

Priority Setting Framework Midwest Landscape Initiative

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide an overall framework for developing co-identified Midwest Landscape Initiative (MLI) priorities and for ongoing review, evaluation, and adjustment of priorities as warranted.

This document provides process guidelines and recommended criteria for facilitating the establishment, review, and ongoing evaluation of priorities for the MLI. It is designed to help assure that a consistent and understandable approach is used to identify and address the highest priority landscape conservation needs in the Midwest. It provides a framework for co-identifying new priorities; identifying and evaluating specific ecoregion/habitat, species, threat, or research/monitoring related priorities within overarching priority categories (see below); and modifying or removing existing priorities.

The MLI Steering Committee has identified the following initial MLI priorities:

- 1) Coordinating on at-risk species conservation
- 2) Developing effective and integrated habitat assessment tools to better leverage and inform conservation investments
- 3) Minimizing negative impacts of wind power generation and transmission on wildlife
- 4) Developing a long-lasting governance model and unifying conservation vision across the region; providing an ongoing forum to support challenging and informing dialog on shared regional conservation priorities

Process for new or modified priority development

Work Groups for the existing priority categories are identifying more specific priorities within those categories as data on regional at-risk species and their landscape connections, habitat assessment needs, threats, and data gaps are further analyzed.

As more specific priorities are identified and considered, the following process steps and responsibilities will provide a consistent framework for development, review, and evaluation of new or modified co-identified priorities. These steps are designed to facilitate an open and transparent approach to proactively identifying and addressing long term and important conservation issues, not reacting to the urgent crises of the moment.

Input and solicitation of proposals:

Proposals for new or modified MLI priorities may originate from any of the MLI Work Groups and Committees, MAFWA Committees, USFWS, MAFWA Board, any state or federal agency, academic institutions, partner organizations, or any other entities sharing an interest in landscape conservation in the Midwest. Proposals for new priorities are welcome on an

ongoing basis. Evaluation of existing priorities will occur every two years, to allow adequate time for progress to be made and to avoid ongoing emphasis on an issue for which there is no longer consensus.

When developing or reviewing and evaluating proposed priorities or modifications, the MLI may seek input and involvement from:

- MAFWA State Wildlife Action Plan Committee, including state SWAP Coordinators, Diversity Coordinators, and Threatened and Endangered Species specialists.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Ecological Services staff from the affected regions
- AFWA research needs survey
- Academia, including Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Units in the Midwest
- Partner agencies and NGOs engagement, input, and review
- Results of discussions on priority needs at regional conferences or forums (e.g. Midwest Fish and Wildlife Conference; MAFWA hosted partner and stakeholder meetings)

Roles of MLI organizational units:

MLI Work Groups

- Develop proposals for new or modified priorities as needed to address current challenges and opportunities
- Review and evaluate proposals received from others within their scope of responsibility, based on established criteria (see below)
- Recommend new or modified Work Group priorities to the Technical Committee, with rationale summarizing how proposed priorities relate to established criteria
- Recommend new or modified Work Groups or Subgroups to the Technical Committee, if needed to address proposed changes to priorities
- Periodically review and evaluate existing priorities (at least every two years?)

MLI Technical Committee

- Seeks input from a wide variety of sources for co-developing priorities
- Develops proposals for new or modified priorities as needed to address current challenges and opportunities
- Reviews and evaluates proposals for changing priorities received from others, based on established criteria (see below)
- Recommends new or modified priorities to the Steering Committee
- Establishes new or modified Work Groups or Subgroups if needed to address priorities established by the Steering Committee
- Periodically reviews and evaluates existing priorities (at least every two years?)

MLI Steering Committee

- Assures broad input was received into co-identification of priorities and may seek additional input through regional or national meetings or other forums
- Makes the final determination of MLI priorities
 - if determined to be a regional priority, these could be taken on as part of MLI or referred by MLI to another existing or specifically chartered entity
- Periodically reviews and evaluates existing priorities (at least every two years?)

Proposed priority review and evaluation criteria:

Proposed priorities for the Midwest Landscape Initiative should be evaluated against the criteria outlined below to assure that they are consistent with direction from the FWS, MAFWA and the Steering Committee and that they are targeted at the highest priority, proactive, landscape-scale conservation needs in the Midwest.

Evaluation criteria

1. A proposed new or modified priority should be considered as a priority for the MLI if:

- It is a priority for multiple state fish and wildlife agencies
 - Potential subcategories include species, habitat types, threats, data gaps/research needs
 - Subcategory criteria, (*example criteria for at-risk species displayed below*)
 - Federal listing status, and species on the National Listing Workplan.
 - What proportion of the range of SGCN is in the Midwest? (regional responsibility for the conservation of the species)
 - How many SGCN occur across broad regions of the Midwest and share similar regional landscape connections that could be addressed by the proposed priority action?
 - % of midwest states for which species is state-listed as endangered, threatened, or SGCN.
 - Likelihood of cooperative action influencing species recovery.
- AND-

- It is a priority for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
 - Subcategory criteria, such as (*Note: these are placeholder criteria for example only – substitute actual*)
 - Listed or Candidate species
 - Species on the National Listing Workplan
 - Migratory Birds
 - Etc.

