Northeast Regional Conservation
Framework Workshop (Albany II)

Executive Summary

The Northeast Regional Conservation Framework Workshop ("Albany II") was held in Albany, New York on June 14-16, 2011 with eighty-six (86) participants, representing a cross-section of 13 state agencies, six federal agencies and 12 nongovernmental organizations or universities. The workshop was convened and sponsored jointly by the Northeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (NEAFWA) and the Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs) in the Northeast Region. The specific objectives of the workshop were to:

- Review, synthesize, evaluate, and present Regional Conservation Needs (RCN) and initial LCC projects completed or underway;
- Increase understanding and engagement by state and other conservation partners in RCN and LCC projects and goals in the Northeast;
- Review progress made toward original goals for the RCN program;
- Discuss challenges, needs, and opportunities for the RCN program and LCCs in the Northeast;
- Explore and discuss opportunities for collaborations between RCNs and LCCs in the Northeast to address common needs; and
- Develop initial consensus on a common conservation framework, vision, and highest priorities going forward.

Elements of a proposed regional conservation framework, presented at the beginning of the workshop, formed the foundation of the discussions. The framework was based on RCN priority topic areas and the elements of Strategic Habitat Conservation, and included the following components:

Priorities
Biological Assessment
Goal-Setting
Conservation Design
Science Translation Tools
Conservation Adoption
Conservation Delivery
Monitoring, Evaluation and Research
Information Management

There was consensus among participants on the need for a framework and general agreement on the framework components for organizing and prioritizing needs and projects. Discussion on the framework focused on the need to address habitat and ecosystem approaches; to specify the role of public engagement in partnering with agencies to determine goals and deliver conservation; and additional tasks that need to be incorporated into the framework.

Workshop sessions corresponding to framework elements, or groupings thereof, included information describing each framework element along with a synthesis of RCN, LCC, Competitive State Wildlife Grant and other projects conducted from 2007 to 2010 that corresponded to that element, and a summary of relevant pre-workshop assessment results. Small breakout group and full group discussions and voting were used to identify and rank priority additional needs under each element or element group. A total of 94 conservation needs were identified through five sessions including: 20 for Habitat Mapping, 17 for Biological Assessment and Goal-Setting, 18 for Conservation Design to Delivery, 19 for Monitoring and Research and 20 for Information Management. The 32 highest ranked projects across all sessions were then grouped and re-voted to determine the highest overall near-term priorities. The highest-ranked projects are listed below, organized by framework element.

Communications and Outreach: *(note: this category does not appear in the Framework diagram but supports multiple elements)*
- Communications, tool kit, users guide
- Deliver the results (synthesis) of the projects (products) in a meaningful way to on-the-ground managers at state/local levels and provide commitment of resources to accomplish (people and funds). Start with RCN Conservation Status Report.
- Take existing RCN products and fund a communication specialist to repackage and deliver information to pre-defined user groups (i.e., public, resource managers, and stakeholders) with associated effectiveness measures.
- An information delivery mechanism should be a requirement of every future RCN product to deliver information to pre-defined user groups (i.e., public, resource managers, stakeholders) with associated effectiveness measures.
- Immediate need for reporting on success of SWG grant-funded work. (PA example - 10 fish species taken off state list) Need to package our project information as success stories that general public/legislators can read and understand.
- Specific performance criteria and reporting must be a required part of all RCN projects -- best if they are standardized.
- Easy access to information for policy makers in Congress - outreach and advocacy for that audience, e.g. Value of basic monitoring data is not always known until there is a problem - translation of value of basic science for lay audience.

Habitat Mapping: *(note: Mapping also does not appear in the Framework diagram but supports multiple elements)*

- Finish mapping all systems (Canada, lakes)
- Usable product (expectations, limits)
- Mapping, accuracy and validation
- Layers (land use, threats, refugia, invasive species)

Biological Assessment:

- In the new SWAPs recommend adopting a consistent format/template which will allow for a region wide roll up (including population targets) for establishing goals, perhaps a consistent summary or appendix.
- Create distribution maps for regional responsibility/high concern species - overlay on NE habitat maps.
- Development of habitat focus areas and corridors.
- Develop a process to develop regional representative species goals (numbers and distribution) to allow development of landscape-scale habitat design and conservation.
- In the new SWAPs recommend adopting a consistent format/template which will allow for a region wide roll up (including population targets) for establishing goals, perhaps a consistent summary or appendix.

