



**An Evaluation of the State Wildlife Conservation Grant Program, 2004-2008:
Building Multi-State Regional Efforts upon State Wildlife Action Plans**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation entered into a partnership called the State Wildlife Conservation Plan Coordination Grant Program (Program) in 2004 to facilitate landscape scale conservation across states' boundaries as a natural extension of the State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAP). Working through the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) and its affiliated regional associations, this Program provided 23 grants in 2006-2008, totaling approximately \$4.5 million.

Nineteen of the twenty three awards were for planning grants. These were almost always made to regional AFWA organizations to support establishment of multi-state regional plans integrating elements of SWAPs that focus on shared priorities among state agencies. Outreach activities were the most frequently undertaken elements of these projects, with monitoring and evaluation efforts being the next most frequent.

The respondents interviewed for this evaluation concurred that investments in the regional planning exercises were well justified and provided solid returns. These regional activities would not have been possible if not for the availability of Doris Duke/NFWF funding and the support of USFWS Federal Assistance staff in addressing the administrative challenges presented by multi-state efforts. This was important, since states comprising AFWA regions did not have much prior experience with multi-state planning and coordinated landscape scale projects. Availability of long-term funding for such purposes remains a concern, however.

Such planning exercises often take longer than anticipated, and may delay implementation of on-the-ground conservation efforts. Looking forward, more attention is needed to build realistic timelines and incentives for moving beyond the process of establishing regional plans to initiating coordinated, on-the-ground conservation at a landscape scale that address the bureaucratic and practical challenges presented by working across state boundaries.

Non-profits were valuable allies, as they were less constrained in performing tasks like coordinating partners across state jurisdictional boundaries and administering grant agreements. The private sector is another important collaborator. For example, several collaborative ventures succeeded only because private landowners became engaged early in the process and played vital roles in balancing often conflicting economic and wildlife conservation objectives.

In looking ahead, increased efforts will be needed to sustain focus by providing appropriate incentives to ensure that regional plans are implemented, revised as appropriate, and targeted at measurable conservation outcomes. This includes leveraging the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Multistate Conservation Grants Program to ensure it aligns with priorities enumerated in the multi-state regional plans. Developing additional sources of funding is also needed to fill important gaps in multi-state collaboration, such as elements related to monitoring and evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the State Wildlife Conservation Plan Coordination Grant Program (Program) partnership between the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation (DDCF) and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) was to build on the successful development of state wildlife action plans (SWAPs) by catalyzing collaboration among states at a regional, landscape scale. While the partnership ultimately shared an interest in broad-scale land conservation achievements, it was recognized that a process for establishing shared SWAP implementation priorities among multiple states must first be established.

Additionally, the program offered a practical proving ground for the mechanics of undertaking priority multi-state collaborative projects. Importantly, funding offered by the DDCF/NFWF partnership gave states an opportunity to strengthen existing partnerships, and to address shared conservation priorities, without significantly depleting limited state financial and staff resources. In all cases, staff and financial capacity were already oversubscribed to meaningful but often parochial state priorities.

Working through AFWA and its affiliated regional associations, the program provided 23 grants in 2006, 2007 and 2008 totaling approximately \$4.5 million. The vast majority of the grants were directed at regional planning efforts, where significant challenges to doing conservation work across state boundaries historically have existed. It is beyond the scope of this report to comment on the ecological merits of the regional plans, especially as a follow-up to the SWAPs created earlier in the decade. Instead, this evaluation focuses on three questions related to the planning and administration of regional conservation efforts by state wildlife agencies supported through the DDCF/NFWF partnership:

1. What were the key characteristics of the funded projects?
2. What were the key factors involved in successful regional planning efforts?
3. Did regional planning efforts ultimately lead to on-the-ground multi-state conservation projects, and if so, what were the key contributing factors?

The evaluation addresses these three questions by drawing on three bases of evidence:

1. File data for each of the 23 grants analyzed according to a series of metrics used to profile the portfolio, as well as a content analysis which summarized narrative information.
2. Five rounds of interviews conducted with national and regional leaders of AFWA organizations (See Appendix 1 for a list of those interviewed). Transcripts of the interviews were created and examined using a content analysis; and
3. Site visits conducted in four Midwestern states (Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri and Iowa). The visits provided an illustrative case study of the factors associated with a series of grants awarded through this program, beginning with a multi-state regional plan, and leading to restoration of tall grass prairie habitat across four state boundaries.