2. A proposed priority meeting the above criteria should be further considered as a priority for MLI if:

- It is a priority for partner agencies or organizations
- It addresses an unmet conservation need
- It will become or remain urgent if unaddressed
- It has a landscape connection
- It is not currently being done or likely to be done in the future by another entity (e.g. joint ventures, habitat partnerships, joint commissions); or if involvement by MLI could enhance alignment or address gaps where efforts of existing entities overlap
- For a research or monitoring priority, it has applied elements supporting objectives of an unmet conservation need
- It is resource intensive and would benefit from a more coordinated and focused approach
- Making it an MLI priority would add conservation value (including by enhancing alignment among existing initiatives and programs)

3. An existing priority may be considered as no longer a priority for the MLI if:

- It is being effectively addressed by others and there is no net benefit from MLI engagement
- Its objectives have been effectively accomplished
- It becomes precluded by higher priorities
- It is found to be not feasible to accomplish the objectives of the priority

Background

At the June 2019 annual Directors' meeting the MAFWA Board passed a Resolution supporting and providing additional direction for the Midwest Landscape Initiative that had been initiated by MAFWA in 2018. That Resolution called for, in part, developing a comprehensive regional action plan to provide a regional framework to address the co-identified priorities of the MLI and coordinate conservation actions and investments in the region.

The 2019 MAFWA Resolution also stipulated that the action plan should include clear, specific, practical and measurable objectives, performance measures, and outcomes and that the work of the MLI must be based on sound scientific principles, including social science and human dimensions aspects.

Based on this direction, MLI priorities should be co-identified and science based, and must lend themselves to the development of specific and measurable objectives, performance measures, and outcomes as part of an action planning process. Established priorities will help to focus, align, and increase efficiency of current efforts and programs directed at the highest priority regional landscape conservation needs and they may also inform and help support the need for increased capacity to accomplish conservation objectives.

Next Phase -- Implementation of identified priorities:

As new or modified priorities are identified and approved by the Steering Committee, there may be a need for new Work Groups or Subgroups to be formed to develop action plans for the priority with clear, specific, practical and measurable objectives, performance measures, and outcomes. The need for these groups should be identified and recommended by existing Work Groups or the Technical Committee and chartered by the Work Group (for subgroups within existing Work Groups) or Technical Committee (for new Work Groups).

Working Groups or Subgroups should lead the development of an Action Plan for the approved priority. They may consider forming temporary and broad-based technical working groups comprised of representatives of agencies and organizations with specific expertise, authorities, or interest in the specific priority being worked on. These technical working groups would be dissolved once their portion of an Action Plan is developed.

Once an Action Plan is developed, recommended by the Technical Committee, and approved by the Steering Committee, then there would be voluntary implementation of objectives by each participating or interested entity based on their authorities, land or species management responsibilities, and capacities.

Recommendation: A new committee should be developed to examine what the Action Plans should entail. Consider Work Group team leads to be on that committee and develop a proposed table of contents for the overall action plan. Some preliminary thoughts and illustrative examples of potential content and outline of action planning follow, but should be more fully developed by a group provided with this specific charge.

Examples:

Some illustrative examples (not comprehensive) of potential priorities: **At Risk Species** in prairies/grasslands/savannas, rivers, riparian/floodplain, young successional forests/open lands, old forest, streams, caves/karst areas, wetlands, lakes; **Threats** such as land conversion, wildlife disease, invasives, pesticides, or predation; **Data Gaps** such as species life history requirements and limiting factors, distribution, habitat or species monitoring, landscape health.

If determined to be a regional priority, these could be taken on as part of MLI or referred by MLI to another existing or specifically chartered entity.

DRAFT action planning template for approved priorities (might consider requiring key elements of this for proposed priorities as well to provide consistent information for review and evaluation?):

Co-identified MLI Conservation Priority_____.

Work Group: _____

Subgroup/Technical working group: _____

- Statement of problem
- Objectives (clear, specific, practical, and measurable)
 - Objective 1. _____
 - Performance Measures
 - Outcomes
 - Objective 2. _____
 - Performance Measures
 - Outcomes
- Background on the priority
 - Assessment of threats/data gaps
 - Summary from scientific literature and other key data sources and their relative significance
 - General description of overall tools, actions, and policies available or needed to implement this priority
 - Description of how coordinated conservation actions and investments under this priority will:
 - lead to efficient use of existing resources in alignment with overall landscape objectives; and
 - jointly address the identified priority and minimize gaps or redundancy in efforts
- Key strategies for addressing the priority objectives
 - Strategy 1. _____
 - Strategy 2. _____
- Rationale for how strategies will lead to accomplishment of objectives
- How will results be monitored and measured?
- How will biological and human dimensions information be used in an adaptive approach to evaluate and adjust actions based on monitoring and evaluation?
- Does the action plan support a compelling case for added capacity, if necessary to accomplish objectives?
- Key groups engaged in developing or commenting on the priority.