Conservation Design and Delivery

- Working with implementers/users, translate the information into usable tools in order to convince them that it's useful to them and what they are doing (cottontail as a model.) Always have specific implementation examples using the results of these projects for both buy-in and delivery. Develop a marketing, training, and capacity building strategy targeted to specific needs.
- Provide information on landscapes of regional significance to conservation partners, big (e.g. NRCS) and small (e.g. local land trusts) to implement specific conservation actions.
- Identification of habitat focus areas with a step up step down (Regional to local) process to implement on the ground habitat conservation, restoration, and management.
- Overlay and integrate existing datasets to delineate landscapes of regional significance (focal areas and connectivity).
- Develop conservation designs for multiple representative species, with consideration that actions will happen by private landowners and with consideration of a changing climate and other threats and translated into a format for those who do conservation on the ground can understand and implement.
- Provide cookbook or catalog of on-the-ground implementation details that translate conservation design results into practical actions or projects. The regional-scale focal areas are a logical starting point for this.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Research
- Long term monitoring and performance evaluation to feed into the conservation framework. Fund the implementation of the NE Regional Monitoring and Performance Reporting Framework.
- Identify and leverage existing federal monitoring programs and develop state/tribal/NGO surveys to complement the federal surveys to provide regional status.
- Establish Uniform Monitoring Practices that can be applied across large geographic areas for multi-jurisdictional resources (e.g., habitats for species that occur across geopolitical boundaries). These need to be relevant and applicable to inform current management decision-making. Need a consistent framework for states to implement monitoring so that we can roll up data.
- Ensure accurate monitoring of representative species to support biological assessment and conservation design.

Information Management
- Support and engage in the forthcoming regional information management needs assessment that was identified as a top priority LCC science need. Engage all the conservation community in this process, with the goal of making better decisions.
- Develop a way for states, LCCs and other partners to immediately access the habitat mapping and geospatial condition analysis products coming out of the RCN process.
- Support development of SWAP database to promote consistency in next generation of SWAPs, allow easy State rollup, guide revisions and improve accessibility.
- Regional habitat management database that includes spatial and tabular data on habitats being managed on both public and private lands, type of management, target species; consider pilot on one type of habitat.
- Institutionalize long term datasets on a Regional cooperative basis (security, access, data sharing, maintenance, transferable data technology).
- Create data sharing agreements between all members of NE conservation community - state, federal, NGO - and get their data.

Several overarching themes emerged from these priorities and came up repeatedly during discussions at the workshop included those summarized below.

Immediate focus on communications, dissemination and adoption: There was consensus on an immediate need to better communicate regional projects and disseminate the results in a way that is meaningful and targeted to 1) on-the-ground managers at state/local levels, and 2) the broad conservation community, and 3) the general public and legislators. The highest immediate need was reporting on the success of SWG grant-funded work to legislators.   Person-to-person transmission of information via dedicated technical assistance staff was identified as the

preferred mode for managers, but tool kits, user guides, and other complementary media were also identified.

Develop an effective information management system: A set of immediate needs were identified related to the development of an information management system that will provide easy access for states, LCCs and other partners to conservation information and tools produced by or compiled in support of regional projects. This enhanced access needs to include training and sustained technical assistance on decision support tools. An important first step is to support and engage in the forthcoming regional information needs assessment that was identified as a top priority LCC science need, and engage the broad conservation community in this process, with the goal of providing information to guide decision-making. Several specific information needs were identified including enhanced access to large spatial datasets (maps); a State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) database to promote consistency in the next generation of SWAPs, allow easy State rollup, guide revisions and improve accessibility; and implementation of the Northeast Regional Monitoring and Performance Reporting Framework.

Expedite delivery of the right actions in the right places: There was a set of immediate needs identified related to finishing and validating mapping of species and habitats and identifying conservation focus areas based on a variety of approaches. A synthesis of existing focus areas was identified as an important first step. In addition, integration of ongoing approaches to developing landscape designs and delineating focus areas including species-habitat modeling approaches using representative species and the Northeast regional habitat maps, geospatial condition analysis of habitats, and connectivity were identified as important. An identified priority need was for tools to be translated into media and formats that are designed to expedite the delivery of specific conservation applications and for specific implementation examples using the results of regional projects for both buy-in and delivery. In order to ensure delivery of the right actions in the right places, marketing, training, and capacity building strategies are needed.

Immediate follow-ups to the workshop include the use of the results by the NEAFWA Fish and Wildlife Diversity Technical Committee to prioritize needs for FY 2012 RCN funding opportunity and use of the results by the North Atlantic LCC to develop a science strategic plan and to select projects for funding. Workshop attendees and other partners will be invited to be actively engaged in ongoing projects. Additional synthesis of the table discussions, group discussions and rankings will be conducted after the workshop by the planning team and other interested partners to identify next steps and roles.