FY 2026 Multistate Conservation Grant Program Strategic Priorities

Eligible project activities include those allowable under the Wildlife Restoration Act and Sport Fish Restoration Act, including research, planning, restoration, species or habitat management, technical assistance, policy coordination, professional development, and other activities that support the conservation of wild birds and mammals and sport fish and their habitats. Other eligible activities include those that provide for public use and benefit from wild bird and mammal and sport fish resources such as R3 for hunting, target shooting and fishing, hunter education, aquatic education, public access improvements, research and evaluation pertaining to these activities, and other activities consistent with the enabling legislation, supporting the ability of state fish and wildlife agencies to carry out projects under the Wildlife Restoration and Sport Fish Restoration Acts.

1. ***Conservation & Science***

    A. Landscape Conservation and Habitat Connectivity
    B. Fish and Wildlife Health
    C. Human Dimensions & Conservation Social Science
    D. Invasive Species
    E. Emerging Technologies for fish and wildlife management

2. **Relevancy and Capacity Building**

    A. Expanding Relevancy and Engagement
    B. Professional Development
    C. Conservation Education

3. ***Recruitment, Retention, Reactivation (R3)***

    A. Marketing
    B. Engaging Participants
    C. Monitoring and Evaluation
    D. Hunting and Shooting Sports Access and Infrastructure

4. ***AFWA Priorities Identified in AFWA Funding Principles (submitted by ExCom)***

    A. Management Assistance Team
    B. Management of the MSCGP Program
    C. CITES and International Conservation Programs and Their Impact on State Agencies
    D. Coordination of Conservation on a National Scale
    E. National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation

1. *Conservation and Science*

A. Landscape Conservation and Habitat Connectivity
B. Fish and Wildlife Health
C. Human Dimensions & Conservation Social Science
D. Invasive Species
E. Emerging Technologies for fish and wildlife management

RATIONALE

The conservation and management of fish and wildlife resources require a science-based, adaptive approach to address the most pressing ecological challenges of the 21st century. **AFWA's member State Fish and Wildlife agencies recognize habitat loss, degradation, fragmentation, invasive species, and fish and wildlife disease as the most significant threats to sustainable natural resource management.** To combat these challenges, state agencies rely on emerging technologies and collaborative, cross-jurisdictional efforts to ensure effective conservation and long-term resilience of fish, wildlife, and their habitats.

DEFINITIONS

- **Landscape Conservation and Habitat Connectivity**
  Landscape Conservation is the integrated approach to preserving and managing large, interconnected natural areas or ecosystems, often across multiple land types and jurisdictions. It focuses on maintaining or restoring ecological processes, functions, and biodiversity at a landscape scale, ensuring the protection of critical habitats, natural corridors, and key species. This approach often involves collaboration among government agencies, conservation organizations, and local communities to address threats such as habitat fragmentation, environmental changes, and invasive species.
  Habitat Connectivity is maintaining or restoring connections between fragmented habitats, allowing wildlife to move freely between areas to access food, shelter, breeding sites, and migration routes. This can be achieved by establishing wildlife corridors, protected areas, and other landscape features that facilitate species movement, genetic diversity, and ecosystem health. Connectivity is crucial for species' adaptation to environmental changes, particularly in the face of change and urbanization.

- **Fish and Wildlife Health**
  Diseases are defined as diseases that affect fish or wildlife populations (e.g., Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), White-nose syndrome (WNS)Outdoor recreation adoption model, Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia (VHS), Infectious hematopoietic necrosis (IHN), Infectious Salmon Anemia (ISA)), with particular emphasis on those diseases with known or potential population impacts.
  Contaminants are defined as manufactured chemicals, both legacy and emerging (e.g., PFOS, PFAS, PCBs, Mercury, Lead, etc.), and toxins, both manufactured and naturally occurring (e.g., harmful algal blooms) that directly or indirectly impact fish and wildlife populations

- **Human Dimensions and Conservation Social Science** is a broad scientific discipline similar to traditional fish and wildlife research and management. It broadly integrates information from social psychology, sociology, political science, decision analysis, economics, and others. These multiple sub-disciplines require different skill sets, training, expert knowledge of complex theory, and proper application of various data collection methodologies, analysis, and interpretation. These components provide a framework for robust and responsible conservation management and decision-making. Conservation social science addresses the 3rd "leg" of the conservation triad: wildlife, habitat, and people. It provides unique insight into the social, psychological, and political determinants that underpin human preferences for fish, wildlife, and habitat management.

- **Invasive species** are non-native or native species subject to range expansions with negative ecological consequences. Of particular importance are especially high-impact organisms identified at the regional or national level.

