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## REGIONAL CONSERVATION OPPORTUNITY AREAS (RCOAs), VERSION 1.0

*NORTH ATLANTIC LCC PROGRESS REPORT FOR STEERING COMMITTEE -- OCTOBER 21, 2015*

### **Background**

NEAFWA: The identification of regional focus areas for conserving fish and wildlife and their habitats has been a goal for the Northeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (NEAFWA) since they came together to share ideas in Albany, New York at the State Wildlife Action Plans Meeting (“Albany I”) in 2006. That meeting was a catalyst for establishing the Regional Conservation Needs (RCN) program including RCN Topic 4: “Identification of Regional Focal Areas and Corridors for the Conservation of SGCN in the Northeast.” At the Northeast Regional Conservation Framework Workshop (“Albany II”) in 2011, state agencies and other attendees reiterated the importance of regional prioritization by identifying the need to “expedite delivery of the right actions in the right places: 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.”

LCC: The North Atlantic Landscape Conservation Cooperative (LCC) used the priorities and conservation framework coming out of that workshop and their resulting strategic plan to guide LCC investments in capacity and projects including conservation design: “developing and integrating information, maps and tools to prioritize where partners need to focus how much of what conservation actions at various scales across the region to achieve natural resource goals and increase resiliency under current and predicted future conditions.” The LCC has been developing tools and testing approaches for conservation design at various scales including the recently completed landscape conservation design pilot in the Connecticut River watershed.

Regional Data: NEAFWA, the LCC and their partners have developed, assembled and made available over 150 regionally consistent environmental data layers through both the LCC data portal and SWAP website. The LCC has worked with the Northeast Fish and Wildlife Diversity Technical Committee (NEFWDTDC) to identify and assemble and assess the quality of available data for Regional Species of Greatest Conservation Need (RSGCN) – SGCN that have high regional concern and responsibility. The LCC hosted five training sessions in 2014 for states & partners on accessing and using this regional data.

### **Definition and Purpose**

Last year, the NEFWDTDC and the LCC have developed consensus on the following definition, purpose and uses for Regional Conservation Opportunity Areas.

Project Definition: Regional Conservation Opportunity Areas (RCOAs) are spatially delineated places within the Northeast Region where actions to support or enhance populations of RSGCN and/or their habitats are likely to be most effective.

Project Purpose: State Fish and Wildlife Diversity Agencies are working together to establish Regional Conservation Opportunity Areas (RCOAs). RCOAs can be used by the NEFWDTDC, state staff, and conservation partners to inform and guide land protection or habitat restoration actions for the benefit of RSGCN species and their habitats, especially considering large scale threats like climate change and land use change. RCOAs are intended to supplement, not replace, state-specific spatial information and conservation planning.

Utility: RCOAs will be used by the Northeast Fish and Wildlife Diversity Technical Committee to prioritize projects funded through the Regional Conservation Needs (RCN) grant program. State Fish and Wildlife Diversity Agencies may also use RCOAs to guide and inform conservation action priorities. In addition to these uses, state, federal, private, and non-governmental organizations and partnerships may find RCOAs and related data products helpful to prioritize and plan conservation actions.

## Status and Next Steps

In April 2014, NALCC approved involvement of NALCC staff in the development of Northeast Regional Conservation Opportunity Areas (RCOAs) in collaboration and partnership with the Northeast Fish and Wildlife Diversity Technical Committee (NEFWDTC). During 2014, NEFWDTC and NALCC drafted objectives and delegated staff to serve on a technical team for the purpose of developing a project methodology. The membership of the RCOA team includes technical experts from Northeast states, NALCC staff, and conservation partners.

Beginning in January 2015, NALCC convened the RCOA team to develop a framework for RCOAs. NALCC staff provided training and guidance on the use and application of many important NALCC science products. In turn, the team developed over 30 potential applications to satisfy regional objectives. In guided workshops, the team critically evaluated each alternative and related data, and then refined an analytical process to complete the design.

Recently, NALCC completed a draft methodology based on the work of the RCOA team. The methodology identifies the data and technical process that will be used to complete conservation opportunity areas for the region in support of wildlife action plans and a suite of broad landscape objectives. On October 21, NALCC staff reviewed the proposed methodology with NEFWDTC, and reached concurrence to develop a first iteration of the analysis for further review. The committee requested that NALCC seek additional engagement from a broader set of partners, including other NEAFWA committees, state and federal agencies, and private partners.

When complete, maps and data depicting Northeast Regional Conservation Opportunity Areas will be made available on the NALCC Conservation Atlas. The final maps will depict four general kinds of conservation opportunities:

- 1) Core landscapes to protect Northeast plant and animal diversity while ensuring landscape integrity and climate resilience;
- 2) Important habitats to protect Regional Species of Greatest Conservation Need and their common associates in the face of broad threats such as development and climate change;
- 3) Watersheds to target for restoration of key ecosystems, improvement and management of early successional habitats and/or agricultural lands, implementation of upland practices to improve water quality, and implementation of in-stream practices to improve connectivity;
- 4) Zones to connect core landscapes, important habitats, and restoration opportunities and plan for salt marsh migration.

Next steps will include:

- 1) Engaging additional partners to assist the RCOA team in key technical areas, such as restoration/management and aquatic conservation;
- 2) Convening the RCOA team and members of the NALCC technical and science delivery teams to begin assessing funding needs for implementation;
- 3) Engagement of a full complement of interested NALCC partners to participate in the review and refinement of RCOA products;
- 4) Completion and review of initial results.

