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WMI Outdoor News Bulletin

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Maine towns to take responsibility for their conservation future:

Development impacts on critical fish and wildlife habitat dominate the list of threats identified within state wildlife action plans, reports the Wildlife Management Institute. Conservationists understand that there never will be sufficient funding to protect every acre that is important and that, instead, protection must stem from society's recognition of the value of wild places. Maine's solution to rapid development pressures in southern and central parts of the state integrates New England's strong sense of land stewardship into the traditional form of independent town governments. The blending forms an effective form of habitat protection by keeping decisions at the local level and by appealing to citizens to ponder their quality of life at build-out.

Maine's "Beginning with Habitat" program's goal is to maintain sufficient habitat to support all native plant and animal species currently breeding in Maine by providing each Maine town with a collection of maps and accompanying information depicting and describing various habitats of statewide and national significance found in the town. The

maps depict riparian habitat, high-value plant and animal habitats, large habitat blocks, wetlands and interior forest blocks. Program staff is available to consult with town officials, assist in interpretation, and help define future options for designing a landscape that accommodates needed development, but maximizes resource conservation for wildlife.

The program provides town leaders with information necessary to enjoin citizens in far-reaching discussions to identify areas suitable for growth and those that may be better reserved as wild lands. The program's message—"We hope the data, maps, written material and suggestions for local conservation strategies will help inform and guide your town's growth in such a way that, 50 years from now, those who want to can still fish, hunt, photograph or watch wildlife and otherwise enjoy the wealth of a rich and diverse outdoor heritage"—makes it clear that local desires will define decisions. The role of state agency personnel is merely to provide information to help guide local decisions. The program is a cooperative, not a regulatory approach. To achieve the landscape, it relies on all available approaches, such as acquisition, property tax incentives and some zoning goals.

The biological model for the program was developed by the University of Maine's Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, under the direction of the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. The Department began consultation with towns in 2000. To date, more than 150 towns and 35 land trusts and regional planning commissions have received instruction. At least two-thirds of these municipalities have used the information to form their local comprehensive growth plans, and most others have indicated that they will use it in the near future. An interactive website was developed to provide efficient access to "Beginning with Habitat" information (<http://www.beginningwithhabitat.org/>). (sjw)

There is such a thing as too many elk in Rocky Mountain National Park:

Research and observations have shown that the elk herd in Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP), in Colorado, has steadily grown, is becoming less migratory and more concentrated, and is seriously impacting plant species in the park, such as willow and aspen, reports the Wildlife Management Institute. RMNP officials estimate the elk herd to number between 2,200 and 3,000 animals.

In response to the problem, the National Park Service has announced the availability of a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for public review and comment regarding potential plans for elk and vegetation management in RMNP. The DEIS, which has taken several years to prepare, presents five management alternatives for elk and their habitat for the next 20 years, and corresponding, projected environmental impacts:

- *Alternative 1*: No action; current management for elk and vegetation would continue.

- *Alternative 2:* Preferred alternative; employ lethal reduction of elk by agency personnel to achieve an elk population target of 1,200 to 1,700 within the plan's first four years. Lethal reductions would continue as needed for the next 16 years to maintain the population target. Elk would also be moved and dispersed (redistributed) in the park by herding dogs, riders on horseback, staff members using noisemakers or visual devices, or by aircraft (including helicopters). In addition, 545 acres of aspen would be fenced to exclude elk. This alternative also proposes that, in later stages of implementation and given appropriate interagency cooperation, the release of intensively managed wolves could be considered as a potential elk redistribution technique.
- *Alternative 3:* Employ lethal reduction over 20 years to reach a population target of 1,600 to 2,100 elk. Elk would be redistributed, and up to 1,405 acres of aspen and montane riparian willow communities would be fenced to exclude elk.
- *Alternative 4:* Employ a fertility control agent and lethal reduction over 20 years to reach an elk population target of 1,600 to 2,100. Elk would be redistributed, and up to 1,405 acres of aspen and montane riparian willow communities would be fenced to exclude elk.
- *Alternative 5:* The release of a limited number of wolves to be intensively managed and maintained in the park, plus lethal reduction of elk to a target population of 1,600-2,100 within the first four years. This would be followed by lower levels of lethal reduction during the next 16 years to maintain a target population of 1,200 to 2,100 elk. Up to 545 acres of aspen would be fenced to exclude elk as needed.

Needless to say, lethal reductions of elk in a national park and the potential introduction of wolves to an entirely new area has made this DEIS a hot topic and undoubtedly will prompt considerable public interest and input.