- **Advanced technologies** are defined as *devices* (e.g., more effective and economical tracking collars and acoustic tags), *techniques* (e.g., eDNA surveillance for rare species and pathogens, RT-QuIC applications to CWD testing), that can be adapted to answer questions and improve natural resource management.

Potential Proposals

A. Landscape Conservation and Habitat Connectivity

Potential Proposals may include but are not limited to:

- Establish regional wildlife migration corridors, restore migratory bird habitats, and enhance coastal and estuarine ecosystems through spatial planning and policy coordination.
- Studies on habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation due to agriculture and development and prioritizing restoration of degraded fish habitats using spatial analyses.
- Human Dimensions (HD) and Social Science (SS) proposals to assess stakeholder expectations regarding fish, wildlife and habitat management, and hunting/angling opportunities.
- Preventing turbine mortality at hydropower projects, evaluating fish dynamics with hydropower development and removal, and assessing big game movement with utility-scale Photovoltaic (PV) solar development.
- Supporting effective coordination of regional & national conservation efforts through state Fish & Wildlife Agencies such as National Fish Habitat Partnership; Furbearer Initiative; Farm Bill; National Grasslands Coordination Initiative and other initiatives
- Develop and adopt plans to restock sport fish and forage fish in the natural areas or districts covered by the plans and obtain data to develop, carry out, and test the effectiveness of the plans.
- Obtain data to guide and direct the conservation of sport fish populations, including environmental factors and conservation measures.
- Research the problems of managing wildlife and its habitat to administer wildlife resources efficiently.

B. Fish and Wildlife Health

Potential Proposals may include but are not limited to:

- Establish monitoring programs, sentinel areas, and large-scale data systems for fish and wildlife pathogens, including sample repositories.
- Develop standardized non-lethal and eDNA testing methods for pathogens and develop new strategies for determining epidemiological factors and disease prevalence in wildlife.
- Identify key transmission pathways for wildlife diseases (e.g., CWD, HPAI, SARS-CoV-2, RHDV2) and assess reverse transmission between species.
- Establish health models for free-ranging wildlife to guide planning, policy, and disease mitigation efforts.
- Develop new sampling strategies, effective mitigation measures for disease transmission, and field-based diagnostic protocols.
- Proposals that advance the development of wildlife vaccine delivery technologies (e.g., using deer to deliver Lyme disease pharmaceuticals or pesticides to ticks).
- Create human dimensions models for wildlife research and provide training opportunities for agency personnel involved in wildlife health management.

C. Human Dimension and Conservation Social Science

Potential Proposals may include but are not limited to:

- Assess the public's use and acceptance of technology in state agency decision-making processes (e.g., online commenting tools, virtual commission meetings) and the effectiveness of public engagement efforts (e.g., media campaigns and event booths to raise awareness of agency activities and accomplishments funded by WSFR).
- Building social science capacity in the conservation community, supporting networking and continued education for conservation social scientists, and developing competencies for improved public engagement.
- Evaluating the long-term impact of "one-off" events (e.g., fishing clinics) on conservation behaviors and understanding the motivations of conservation volunteers.
- Improving methodologies in managing public input, satisfaction surveys, and determining the economic impact of conservation at the local level.

D. Invasive Species

Potential Proposals may include but are not limited to:

- Developing cost-effective tools, technologies, and methods to address invasive species introductions and movement pathways by anglers, hunters, and boaters.
- Developing safe and cost-effective tools, technologies, and methods to eradicate or manage invasive species and restore native fish, wildlife, and habitats.
- Expanding or creating partnerships to manage invasive species across jurisdictional boundaries.
- Incorporating surveys of hunter, angler, and boater perceptions and values regarding invasive species prevention and management strategies.
- Evaluating and implementing effective invasive species communications (e.g., effects of invasive species of fish and wildlife, prevention strategies) for anglers, boaters, and hunters.

E. Emerging Technologies for fish and wildlife management

Potential Proposals may include but are not limited to:

- Developing methodologies for LiDAR applications that facilitate watershed management.
- Identify tools to assist in implementing machine learning to estimate wildlife abundance utilizing remote sensing techniques that are also considerate of associated wildlife health concerns (e.g., thermal imagery or aerial photography).
- Advancing utilizing the Motus Wildlife Tracking System (Motus) in wildlife management decision-making.
- Assessing impacts of commercially-available emerging technologies, such as forward-facing sonar (FFS), on fish populations and management.

2. Relevancy and Capacity Building

A. Expanding Relevancy and Engagement
B. Professional Development
C. Conservation Education

RATIONALE

By prioritizing **relevancy and capacity building**, agencies can adapt to societal shifts, enhance public engagement, and secure sustainable fish and wildlife conservation support. Fish and wildlife agencies must foster and train leaders; better equip policymakers such as Commissioners and State legislators with better information on wildlife management practices, principles, and appropriate governance practices; create new ways to educate and inform citizens involved in conservation issues; and coordinate policies to manage fish and wildlife resources within the context of both State-level and national impacts to conservation.

