Kaye	Institute for Applied Ecology
Dick	Brainerd	Carex working group
Jeff	Baker	Public participant/Greenbelt Land Trust
Karen	Fleck Harding	Public participant/Marys River Watershed Council
Al	Kitzman	Benton Co. Natural Areas and Parks
Adam	Novick	Public participant
Donna	Schmitz	Benton SWCD
Laura	Starha	Benton County
Steve	Northway	Public participant
Rachel	Schwindt	Institute for Applied Ecology
Amy	Schoener	Public participant
Jeff	Powers	Benton Co. Natural Areas and Parks
Bennett	Hall	Public/Gazette Times
Andy	Cripe	Public/Gazette Times
Mark	Wilson	OSU Botany

Comments provided by Dave Vesely prior to meeting.

Since I won't be able to attend the meeting, I thought I'd just email you a few comments from my brief review of the goals/objectives statement and the species list. First of all, I'm happy to see lazuli bunting, short-eared owl, and western kingbird on the species list. These birds often are overlooked by WV conservationists as they are planning projects and I believe they are in need of greater attention. I do question having the yellow-legged frog on the list. Do you have information that it occurs in the county?

The following comments mostly note some weakness I commonly find in other habitat management plans I have reviewed in the last 20 years. I haven't read any of the conservation strategies you are planning for the HCP...but these are some pitfalls I hope you will avoid...

Objective 1

It is essential to recognize that habitat is a species-specific concept. In my experience, restoration planners often fail to do adequate research to understand the fine-scale habitat elements to which wildlife respond. The habitat quality metrics for Fenders blue butterfly will be very different from that of vesper sparrow, although both species are associated with the upland prairies and savanna habitat types.

It's rare to find a prairie restoration plan that has analyzed the space/territory requirements of the focal species and projected the number of breeding individuals or pairs that the site could accommodate...assuming the planners successfully created and maintain suitable habitat for the species in the first place. Such a planning exercise is essential to developing any realistic estimate of the breeding habitat capacity of the management area.

Because of the rarity and site fidelity of most of the wildlife species on your list, it is important that the selection of habitat restoration areas consider the proximity of the site to source wildlife populations. As I'm sure you are aware, most site selection for conservation projects is primarily driven by the location of a willing landowner, not the locations of occupied sites by focal wildlife species. Not surprisingly, few restored habitats become occupied by the rare wildlife they were designed to benefit.

Who's going to be monitoring abundance of focal wildlife species, measuring their response to management practices, and assessing population trends? This is a particularly difficult analysis problem on complex landscapes, especially when management areas are relatively small and can only support a few dozen individuals of the focal species. The sampling design and analysis must be able to isolate the effects of site management on the species from the effects of the surrounding landscape (which tends to be very dynamic in the Willamette Valley).

Dan Rosenberg and I are working on literature synthesis/problem analysis for wildlife of Willamette Valley prairies/savannas that includes species accounts for most of the vertebrates on your species list. Our report will be available this spring and may be useful for your work. We also probably have the best database of turtle sightings in the state.

Comments provided by Adam Novick for inclusion in the minutes:

Thank you for IAE's interest in saving these species and for inviting public comment.

Given that IAE proposes the Prairie Conservation Strategy as an implementation of Oregon's official conservation strategy, I would like to please suggest that the Prairie Conservation Strategy include a placeholder for efforts to identify how existing regulatory policies or policy frameworks might better encourage voluntary cooperation by landowners to maintain these species on private land.

I suggest this for two reasons. First, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and others have stated that landowner cooperation is essential to the survival of these species, yet the proposed Habitat Conservation Plan and related draft USFWS policies all entrench regulatory disincentives that inadvertently make such cooperation self-defeating.

Second, I find the state conservation strategy gives the Prairie Conservation Strategy some duty to include such work. Under "Institutional Barriers to Voluntary Conservation" (Issue 6, p. 10), the state strategy in part recognizes that "In some cases, institutional barriers prevent landowners from implementing projects that will benefit fish and wildlife", and that "These barriers include ... rules originally passed for one purpose that block another one". To address the issue, the state strategy expressly calls for action to "Resolve conflicting regulations that hinder conservation and restoration of Strategy Habitats" (Action 6.2, p. 10). In contrast, at the most recent public meeting of Benton County's HCP Stakeholder Advisory Committee (on 2 Apr 2009), IAE described the Prairie Conservation Strategy as excluding any discussion of existing regulatory policies.

To further illustrate the need to examine existing regulatory policies, I note that at that same meeting (of 2 Apr), a Stakeholder Advisory Committee member commented "I think there's been a lot of damage done" (apparently referring to letters informing private landowners of their potential liability under the US Endangered Species Act if they have Fender's blue butterflies or suitable nearby habitat). Speaking next, USFWS said, "I kind of agree", and expressed intentions of informing landowners what USFWS can do for them. Yet it's unclear to me what USFWS perceives it can do to address this disincentive. From public comment to date, USFWS apparently perceives it has no mechanism to prevent harm to species from mitigation requirements or other exactions (including requirements to participate in Safe Harbor Agreements). Also, aside from this official's comment, USFWS apparently perceives it has no duty to consider or address such harm.

For examples of potential policy efficiencies to improve landowner cooperation under existing legislation, please see my public comment included in Benton County's recent (2 Apr 2009) posting of comments by others.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment.