

# 1998 International Conference: Wildlife Ecology And Transportation.

## Wrap-Up Session: Recommendations for the Future.

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The following is the documentation for the February 13, 1998 wrap-up session held at the Ft. Myers, Florida International Conference: Wildlife Ecology and Transportation. The session objectives were to clarify problems and recommend solutions related to the conservation and management of rare wildlife, fish and plant resources located on Federal lands that are affected by highways. The wrap-up session was sponsored by the Defenders of Wildlife and the USDA Forest Service. Some of the people who worked on preparing the session included: Robert Dewey, Defenders of Wildlife; Laurie Fenwood, USDA Forest Service; Joan Friedlander, USDA Forest Service; Marc Bosch, USDA Forest Service; Richard Sowa, USDA Forest Service; Bill Ruediger, USDA Forest Service; Gary Evink, Florida State DOT; Paul Garrett, Federal Highway Administration; Dan Ferris, Federal Highways Administration; Tracy Lloyd, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife; Paul Wagner, Washington State DOT; Bill Ballard, Alaska State DOT. Nearly 100 people attended the wrap-up session to provide ideas and contributed to the discussions and recommendations.

The following are recommendations from the panels and audience relative to how to improve coordination of highways across Federal lands:

1. Policy: ISTEPA should be amended to include provisions for addressing and correcting serious environmental issues created by highways such as wildlife underpasses and overpasses, allowances to acquire critical lands or easements to provide habitat connectivity, mitigation of habitat lost directly or indirectly from highways, and funding for research to improve highway mitigation measures.

2. Coordination Between Agencies: Funding and jurisdictional issues currently impede many biological concerns from being implemented at the highway planning and construction phases. The development of an MOU between Federal Highways Administration (FHWA), USDI Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), USDC National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), USDA Forest Service (FS), USDI Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the USDI National Park Service (NPS) could resolve many of the funding and jurisdictional issues. The nature of this MOU should be to define which species would be addressed (threatened, endangered, proposed, candidates, sensitive or species of special concern), determine who would prepare and coordinate biological assessments and evaluations (land management agencies), who would pay for coordination, how disputes would be handled, how rare species would be handled in NEPA and ESA documents, and an outline of acceptable mitigation measures or processes. None of the current MOU's adequately deal with these issues.

There should be better coordination between land management agency resource management plans (FS, BLM and

NPS) and highway development plans. Presently, most highways are developed in segments, and there are not interdisciplinary processes for integrating highways with land management objectives. Land management plans do not usually provide direction for highways, other than acknowledging existing highways. Broad-scale land management plans could provide important direction as to the best areas for wildlife or fish passages, where connectivity is necessary, potential key habitats to avoid or minimize impacts and possible mitigation measures.

Consultation for highway projects under ESA should be given similar emphasis as other major Federal projects by the FWS and NMFS. Highways are a major impact for many listed, proposed and candidate species including grizzly bear, Florida panther and Black bear, wolves, lynx, ocelot, salmon, steelhead, bull trout, desert tortoise and many others. There currently is a perceived discrepancy between FWS Regional and Field Offices relative to the emphasis provided for consultations on highway projects for listed and proposed species. Many participants, including some FWS employees, felt more emphasis was needed in coordinating highway projects with threatened, endangered, proposed and candidate species. Since most highways are built and coordinated by state DOT's, the amount of emphasis provided for Section 7 consultation varies greatly from state to state. The MOU recommended above could provide guidelines for development of Biological Assessments, consultations and NEPA analysis and disclosure that would result in better management of listed, proposed and candidate species. Highway project NEPA documents and Biological Assessments should always address: a. Habitat Fragmentation. b. Direct Mortality c. Avoidance and Displacement. d. Direct and Indirect Habitat Loss and e. Associated Human Development and Use Patterns.

There is a need for better communication and coordination between engineers and biologists. Many situations were noted whereby the engineering professionals viewed protection of rare species as unnecessary, or impediments to getting the highway work done. Protection of important wildlife, fish and plant resources should be an integral part of overall highway planning and implementation. This communication situation occurs within Federal agencies, between Federal agencies, between Federal and State agencies and within State DOT's. It is considered a major impediment in designing highways that are more sensitive to wildlife, fish and plant resources.

3. Development of an Interagency "Handbook" for Coordinating Wildlife, Fish, and Plant Resources with Highways: This project would best be lead by Federal Highways Administration. It would provide practical examples, designs and advice for coordinating a variety of species. Included would be size and design information for highway wildlife passage structures (from frogs to grizzly bears), fish passage designs, and

other design features to avoid or reduce impacts. This would provide a source of information that Federal Highway Administration, State DOT's, State Fish and Wildlife agencies, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Federal land management agencies could use to quickly assess and prescribe corrective measures.

4. **Development of Wildlife, Fisheries and Plant Standards and Guidelines To Protect Rare Species Affected By Highways:** This was recommended so there would be consistency in applying protective measure for rare species such as threatened, endangered, proposed, candidate species, sensitive species and species of special concern. At the present time there is a wide disparity of how rare species are dealt with. All Federal land management agencies, and most state land management agencies, have standards and guidelines that projects are guided by. There are many issues with rare species that could be clarified with broad direction on how Federal and state protected species and habitats would be assessed and coordinated.

5. **Training:** There are important opportunities for training within and between agencies. Many of the ecological concepts presented at the International Conference on Wildlife Ecology and Transportation are not well understood by Federal and State agencies. These concepts could be shared by providing

training through agency training programs. This training could include, but is not limited to: 1. Identification and analysis of wildlife, fish and plant resource issues affected by highways, traffic, connected actions and construction activities. 2. Development of NEPA and ESA documents for highway projects. 3. Mitigation Measures.

6. **Development of Agency and Public Understanding and Acceptance of the Wildlife, Fisheries and Plant Issues Related To Highways:** A major impediment in moving forward with wildlife, fisheries and plant coordination related to highways is the low level of understanding and acceptance of the issues. The general public is not well informed about the impacts or solutions related to the ecological effects related to highways, so there is often little concern or comment to highway, wildlife or land management agencies. Line officers also have a low level of understanding of the ecological impacts created by highways. Line officers perceive little support from traditional highway constituencies or the public in identifying or correcting problems. The potential costs associated with corrective actions concern state and Federal highway agencies in times of declining highway budgets. There needs to be a coordinated effort to better inform agency heads and the public about the impacts highways have on wildlife, fish and plant communities.

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