The remainder of this report is laid out in three sections: (1) background of the project grants comprising the portfolio; (2) critical factors identified by participants in cross-state collaborative regional plan development; and (3) key lessons learned and a series of recommendations.

THE PORTFOLIO

NFWF awarded twenty three project grants in 2006, 2007 and 2008 under the Program. As shown in Table 1, the yearly distribution of grants was relatively even. Nineteen of the twenty three awards were for planning, and the remaining four were for on-the-ground conservation work. Approximately \$4.5 million was invested over the three year performance period. Doris Duke funds were matched on approximately a 2:1 to 3:1 basis with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and grantee funds secured by NFWF.

Table 1: Number of Project Grant Awards by Year

Year	Number of Grants	Percent of Total	Total Grant Awards	Doris Duke Match Rate
2006	9	39%	\$1.70 million	3.00
2007	8	35%	\$1.34 million	2.03
2008	6	26%	\$1.47 million	1.91

The median project grant award was approximately \$150,000. The variance ranged from a low of less than \$34,000 (2005 planning grant award to the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources for “Pacific Islands Cooperation for Shared Species”) to a high of almost \$775,000 (for a 2005 planning grant award to the Missouri Conservation Heritage Foundation for “Coordinating Conservation Actions in Midwest U.S.”).

The grants have a relatively wide geographic distribution along AFWA administrative regional boundaries as illustrated in Table 2. Two additional categories, national-scale grants awarded to AFWA for re-granting purposes and regional grants awarded to Hawaii and other Pacific Islands, are also included in this table. .

Table 2: Number of Grants by Region

Region	Number of Grants	Percent of Total
Midwest	4	17%
Northeast	4	17%
Southeast	7	30%
West	3	13%
Pacific Islands	2	9%
National (AFWA re-grants)	3	13%

Eco-Regional Considerations

AFWA regional boundaries do not generally conform to conventional eco-regional classifications (see, for instance, Bailey 2008). To gain a better handle on eco-regional implications, we classified projects

by the number of contiguous states comprised within a project grant, as seen in Table 3. Eleven of the twenty three grants may be construed as having eco-regional implications, however, given that the number of affected contiguous states is less than the size of the surrounding AFWA administrative region.

Table 3. Number of Project Grants with Eco-Regional Implications

Number of Contiguous States/Territories	Number of Project Grants	Percent of Total
Two	3	13%
Four-Six ¹	8	35%
All Continental States in an AFWA Region	9	39%
National	3	13%

¹ Includes two projects involving Hawaii and territories in the Pacific Ocean

Grant Activities

A content analysis of project file data was conducted to determine the specific types of planning and on-the-ground conservation activities undertaken for the 23 grants. In most cases, more than one activity was associated with each project grant. A total of 65 activities was identified, comprising 5 categories (Table 4). Outreach activities were the most frequently undertaken and included such specific efforts as workshops, landowner contacts, and facilitated meetings. The second most frequently undertaken activity type was monitoring and evaluation, which often involved efforts to strengthen GIS capabilities, but also included database improvement and selection/definition of indicators. Not surprisingly, the four on-the-ground conservation projects included habitat restoration activities.

Table 4: Activity Type in Project Grants

Activity	Number of Incidents	Percent of Total
Outreach	23	35%
Formal Research/Planning	12	18%
Monitoring/Evaluation	15	23%
Dissemination	5	8%
Habitat Restoration	10	15%

There were some notable observations related to the types of work associated with project grants targeted at planning. According to the project files, GIS development was reported in eight grants. Baseline monitoring (e.g., aquatic habitat, birds and vegetation, shorebird banding) also was noted in eight project grants. Ten projects contained some component for engaging segments of the general public (e.g., landowner outreach or outreach to community leaders).

CRITICAL FACTORS FOR SUCCESSFUL MULTI-STATE REGIONAL SWAP PLANNING

This section first examines the advantages and disadvantages for the AFWA regional organizations inherent in their governance and culture as related to undertaking multi-state regional planning efforts. Key factors identified as critical to collaborative planning processes are then discussed. The latter involve inclusion of stakeholders, niche of nonprofits, leadership traits, and funding.

AFWA Governance and Culture

Regions varied in their commitment to undertaking collaborative multi-state regional planning efforts based on analysis of the data collected. All regional AFWA organizations have established working committees of scientists, managers, administrators and policy leaders that customarily work to address common conservation issues, including some that are related to planning. However, the multi-state regional planning efforts supported under this grant program appear to be without precedent in terms of scale and complexity. According to all Directors interviewed for this study, the program was successful in establishing structure and formality that is sometimes lacking in communication between the hierarchical levels within and across state fish and wildlife agencies (Directors, managers and field scientists/managers) regarding collaborative conservation action to address shared priorities at a regional scale. As one director commented, "While discussion of this sort had occurred previously, this was the first time it was done in accordance with a structured process."

