COLORADO DIVISION OF WILDLIFE

Crucial Habitats and Corridors

In 2008, the governors of nineteen western states agreed to develop a regional network of statewide data systems that identify crucial wildlife habitats and important wildlife movement corridors. As the first step in this process, the Colorado Division of Wildlife is working in partnership with the New Mexico Game and Fish Department to implement a pilot project to identify crucial habitats and corridors on our states' border.

Fish and wildlife depend on a variety of different types of natural lands and waters for food, shelter, and reproduction. Poorly planned urban growth, energy development, and transportation infrastructure can alter these natural areas, which can have serious impacts on fish and wildlife populations. Habitat loss and fragmentation is the leading cause of species decline.

Making information about wildlife habitat available in the early stages of planning for development activities can help guide siting and construction away from the most important areas for fish and wildlife. Minimizing the potential impacts of development can help balance economic development activities with wildlife needs.

What is Crucial Wildlife Habitat?

All fish and wildlife habitat is important, but not all habitat is crucial. Crucial habitats are those areas that wildlife depend on in order to avoid unacceptable population declines. If these crucial areas are lost, then species are vulnerable to drastic, irreversible declines. In addition, crucial habitats are difficult to replace.

The phrase crucial habitat does not have a regulatory or legal meaning. State and federal laws and regulations do define some categories of habitat, such as "critical habitat" under the federal Endangered Species Act. However, the term crucial habitat refers strictly to a nonregulatory identification of important lands and waters. By identifying and protecting these crucial areas, we hope to avoid regulatory limits on land uses.

What are Wildlife Corridors?

Fish and wildlife need room to roam. This includes room for day-to-day movements for feeding and resting, seasonal migration between summer and winter ranges, dispersal of animals to new areas as populations grow, and large-scale shifts due to changing environmental conditions.

Wildlife corridors are the crucial habitats that provide connections among different habitat areas used by fish and wildlife. These connections can span seasonal movements and longer term timeframes. Corridors can exist within unfragmented natural landscapes or they can include connections among natural areas in a more fragmented landscape. Corridors can include specific linkages for individual species as well as broad areas that benefit many species.

What is a Decision Support System?

At present, wildlife managers lack reliable processes and easy-to-use tools for communicating habitat protection priorities with the array of decision-makers that impact wildlife habitat, including local governments, federal land managers, and private industry. Habitat protection priorities are often assembled on a case-by-case basis, using whatever data is available at the time. Maps developed for one purpose might not work for another, and different recommendations can end up uncoordinated and out-of-date.

A decision support system (DSS) represents a new way of communicating habitat information. Using geospatial information systems (GIS) technology and web-based tools, a DSS can provide developers, land managers, and other interested stakeholders with direct access to consistent, up-to-date maps of wildlife habitat and other landscape-level information for planning and siting decisions.

A decision support system is first and foremost a planning tool. It does not create any land use regulations, replace existing permitting requirements, nor eliminate the need to consult with agency personnel. By providing easier access to data and maps, a DSS can improve landscape-scale planning and simplify eventual project-level consultation.

Colorado - New Mexico Decision Support System Pilot Project

As a first test of the decision support system concept, the Colorado Division of Wildlife is working in partnership with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish to implement a pilot project to identify crucial wildlife habitat and wildlife corridors in the border region. This project is supported by the Western Governors' Association, with funding from the US Department of Energy.

The Colorado-New Mexico border region provides important habitat for a variety of fish and wildlife species. This region also has a wealth of developed and potential renewable and non-renewable energy and is subject to strong pressure for residential/vacation development and recreational activity. Balancing development activities with wildlife habitat protection is essential to ensuring the long term viability of the region and its communities.

The Colorado-New Mexico Border Region Decision Support System Pilot Project will provide information on crucial habitats and wildlife movement corridors along the border region. This process will create a template for Colorado and New Mexico to develop statewide decision support systems.

The Western Governors' Association

The Western Governors' Association is an independent, nonprofit organization made up of the Governors of 19 states and three US-Flag Pacific islands.

In June 2010, the Governors adopted a policy that committed their state wildlife agencies to developing a regionally compatible network of statewide decision support systems by 2013 that will provide public access to information on habitat priorities. With funding from the US Department of Energy, the Western Governors' Association is providing support for eight Decision Support System pilot projects to demonstrate how these statewide decision support systems can be designed and maintained.

For more information on the Western Governors' Association, visit *www.westgov.org*.