

General Principles for 30 X 30 Initiative
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
April 26, 2021

On January 29, 2021, President Biden signed Executive Order 14008 that among other things recommended identifying “*steps that the United States should take, working with State, local, Tribal, and territorial governments, agricultural and forest landowners, fishermen, and other key stakeholders, to achieve the goal of conserving at least 30 percent of our lands and waters by 2030*”. The goal is to accelerate conservation of the nation’s diverse fish and wildlife species and address the threats of a changing climate. State, Territorial, and District of Columbia fish and wildlife agency (hereafter, State Agencies) missions are to conserve the nation’s fish and wildlife species for the benefit of current and future generations, and the Administration’s focus on this important work could be an opportunity to catapult our collective successes. We recommend the Administration focus on the conservation of fish and wildlife populations, their habitats, and sustainable use of our natural resources -- not levels of protection or numbers of acres, *per se*. As the Administration begins implementing the Executive Order, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies recommends the following general principles be considered:

- **Cooperation Early and Often.** -- State Agencies, along with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and Tribes, have primary responsibility and governing authority for conservation of fish and wildlife and their habitats and uses. As such, State Agencies should be primary collaborators in the strategic development and implementation of science-driven processes, policies, and strategic guidance for the conservation of resilient fish and wildlife populations of all kinds and their habitats. We urge the establishment of an intergovernmental State-Federal-Tribal task force to focus on these first-step issues.
- **Clearly Define Purpose and Intent.** -- There is considerable concern regarding definitional presuppositions (e.g., protection versus conservation) and implications for sustainable use (e.g., regulated hunting, fishing, trapping, and timber harvest) and also for outdoor recreation on public lands. We strongly recommend using the term “conservation,” which includes ‘sustainable use’ instead of “protection” so as not to alienate crucial partners, to assure abundant public access to conserved public landscapes, and to support the sustainable use of our natural resources. Most immediately and of equal importance, the Administration should clearly articulate what the 30x30 initiative is *not*. It should not include the use of eminent domain, new federal land designations without the expressed support of an affected community, create a 30% federal landownership threshold in every county across the nation, or unilaterally create a federal nexus over State, territorial, and local government lands. Lands considered for inclusion under the 30x30 initiative should not be required to have additional federal easements or other regulatory frameworks overlaid on them, and designations should be voluntary not mandatory. It should not focus on the designation and development of additional defacto protections on federal lands at the expense of conservation-based natural resources management and sustainable use which many State, local, rural, and disadvantaged communities depend on for economic sustainability and growth.
- **One-size Approach Should Not Drive Policies or Actions.** – Any policy should recognize individual State and regional differences in conservation approaches as well as differences in legal criteria for establishment of new conservation areas. For example, what may work on the east coast may not work in the west or in Alaska. Approaches need to be tailored to the unique circumstances of the States. Likewise, conservation of aquatic systems in the west may be a higher priority than in many portions of the Midwest (e.g., Great Lakes).
- **Science-based Collaboration Should Drive Policies and Actions.** -- State Agencies have a long and consistently beneficial history of natural resources conservation, restoration, and management on the millions of acres of fish and wildlife habitat under their jurisdictions. The 30x30 policies should be designed to recognize, complement, and build on this demonstrably strong track record. We encourage the Administration to establish cross-agency coordination with standardized and transparent operational procedures within and between the

30x30 science teams for land, freshwater, and marine resources and State-Federal-Tribal interagency and intra-agency coordination. This will ensure previous and ongoing conservation actions are incorporated into future planning and implementation and also that existing conservation objectives for landscape and watershed-level approaches are met. Translating goals and objectives into conservation actions on the ground must be determined through an objective, science-driven, stakeholder-engaged process.

- **Utilize Existing Regional Partnerships.** -- Landscape conservation across multiple jurisdictions is the appropriate scale for effective collaboration. Existing and new partnerships between State Agencies, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and conservation organizations have and are creating collaborative and strategic conservation plans, science, and implementation tools for conserving fish and wildlife populations and their habitats in ways that are resilient to climate change and emerging issues. Examples of these partnerships include the [Southeast Conservation Adaptation Strategy](#), [Nature's Network](#) in the Northeast, the [Midwest Landscape Initiative](#), and the [Crucial Habitat Assessment Tool](#) in the West. Since these partnerships were expressly created for this very purpose, these regional scale landscape-level voluntary collaboratives should be integral and leading forums to guide where investments could be made to ensure they are scientifically targeted, durable, State and community-supported, and meet their intended purpose. These regional partnerships also provide collaboration frameworks for the engagement of non-governmental organization partners.
- **Establish Collaborative and Transparent Processes.** – Achieving 30x30 goals and successes will hinge on taking the collaborative science-based framework and integrating robust stakeholder processes that include hunters, anglers, outdoor recreationists, private landowners, energy and agriculture interests, scientists, State Agencies, Tribes, conservation organizations, and other stakeholders working collectively in true partnership to implement conservation objectives and strategies for the nation's public and private lands and freshwater and marine resources.
- **Proactive, Voluntary, and Incentive-based Conservation of Threatened and Endangered Species and Species of Greatest Conservation Need.** – Alone, land protection through 30x30 will be insufficient to address the needs of over [12,000 species](#) of fish and wildlife that are recognized as rare, declining, or imperiled. Passage of the [Recovering America's Wildlife Act](#) by Congress will provide States, Territories, the District of Columbia, Tribes, and their conservation partners with the critical funding to invest in habitat management and restoration, species monitoring, applied research, threat abatement, reintroduction of extirpated species, conservation education, voluntary private landowner incentives, and other activities critical to at-risk species conservation. Many of these actions are already identified in federally approved [State Wildlife Action Plans \(SWAPs\)](#) which serve as conservation blueprints to restore and sustain species populations through proactive, voluntary, and incentive-based approaches. Full implementation of these existing plans by State Agencies and their conservation partners will preempt the need for regulatory (listing) actions and leverage existing federal resources to provide communities with public-private conservation partnership opportunities.
- **Focus on Tools for Conserving Habitat and Ecosystem Functions.** -- Conservation measures and frameworks established to meet the 30x30 goals should focus on outcomes tied to habitat and ecosystem function, not just protection. Land protection is one of many important conservation tools but is insufficient alone, and in some situations is not the tool of choice. The 30x30 policies and conservation frameworks should include a broad and adaptive range of tactics and incorporate or amplify existing management levels/actions already in place that maintain habitat functionality. These may include permanent conservation mechanisms; semi-permanent conservation tools, including long-term water leasing and fallowing; conservation programs with a national cap under which term easements are authorized; the full suite of conservation and restoration programs across departments and agencies; mitigation actions; and collaborative land and water management based on State, Tribal, and community-based input and science-driven approaches.
- **Consider Private Landowner Perspectives.** -- Private landowners and working lands play a critical role in fish, wildlife, and habitat conservation including habitat restoration activities that provide carbon sequestration benefits. These efforts should be encouraged through voluntary, incentive-based approaches that foster and support good stewardship. Voluntary actions are essential to the goal of achieving high value and functioning

habitat on private lands, as well as restoring and enhancing habitat on working farms, ranches, forests, and other privately owned lands. State Agencies and their nongovernmental conservation organization partners have extensive experience and are well positioned to work with private landowners and local communities to achieve mutually beneficial conservation outcomes.

- **Opportunities Ahead.** – The 30x30 conservation framework should prioritize intact, high quality natural habitats and communities that are vulnerable to loss, fragmentation, degradation, and conversion because connected landscapes enhance the resilience of fish and wildlife to climate variability. The emphasis should include the restoration of degraded landscape segments across private and public lands, in which other federal and State Agencies such as the Departments of the Interior, Agriculture, Defense, and Transportation should also play an important role in facilitating habitat connectivity and improving habitat quality. Additionally, a critical aspect of resilience of protected and conserved resources to climate change is ensuring habitat connectivity and low levels of other stressors. When an area is protected or removed from management, stressors can intensify elsewhere in the system, create more uncertainty across the system as a whole, and create additional challenges to conserving fish and wildlife populations outside of the protected areas that can affect species viability within the protected area. Unlike other States, the unparalleled terrestrial and aquatic wildlife connectivity in Alaska having 40% of land and 65% of federal waters set aside provides considerable resilience to climate change impacts and still allows sustainable use of fish and wildlife to provide food, jobs, and economic sustainability.
- **Integrate Diverse Landscapes.** – State Agencies, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Forest Service, and Tribes should work collaboratively to provide the high priority and relevant science needed to inform management decisions. One approach could be the formation of interagency teams of experienced scientists, managers, and structured decision-making experts to provide such science support, such as those relationships already formed to guide U.S. Geological Survey Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Units as they collaborate with State and federal agency natural resource managers. These interagency, interdisciplinary teams could be useful in efficiently identifying the essential elements of processes, policies, and strategies that determine what, when, which, and how landscapes are conserved and contribute to the 30x30 goal.
- **Consideration of Federal Lands and Waters.** -- State Agencies have strong interests in the management of millions of acres of federal lands and waters that provide fish and wildlife habitat, affect biodiversity, and are used by hunters, anglers, bird watchers, and other wildlife enthusiasts and outdoor recreationists. A collaborative process involving State Agencies and Tribes should lead decision-making to assure that management is, to the greatest extent possible, aligned with and considerate of the public's use of federal land and water for outdoor recreation. Federal lands and waters currently available for wildlife-dependent recreation should remain open and available for such activities unless reduced access is justified by scientifically demonstrable negative impacts of those activities on fish, wildlife, and habitat. In those instances where recreation is justifiably constrained, special regulations should be limited to the smallest acreage necessary through a stakeholder engagement process involving the affected communities and interests.
- **Better Mitigation Strategies that Contribute to Landscape Resiliency.** – Energy development and transmission are vitally important but can have significant and negative impacts on fish, wildlife, and their habitats. Habitat fragmentation, degraded habitat quality, unnaturally increased predation risk, barriers to migration, and the conservation of our diverse fish and wildlife species are just some of the challenges to address. Consequently, a balanced and thoughtful approach to energy, transmission, and transportation infrastructure development is required to assure resilient habitats and landscapes and to conserve the nation's fish, wildlife, and other natural resources. To date, one of the most popular strategies has been attempts to replace affected acres, but the biological and ecological qualities and values of the acre lost is seldom matched with an acre of equal quality and value. When impacts from development cannot be avoided, we urge the development of better mitigation options that are designed and monitored to achieve net conservation benefits for affected habitats (e.g., habitat quality, function, and connectivity) and to sustain and restore species, habitat quality and functions, and landscape resiliency.