There were challenges to establishing full engagement by participants in the process. The culture and the nature of the state-federal relationship presented a set of challenges, as did the understandable inclination of states for focus on unmet parochial needs, particularly during difficult budget times, which most have experienced during the last decade or more. As one director reported, "States were not resistant but were preoccupied with working on development and implementation of their own action plans and priorities." Another commented that historically, the programmatic structure of federal funding programs available to the states, and the general philosophical approach of AFWA (historically) in supporting the interests of the states, reinforces a culture of "states rights", making it easier to justify the practice of applying federal funds to address individual state needs, rather than to pool the funds to address shared regional priorities.

Though the general philosophical approach, organizational structure, and culture of AFWA operations has served the states extremely well by all accounts, this also explains some challenges inherent in undertaking an initiative requiring agreed upon commitment of financial and staff resources to regional, multi-state priorities. The bureaucratic nature of the regional AFWA organizations also presented an obstacle. Deference to the authority and interests of individual states is customary, and staff turnover at the Director level and vertically through state organizations is not uncommon. As one Director commented, "Staff turnover contributed to less than hoped for success, by making networking, outreach and shared implementation difficult to achieve due to lack of familiarity with the staff and

culture of other state agencies.” Acquiescence to individual state interests and turnover contributed to make consensual decision-making problematic. As another director commented, “At some point, the ... grant making process has to evolve to permit sub-regional projects involving just a group of states, since not all regional priorities affect every single ... state.” Another major factor challenging full engagement by states in the collaborative process was a lack of significant incentive to work on multi-state regional conservation efforts given existing demands on staff time. According to another respondent, “... the effort [to work on regional conservation efforts] was seen as additional work for already overtaxed staff.”

Inclusion of Stakeholders

As shown in Table 5, stakeholder engagement was uneven. Thirteen grants included participation with federal partners, and ten included partnerships with non-profits. On the other hand, only four grants included collaboration with local agencies, and just two reached out to private landowners or industry.

Table 5. Stakeholder Involvement in the Project Grants¹

Stakeholder	Number	Percent
State Government	23	100%
Federal Government	13	57%
Local Government	4	17%
Non-profits	10	44%
Industry/Private Landowners	2	9%

¹ Most projects had more than one identified stakeholder so totals exceed 100%.

The importance of landowner engagement was made clear throughout the evaluation process. This was especially evident during the site visit, when several examples arose of conservation efforts gaining legitimacy through advocacy by a respected landowner in the target community. Such landowners lent credibility to the conservation effort, elevating the confidence and comfort of his/her neighbors, thereby leveraging their participation in the initiative. It does not seem that this would have been possible relying strictly on leadership from key individuals from the public or non-profit sectors, at least in the instances presented.

Private landowners also can be convincing spokespeople for conservation efforts. One state director noted that the words of a farmer describing tall grass prairie conservation programs were more persuasive to a Congressional delegation than were similar comments presented by state agency personnel.

Importance of Non-Profits and Third Party Contractors

The site visit revealed two explicit benefits that non-profit organizations and third party contractors contributed to the multi-state collaboration efforts. First, these organizations are generally less restricted than agency counterparts regarding out-of-state travel. Consequently, it is easier for them to coordinate meetings and activities across states and involving multiple implementing agencies. This was true even if project sites were located only a few miles apart, if traveling between them required crossing state lines. It was the norm, not the exception for state agency staff to have to clear substantive bureaucratic hurdles to travel to collaborate with counterparts in another state.

Second, non-profit organizations and third party contractors are better positioned to efficiently fulfill contracting and fiscal management tasks associated with projects, sometimes doing so in advance of having actually received the grant funds intended to support the projects. States are generally more constrained by more stringent bureaucratic requirements. States appreciated the ability of the non-profit organizations and contractors to nimbly fulfill such roles.

In addition to the roles fulfilled by non-profit organizations, the important consulting contributions of D.J. Case should be underscored. The firm capably coordinated and conducted many of the outreach meetings and prepared the planning documents that were the intended products resulting from the meetings. Respondents noted that D.J. Case staff had strong skills in convening, facilitating and writing, which were critically important as the regional AFWA plans were developed.

