Regional Conservation Opportunity Areas (RCOAs), Version 1.0

*Progress Report from the Northeast Fish and Wildlife Diversity Technical Committee
September 2014*

**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 a pilot effort in the Connecticut River watershed.

Regional Data: NEAFWA, the LCC and their partners have developed, assembled and made available over 80 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 (NEFWDTC) 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 and partners on accessing and using this regional data.

**Definition and Purpose**

Over the past year, the NEFWDTC 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 NEFWDTC, 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**

At the September 2014 NEFWDTC meeting, committee members agreed on a general approach and recommended individuals from a number of northeast states to participate in a process facilitated by LCC staff to develop the methods for mapping RCOAs.

Proposed Governance and Steps:

1. North Atlantic LCC staff will provide technical assistance and facilitation to complete and test an RCOA methodology in close collaboration with NEFWDTC;
2. Phase 1 of the process emphasized refining the general goals and objectives of RCOAs, including the scope of fish and wildlife resources, actions, and threats to be addressed by the methodology—webinars were hosted by LCC staff prior to the September 2014 NEFWDTC meeting and sessions were held at the NEFWDTC meeting to gather input to be summarized in a draft methods document;
3. Phase 2 of the process will emphasize refinement of a draft methodology for RCOAs—an initial Draft RCOA Methodology will be provided to NEFWDTC by LCC staff on by October 15, 2014;
4. NEFWDTC and LCC staff will designate members of a RCOA Advisory Team with appropriate GIS, biological, and landscape technical capability by October 15, 2014 to provide input on the draft methodology and results on behalf of the NEFWDTC, LCC, and other conservation partners;
5. LCC staff will disseminate the Draft RCOA Methodology to the Advisory Team, and will provide assistance coordinating the Advisory Team as follows:
	1. Provide guidance and a schedule for review and testing of the Draft RCOA Methodology and initial results;
	2. Convene monthly calls;
	3. Coordinate three in-person meetings in February, April, and June of 2015;
	4. Provide facilitation as needed to document meetings and decisions;
	5. Provide GIS and other support as needed to demonstrate results of alternative approaches and methods and draft a final methodology;
6. NEFWDTC and LCC will each designate a project leader (NEFWDTC TBD and Steve Fuller) to coordinate the Advisory Team to ensure that designees are engaged and that the governance needs of each committee are satisfied by the process;
7. NEAFWA and LCC committees will be engaged and briefed as necessary to achieve final concurrence and approval on RCOA methodology and products;
8. The interim outcome in 2015 will be a standard methodology for RCOAs that may be referenced in State Wildlife Action Plans;
9. The final mapping and timeline for specific applications remain to be determined.

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