



Outdoor News Bulletin

Bringing All Authorities on Deck: Leveraging Federal Authorities to Support State Wildlife Action Plans

By Leo Miranda-Castro | January 2025 | Volume 79, Issue 1

If we truly aim to conserve and recover species, we must evolve beyond our traditional approach of managing isolated, siloed programs. Conservation success in the modern era requires a collaborative, integrated strategy where resources and efforts are leveraged across various sectors to conserve habitats and ecosystems holistically. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) can play a pivotal support role in state-led efforts, working in tandem with state initiatives to harness multiple federal authorities. This essay explores how this partnership can enhance the effectiveness of State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAPs) in safeguarding our nation's biodiversity.

SWAPs are pivotal in the conservation landscape of the United States, serving as detailed strategies developed by each state and territory to manage fish and wildlife proactively. SWAPs identify over 12,000 species of greatest conservation need (SGCN), outline their habitats, and propose actions to mitigate threats and conserve biodiversity. These plans aim to prevent species from reaching the point where they need to be listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) by addressing conservation issues before they become critical. When successful, the conservation of these species results in lessening the federal regulatory burden and helps to more efficiently use limited resources focused on species that are on the brink of extinction.

The USFWS plays a crucial role in supporting these state-led initiatives. The USFWS decides whether to list species under the ESA and for creating recovery plans and regulations for listed species. That's how it's always been done. However, there are additional ways where the agency can speed up the conservation of at-risk and listed species through various legislative tools, with Section 7(a)(1) of the ESA being significant. This section requires all federal agencies to use their authorities to promote



conservation, not only of listed species but also those at risk of becoming endangered. The USFWS can leverage this mandate to provide technical assistance, share resources, and fund conservation projects aligned with SWAP priorities. By acting early to protect species, we may avoid stricter government regulations.

We should use this ESA mandate alongside other USFWS authorities. We can synergistically use authorities outside the ESA with SWAPs. The Sport Fish Restoration Act (Dingell-Johnson Act) generates funds from taxes on fishing equipment, traditionally used for sport fish conservation. However, authorities can also direct these resources toward broader aquatic habitat restoration, benefiting a wider array of aquatic SGCN identified in SWAPs. Similarly, the Wildlife Restoration Act (Pittman-Robertson Act) funds habitat management, primarily for game species, using taxes on firearms and ammunition; however, this funding can also support non-game species. After all, species, regardless of their classification, cannot distinguish between habitats or ecosystems managed for game or non-game species. All species need healthy and resilient ecosystems to thrive.

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) provides another avenue for conservation synergy with SWAPs. The MBTA protects migratory birds across international borders. This involves not just habitat conservation but also reducing threats like habitat loss or bird mortality from human activities. States are very familiar with the MBTA, particularly in relation to ducks. The MBTA provides the legal authority for regulating waterfowl hunting, while the USFWS sets the overarching framework, and individual states implement and enforce specific regulations within that framework. We can use the MBTA to target many of the birds identified in the SWAPs: the USFWS has already identified these species as of greatest conservation concern allowing for more efficient collaboration with the states to improve vital migration, breeding, and wintering habitats.

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act is yet another tool at the USFWS's disposal, facilitating voluntary conservation on private lands. This can help to implement SWAP recommendations by partnering with landowners to restore or enhance the ecosystems where at-risk and listed species occur. Focusing the program's resources and capabilities on these at-risk and listed species can lead to significant and timely conservation achievements, like the restoration of wetlands or the creation of wildlife corridors, directly supporting the objectives outlined in SWAPs.



To implement strategic conservation actions, the USFWS can encourage integrated conservation planning, aligning SWAP actions with other conservation initiatives. This includes using the ESA Section 7(a)(1) mandate to leverage funds from different acts and the states to maximize impact, such as combining resources for habitat projects that benefit both game and at-risk species. Public education and engagement, funded through these acts, can also broaden support for conservation beyond traditional interests, emphasizing the interconnectedness of ecosystems and the benefits of conserving all wildlife.

Adaptive management is another key aspect where the USFWS can assist states in implementing their SWAP actions. By continually assessing conservation action outcomes and identifying additional authorities for conservation implementation, the USFWS can adjust strategies based on new findings or changing conditions, ensuring ongoing SWAP effectiveness. This approach not only keeps conservation efforts relevant but also allows for more dynamic responses to emerging challenges.

According to the [Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies](#), funding for SWAPs comes primarily through the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants program, averaging around \$1 million per state annually, though significantly less than the recommended \$1.3 billion annually needed nationwide for comprehensive implementation. This underscores the need to conserve at-risk species and their habitats proactively with sustained and predictable funding. Moreover, states like Oregon have innovated by making SWAPs more accessible through interactive online platforms, enhancing public and partner engagement in conservation efforts. Programs like Maine's Beginning with Habitat further support on-the-ground conservation, providing tools and help to various stakeholders, fostering community-driven conservation that aligns with SWAP goals.

However, funding and other resource challenges remain, including aligning diverse state and federal priorities, securing sufficient funding, and ensuring public support. Despite these hurdles, the combined use of Section 7(a)(1) of the ESA and other legislative tools presents a robust framework for enhancing state leadership on fish and wildlife conservation with strong federal support. By using these methods and approaches, the USFWS will play a better, more efficient role to assist states in their conservation efforts, promoting cooperation and benefiting wildlife nationwide, ultimately preserving America's natural resources for the future.

The conservation landscape is ripe for transformation beyond traditional methods and approaches. By scaling up and expanding the use of multiple non-traditional federal



authorities as envisioned by Section 7(a)(1) of the ESA, we can foresee a future where conservation becomes a set of well-coordinated actions rather than a collection of solo performances. Imagine local efforts like the restoration of a single wetland, a forest patch for the conservation of a local species expanding into regional and national networks of wildlife corridors, multi-state habitat projects, and even international collaborations for migratory species. This innovative approach where the federal role is primarily to support the state-led efforts to conserve species, breaking from past models, would harness the collective strength of the Sport Fish Restoration Act, Wildlife Restoration Act, Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act among many others, all working together for a shared conservation goal. Such a strategy not only amplifies the impact of conservation efforts but also invites us to think creatively, ensuring that every species, from the well-known to the obscure, finds a place in our conservation narrative, fostering a legacy of land stewardship for generations to come.

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