Leadership Traits

Strong leadership is unquestionably essential in any ambitious endeavor, and prescribing agreed upon approaches to address priorities shared by states included in multi-state regional plans was no exception.

According to respondents to this evaluation, AFWA was the main convener, thought leader and catalyst for the overall planning efforts. However, there were also many key, catalytic individuals who played a critical leadership role. For instance, Directors within the regions played a key role by legitimizing and advocating the work as a priority for their respective state agencies. In many cases, the Director's vocal support for full engagement by their staff added necessary gravitas to help drive collaboration on the planning efforts.

While much of the actual work activity was accomplished by professional staff working through AFWA committees, vertical integration of executive and staff contributions at all levels was characteristic of the process. As one respondent noted, "... this opportunity brought together a wider than usual variety of players from state agencies to discuss range-wide collaborations over multiple years, and that unprecedented focus on shared priorities resulted."

Individual personalities were important in driving the process. One respondent spoke of the importance of “visionary ambassadors” who were at different levels of the hierarchy but had the shared trait of being able to “articulate the significance of the funding opportunity and the associated multi-state projects.” These individuals were described as galvanizing initially disjointed group discussions, thereby helping to create a shared vision of a regional plan to be embraced by the team. They were also consistently described as empowering well-positioned colleagues to play leading roles as the regional plans developed. These individuals shared a common trait of seeing and acting beyond their parochial interests.

Funding

Respondents consistently stated that State participation in these regional activities would not have been possible if not for the availability of the DDCF/NFWF funding and the support and creativity of the USFWS Federal Assistance staff in addressing the administrative challenges presented by work to be conducted in multiple political jurisdictions. This was important since states comprising AFWA regions did not have much prior experience with multi-state collaboration leading to on-the-ground projects. As one respondent noted, “Given the barriers of spending funding across state boundaries, this conversation would never have taken place without this Doris Duke grant program.”

Availability of long-term funding for such purposes remains a concern however. This was identified by several respondents interviewed for this study as well as those who participated in the site visit. Respondents report that inadequate incentives are in place to support regional conservation efforts across states given the demands for implementing projects called for by individual state wildlife action plans. It is unclear to what extent the availability of funding through the partnership between AFWA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the Multistate Conservation Grant Program (MSCGP; currently funded at approximately \$6 million annually) will address this concern in the long term. Notwithstanding MSCGP, it appears that the regional plans play an important role in establishing regional priorities, and that current funding is insufficient even to meet individual states’ needs.

In sum, the respondents interviewed for this evaluation concurred that the investments in the regional plans were well justified and provided solid returns. Senior officials in state wildlife agencies, scientists and managers all played key roles in the development of the plans. While the regional AFWA organizations had supported multi-state collaboration long before this grant program started, all respondents agreed that the plans helped to identify and focus on shared priority conservation opportunities within each region. The availability and targeting of additional funding for such purposes is clearly a subject worthy of further consideration. For now, the key unanswered question is whether these plans did lead to on-the-ground conservation results and will continue to do so. This is the subject of the next section of this report.

CONSERVATION RESULTS

Despite the benefits of this grant program in helping to meet the challenges confronting states and regional AFWA organizations, there has been uneven progress in implementing multi-state collaborative conservation projects at a landscape scale, particularly those that cross state boundaries. This is concluded from examination of evidence from the project files, interviews with AFWA officials, and the site visit to a multi-state project in the Great Plains focused on tall grass prairie restoration.

According to the project file data, on-the-ground conservation efforts are often delayed due to an extended planning process. The results are summarized in Table 6 below. As of Spring 2009, seven of 23 awards were still in the collaborative planning phase and constitute unfinished work to date. In three cases, second grants were awarded before first grants finished; three of these cases involved grants to AFWA for coordinating national meetings to advance multi-state plans intended to add value state wildlife action plans. Another seven were “one-offs” -- grants to complete a regional plan addressing shared priorities that have not (at least through this program) led to additional funds to implement on-the-ground projects. Three regional grants resulted in completed initial planning which subsequently led to new grants to continue the planning process.

Table 6. Status of Project Grant

Status	Frequency	Percent of Total
Project Unfinished; No Follow-Up Grant Awarded	7	30%
Project Unfinished: Follow-Up Grant Awarded	3	13%
Project Finished; No Follow-Up Grant Awarded	7	30%
Project Finished; Follow-Up Grant Awarded	5	22%
Data Not Available	1	4%

These findings present an incomplete story since they fail to account for activity outside of this DDCF/NFWF program. Additional insights were gained after interviewing heads of regional AFWA organizations and investigating the availability and intended use of MSCGP funds. Each Director interviewed for this evaluation identified several on-the-ground projects crossing individual state boundaries that would not have happened in the absence of this grant program. These included efforts to address white nose syndrome in bats in the Northeast, tall grass prairie restoration in the Midwest, migratory bird conservation efforts in the West, and a group of aquatic restoration projects in the Southeast.