To see a copy of the complete document, go to

<http://parkplanning.nps.gov/document.cfm?projectId=11012&documentID=14855>.

The National Park Service is asking for public input and comment on the DEIS and has scheduled several public meetings during May (specifics to be posted on the RMNP website). Comments also can be submitted via the Web at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/> or by mail to Superintendent, RMNP, Estes Park, Colorado 80517, by fax (970-586-1297), by email to romo_superintendent@nps.gov or hand delivered to RMNP headquarters, 1000 Highway 36, Estes Park, Colorado. The deadline for comments is July 4, 2006. (lhc)

Gunnison sage-grouse dodges listing:

After several years of review, study and debate, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has announced that the Gunnison sage-grouse will not be placed on the federal threatened or endangered species list, reports the Wildlife Management Institute.

A key factor in the Service's decision was the results of a November 2005 population "trend analysis," which indicated that populations of Gunnison sage grouse have been stable for the past 10 years.

Like its more populous, somewhat-larger cousin, the greater sage-grouse, the Gunnison sage-grouse has experienced significant decreases in distribution and numbers during the past 50 years. At one time, the species was found in parts of Colorado, Utah, New Mexico and Arizona. Today, it exists in seven populations—six in Colorado and one in both Colorado and Utah. Estimates of total numbers range from 3,000 to 4,000. Appropriately enough, the Gunnison Basin in Colorado has the largest population and the largest amount of suitable habitat.

The Gunnison sage-grouse differs from the greater sage-grouse primarily by its mating display, body size, vocalization and plumage. It was recognized as a distinct species by the American Ornithologists' Union in 2000, and was added to the Federal Candidate List that same year.

A "candidate species" is one for which the Service has determined a need for listing as threatened or endangered under terms and conditions of the Endangered Species Act, but action to list is precluded by higher priorities for listing other species. The decision not to list will remove the bird from the candidate list.

More than 30 percent of the land in Gunnison Basin is privately owned, and 72 area landowners have indicated interest in voluntary conservation efforts for Gunnison sage-grouse. Landowners have also been active in developing local conservation plans. Such plans have been approved by the Service for six of the seven populations. In June 2005, a rangewide conservation plan was signed by the Colorado Division of Wildlife, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, the Service, U.S. Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service.

The decision not to list the Gunnison sage-grouse has not set well with several environmental organizations. They challenge the validity of the 2005 population analysis and point to significant continuing threats to the populations, such as oil and gas drilling, motorized recreation, and urbanization. They argue that the decision will diminish conservation efforts to protect the birds.

In fact, the decision removes the prospect of federal intervention to protect the species, nearly always a matter of contentiousness with private landowners because of imposed constraints on land use. However, management authority and responsibility will remain vested with the Utah and Colorado wildlife agencies, and the local and rangewide conservation plans are expected to afford the necessary protection for Gunnison sage-grouse without fact or threat of imposition on private property rights. (lhc)

Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Units look to the Senate for help:

The Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit Program did not get the boost in funding it needed from the U.S. House of Representatives' Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies, reports the Wildlife Management Institute. The House Subcommittee approved \$14.938 million for fiscal year 2007, the amount requested by the Administration but \$2.6 million less than needed to restore the number of scientists in the program to the 2001 level.

Across the country, there are 18 Coop Units with one or more vacant scientist positions. Without an increase in this year's budget request, the Unit program must absorb four more scientist vacancies by the end of fiscal year 2007, in order to stay within available funding.

This places all of the Coop Units in jeopardy for two reasons. First, any vacancy created by a Unit scientist retiring or electing to take another position is very unlikely to be filled. Second, without additional funding in fiscal year 2007, major changes in the Unit program—either closing of Units or restructuring of Units—will be necessary to meet payroll in fiscal year 2008.

The National Cooperators' Coalition, an alliance of more than 60 university and state fish and wildlife agency Unit cooperators, and 22 hunting and fishing conservation organizations are urging the Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee to approve \$17.5 million in fiscal year 2007 to make it possible to begin refilling vacant scientist positions at 18 Units across the country. (rpd)

Report calls for immediate, shared conservation actions across greater sage-grouse range:

A new set of findings and recommendations to conserve greater sage-grouse in the western United States and Canada has been produced through the collaborative efforts of a diverse 35-member working group, reports the Wildlife Management Institute.

The report was produced by the Greater Sage-grouse Range-wide Issues Forum (Forum), which the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) convened to devise approaches to contribute to a range-wide conservation strategy that would "maintain or, where possible, increase the present distribution and abundance of greater sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat." The Forum range-wide findings and recommendations will be integrated with approaches already developed at local working group, state/province, tribal and federal agency levels and incorporated into the WAFWA Greater Sage-grouse Comprehensive Conservation Strategy.

