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INTERIOR:

6 years in, landscape-level conservation program works -- report

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An ambitious Interior Department program established six years ago to coordinate conservation efforts across federal, state, tribal and private lands is performing as it was designed, achieving "numerous objectives and milestones" in a short period of time, according to a new congressionally mandated analysis of the program.

But the Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCC) program established by former Interior Secretary Ken Salazar in 2009 still has work to do, including developing a system that can track whether the program is actually improving wildlife habitat conditions, according to the [report](#) released today. It was conducted by a committee of experts appointed by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine.

Still, the LCC program "can point to many early accomplishments" in meeting its "high-level goals related to addressing conservation strategy, developing collaborative conservation, and advancing science for conservation," according to the 201-page report. Among them is the establishment in the last five years of a network of 22 individual conservation cooperatives covering specific regions across the United States, including the Pacific and Caribbean islands, the Arctic, and parts of Canada and Mexico.

The goal of the LCC program is to bring together scientists with federal, state and local government leaders and other stakeholders to identify regionwide conservation priorities and strategies to address them. The LCC program, for example, played a role in the coordinated federal, state and local partnerships across the West that worked to conserve greater sage grouse habitat and avoid the need to list the bird for protection under the Endangered Species Act, the report said.

"They are breaking new ground in ways to approach conservation," said Dorothy Merritts, who chaired the committee that conducted the study, in an interview today.

"The report overall is positive, and it indicates from our assessments that the individual LCCs and the LCC network have established a platform and collaborations and partnerships that provide the elements to deliver on the national need for a landscape approach to conservation," added Merritts, a geomorphologist by training.

Congress directed the Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages the LCC program, to ask the National Academy of Sciences to evaluate the goals "and scientific merit of the program within the context of other similar programs" and to determine "whether there have been measurable improvements in the health of fish, wildlife, and their habitats as a result of the program."

The committee presented the report's findings yesterday to FWS Director Dan Ashe in Washington, D.C., Merritts said.

Critics argued when the LCC program was launched six years ago that it is redundant and overlaps with various existing federal programs. Climate doubters also seized on the fact that the program was part of a larger Interior Department policy initiative, also announced in 2009, that expanded the role of science in departmental activities related to climate change ([Land Letter](#), Nov. 5, 2009).

The report acknowledges that the LCC program shares similarities with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Regional Integrated Sciences and Assessments program, which supports nearly a dozen regional research teams that help expand and build the nation's capacity to prepare for and adapt to climate change. There's also potential overlap with two FWS programs involving migratory birds and fish habitat, as well as the U.S. Geological Survey's Climate Science Centers.

The report recommends that Interior "review" these other programs "to identify opportunities for improved coordination" between all efforts.

But because wildlife and their habitat, as well as cultural resources, are spread across millions of acres of public and private lands, the report concludes the need exists for a broad program like LCC, which can bring together various stakeholders to develop shared conservation priorities and identify research priorities for entire regions.

And the report says the LCC program and the 22 individual conservation partnerships have features that are unique in that they are designed to address landscape needs at a national level for all natural and cultural resources.

"The committee concludes that the nation needs to take a landscape approach to conservation and that the Department of the Interior is justified in addressing this need with the Landscape Conservation Cooperatives," the report says.

The Fish and Wildlife Service issued a statement today saying the service is "encouraged by the panel's findings that a landscape approach is needed to meet the nation's conservation challenges and that the LCCs address this need."

It adds, "The NAS review confirms that LCCs create new opportunities to identify common conservation goals and leverage efforts of diverse partners at a much greater scale than they could achieve alone."

Chase Huntley, senior director of the Wilderness Society's Energy and Climate Campaign, said it is significant that after a lengthy review of the program, "the nation's leading scientists unequivocally found that the country needs a landscape approach to conservation."

He added: "We know many of our public lands will be altered by changes in hydrology, population and a changing climate. The LCC network is a leading approach that can help the land management agencies meet the challenges we will all face tomorrow in the decisions they make today."

Measuring success

But ultimately, today's report concludes that the long-term success of the program will depend on developing tools to measure and demonstrate the direct benefits of the program to its conservation partners and the nation as a whole.

"The committee found it difficult to determine whether the LCC Network had resulted in measurable improvements in the health of fish, wildlife, and their habitats and cultural resources," the report said.

Part of the reason is the program is so new, and "conservation efforts typically take many years or decades to demonstrate measurable changes in the health of resources. Thus, it is too early to expect to see much improvement in the status of habitat, fish and wildlife," the report says.

The task is all the more difficult because the 22 LCCs don't have any authority to require that conservation actions be taken, instead relying "on their partners" to take the steps to implement conservation measures.

"In other words, while it is clear that improved coordination among these partners is needed to reach their shared conservation goals, it is not straightforward to measure the added value of the coordination," the report says. "This, in turn, makes it challenging to measure and document how the LCCs contribute to improved management of fish, wildlife, their habitats and cultural resources."

The Fish and Wildlife Service has attempted to address this concern, developing what the report calls a Science Investment and Accountability Schedule (SIAS) that is designed to evaluate each of the 22 LCCs.

But, according to the report, "the SIAS tool falls short" in a number of ways, including its lack of a "process to measure the outcomes that result from the collaborative process and its partners' on-the-ground conservation efforts."

FWS, in its statement today, said it is reviewing the recommendation in the report to develop a system to track the program's impacts.

"The LCC Network will develop an action plan for addressing the Academy's recommendations and will provide a 'report card' to document progress over the coming year," the statement said.

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