The short-term results of these on-the-ground projects do not tell the whole story either. They are anecdotes and are symbolic of myriad possible bases for future, more ambitious collaborative conservation projects. As one respondent noted, “It is not just about 1,000 acres of habitat. It is also how it catalyzed implementation of other projects.” As another respondent reported, “Since the

concept of multi-state collaboration was widely accepted, it made planning proceed more easily. This in turn led to a process where projects were prioritized using a multi-state approach for adoption.” As another Director added, “The process succeeded in getting people talking to each other; the actual documents we created served the purpose of articulating important steps in moving the shared conservation effort forward.” And as still another Director commented, “An unintended consequence was that many excellent projects were identified and discussed, making participants from all states aware of projects in other states that are of mutual interest.”

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section summarizes key lessons from the evaluation and concludes with a series of recommendations.

- SWAPs made interstate planning and collaboration easier. More closely integrating the interstate regional conservation efforts to national scale funding opportunities -- such as the MSCGP and NRCS programs associated with recent improvements to the Conservation Title -- remains a challenge.
- Methodological inconsistencies across SWAPs hampered multistate planning and project implementation. Individual SWAPs were developed using different strategies, measures and approaches to data collection; this presented challenges in developing shared, multistate approaches. One grantee recommended that the need for developing a centrally managed database for developing more consistent GIS layers for classifying habitats for needed to direct regional conservation efforts. We find this recommendation to be practical and prudent.
- Funding from Doris Duke and NFWF was essential for catalyzing multistate planning efforts. Funding shortfalls necessitate that states focus primarily on their own individual needs. Without outside funding, regional planning probably would not have been a priority.
- Realistic timelines and incentives need to be established to encourage implementation of multistate efforts. The challenges to implementation posed by bureaucratic and practical considerations should not be underestimated.
- Third parties can play an important role in program development and implementation and should be encouraged to participate in multi-state planning and on-the-ground conservation activities. Non-profits can more easily coordinate projects and associated work requiring travel across state boundaries. They also can more effectively manage grants by more nimbly and quickly disbursing funds to support on-the-ground action. Entities such as D.J. Case, which have extensive experience with planning and facilitation, are vital building blocks in multi-state collaboration.
- Private landowners are often essential partners in project planning and implementation. Landscape conservation in the current national framework is not feasible without the cooperation of private landowners. In many parts of the country, ensuring their buy-in is difficult given the historic distrust of government. There are many examples of successful collaborative ventures that have succeeded only because private landowners have been engaged early in the conservation process and have played a vital role in balancing often conflicting economic and wildlife conservation objectives.

Finally, it is important to reinforce the positive impressions that this grant program had on all of the participants interviewed during this study. They concurred on the importance of the multi-state regional planning at a landscape scale. They were grateful that DDCF/NFWF funds were available to start the planning process. In moving forward, increased efforts will be needed to sustain focus by providing appropriate incentives to ensure that the regional plans are implemented, revised as appropriate, and targeted at measurable conservation outcomes. This includes leveraging the Multistate Conservation Grant Program to ensuring it aligns with priorities enumerated in the regional plans. Developing additional sources of funding will continue to be needed to fill important gaps, such as elements related to monitoring and evaluation.

REFERENCES

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Learner, Jeff, Bobby Cochran and Julia Michalak. 2008. *Conservation Across the Landscape: A Review of the State Wildlife Action Plans*. Washington, DC: Defenders of Wildlife. Available at http://www.defenders.org/resources/publications/programs_and_policy/habitat_conservation/private_lands/living_lands/conservation_across_the_landscape_handout.pdf.

Appendix I: List of InterviewsNational AFWA Office

David Chadwick, formerly with AFWA

Northeast AFWA Region

Steve Weber, New Hampshire Fish & Wildlife

Bob McDowell, NEAFWA Contractor

Scott Williamson, Wildlife Management Institute

Southeast AFWA Region

Thomas Eafon, Florida Fish & Wildlife

Midwest AFWA Region

Mark Humpbert, formerly with Nebraska Fish & Game

West AFWA Region

Terry Johnson, Arizona Game & Fish

Larry Kruckenburg, Wyoming Game & Fish