Greater sage-grouse currently occupy approximately 56 percent of the species' historically occupied range. Forum findings recognize that the loss of 44 percent of greater

sage-grouse range and the fragmentation and degradation of remaining habitats pose great challenges to perpetuate and conserve the species. Without greater conservation efforts, according to the Forum, increasing human population and use of greater sage-grouse habitat will continue to compromise the birds' abundance and distribution. The report finds that federal, state and provincial land and resource management agencies often have failed to involve citizens sufficiently and meaningfully in an integrated planning process. The Forum report concludes that, even in those instances when citizen involvement has occurred, there seldom has been sufficient resolve by the agencies to bring about change that actually benefits greater sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat.

The Forum report recommends immediate investment of resources to address a number of critical needs. For the eastern half of greater sage-grouse range, it stresses the need to assure no net loss of sagebrush habitat or greater sage-grouse populations in providing for non-renewable resource development and utilization. High priority also is given to development of consistent guidelines and implementation of best-management practices and appropriate mitigation measures to minimize impacts to greater sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat in locating energy corridors and operating and maintaining energy facilities. For the western half of the species' range, the report emphasizes containing and suppressing wildfires, addressing invasive plant species and managing dispersed recreational activities to avoid, reduce and, where possible, eliminate displacement of greater sage-grouse or negative impacts to greater sage-grouse habitat.

Over the entire range of the greater sage-grouse, the Forum sees an immediate, critical need for shared leadership and commitment to locate and protect important habitats ("save the best") and identify priority areas on which to focus conservation actions to maintain the function of sagebrush ecosystems ("retain what we're losing").

Other identified high priorities include expanding long-term, existing, natural resource information portals (e.g., SAGEMAP) to provide easy and dependable access to information, implementing integrated research and monitoring projects within a landscape context, to use grazing systems and management practices that maintain soil quality and ecological processes, and to create a mechanism for sharing information to address cumulative effects on habitats.

Forum participants identified three essential resources needed to take this work forward: (1) funding, (2) leadership committed to organizing, supporting and guiding a long-term effort, and (3) the appropriate organizational structure to sustain it. The final Forum report may be obtained at <http://sagegrouse.ecr.gov/>. (rpd)

Worth reading

What a terrific reference book Milt Friend and colleagues at the National Wildlife Health Center produced. *Disease Emergence and Resurgence: The Wildlife-Human Connection* (2006) is clear and concise documentation of when, where, how and to what extent a

rather extraordinary suite of animal diseases is occurring in or hovering close to the United States.

It is an altogether timely publication, given the growing concern about such wildlife diseases as avian influenza, chronic wasting disease, avian botulism, whirling disease, West Nile fever and brucellosis.

It is a remarkably creative and reader-friendly volume—not the usual, banal treatment one has come to expect of government documents on hard science. A U.S Geological Survey publication (Circular 1285), prepared in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the book is four-color throughout, meticulously organized and very readable. At 388 pages on coated, 8.5 by 11-inch text stock, it has some heft to it, which doesn't detract. However, the soft cover was a questionable choice. That fussiness aside, the design is outstanding. The back matter (glossary, appendices and index) is particularly good.

It is a bit scary. The coverage is not intended to frighten and it doesn't suppose or suggest a "sky-is-falling" outlook, but the thoroughness of coverage of infectious pathogens, their prevalence, pathways and possibilities as bioterrorist weapons will have readers thinking monkey pox every time they detect a new liver spot. Human health and economic implications of unchecked zoonoses are quite convincingly presented, amounting, in places, to more than this reader really wanted to know.

I think everyone in zoology, wildlife ecology, and veterinary and other animal sciences ought to have a copy of this quality work. It should be a textbook for students majoring in animal and food sciences, and required (and desired) reading for anyone seeking a license for commercial dealing with wildlife and wild stock—game ranchers, pet dealers, fur farmers, etc. For all of the above, this book will be one of those essential, at arm's reach references that will last long after the soft cover has warped, torn and disintegrated. If my take on it is not abundantly clear, I think this is not only an impressive publication, but very important literature.

Disease Emergence and Resurgence: The Wildlife-Human Connection (2006) also is one of the best bargains around. It can be ordered from USGS by calling 1-888-ASK-USGS or going to the Web at <http://www.usgs.gov/>. The cost—get this—is all of \$5.00, for shipping. Or, if you want it electronically as a humongous file, you can view and download it at http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov/publications/disease_emergence/index.jsp.

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