DEFINITIONS

- **Relevancy** ensures that fish and wildlife agencies remain effective stewards of natural resources while fostering broader public support and participation. As the percentage of people who hunt and fish declines, the base of people aware of, participating in, valued, and supporting conservation must be expanded beyond traditional agency constituencies who can no longer disproportionately shoulder the financial burden of conservation.
- **Professional Development** for state fish and wildlife agency biologists and resource managers refers to the systematic process of enhancing their skills, knowledge, and competencies related to wildlife conservation, management practices, policy implementation, and emerging scientific advancements. This development aims to improve their effectiveness in managing natural resources and supporting conservation efforts.
- **Conservation education** is an effective, dynamic means for fish and wildlife agencies and their partners to share conservation accomplishments achieved through the Wildlife Restoration Act and Sport Fish Restoration Act, helping to reinforce:
    - The value of our fish and wildlife resources as a public trust.
    - Conservation and management of terrestrial and aquatic resources as essential to sustaining fish and wildlife, the outdoor landscape, and the quality of our lives.
    - Participation in the stewardship of fish, wildlife and habitat.
    - Understanding and accepting lawful participation in fishing, boating, hunting, trapping, and shooting sports.

Potential Proposals

A. Expanding Relevancy and Engagement

Potential Proposals may include but are not limited to:

- Opportunities to engage new conservation professionals through Internship programs, fellowships, training scholarships, career development, mentoring, and continuing education.
- Opportunities to engage new stakeholders
- Informing trust fund contributing industries on the tangible benefits of the American System of Conservation funding.

B. Professional Development

Potential Proposals may include but are not limited to:

- Training and Workshops, e.g., participation in training sessions focusing on specific areas such as species identification, habitat management techniques, conservation policy, hands-on workshops that provide practical skills, such as data collection methods, field survey techniques, emerging technologies, or habitat restoration practices.
- Participation at scientific and professional conferences where biologists can present research, share findings, and network with peers in the field of wildlife management.
- Interagency Mentorship Programs – Pairing early-career professionals with experienced mentors in conservation leadership.
- Applied Research Fellowships – Supporting conservation staff in conducting field studies or policy research.
- Supporting effective administration and coordination of the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Programs (and other Office of Conservation Investment administered grant programs) through the Fish and Wildlife Trust Fund Committee's Federal Aid Coordinators Subcommittee
- Evaluating and developing strategies or approaches to enhance state workforce success and maximize delivery of wildlife programs

C. **Conservation Education -** *Proposals addressing this Strategic Priority must directly explain how the project focuses on accomplishments or findings of state agency work supported by the Wildlife Restoration Act and Sport Fish Restoration Act. Communicating this information to a specific or broad audience must help state agencies regionally or nationally achieve conservation and management objectives for wild birds and mammals, sport fish and/or habitats that support these species, or agency objectives related to hunter, recreational target shooter, angler or aquatic education.*

Potential Proposals may include but are not limited to:

- Education on fish and wildlife as public trust resources managed by federal, tribal, and state agencies, including the role of regulations in conservation.
- Highlighting the connection between environmental quality and wildlife health, the role of regulated hunting, fishing, and trapping in management, and the funding sources supporting state conservation efforts.
- Encouraging respect for property, responsible outdoor behavior, and ethical engagement with fish, wildlife, and natural resources.
- Enhancing public understanding of water resources, aquatic life, sport fishing, and responsible aquatic resource use.
- Supporting the expansion of conservation law education in law schools.

3. Recruitment, Retention, Reactivation (R3)

A. Marketing
B. Engaging Participants (Angler, Hunting and Recreational Shooting)
C. Monitoring and Evaluation
D. Hunting and Shooting Sports Access and Infrastructure

RATIONALE

For proposals submitted under the following strategic priorities, "R3" refers to efforts that strategically increase, retain, and invite lapsed customers to participate and support the participation of others in shooting sports and hunting (which includes trapping for this grant program). The long-term purpose of R3 is to provide improved support and experiences for existing participants, ensure that new participants are introduced from all different backgrounds, and ensure that hunting, shooting sports, and angling are seen as relevant throughout all segments of society. Priorities, where projects may also be considered for angling R3, are noted in italics.

Proposals under the following strategic priorities should be broad in scope and far-reaching. Collaboration between new and existing partners such as industry, NGOs, and state agencies is highly encouraged. Projects that build off prior Multistate grant-funded efforts are encouraged where appropriate. Proposals that support startup programs designed to increase hunting and shooting sports participation should include a robust evaluation plan capable of documentation of participant behaviors or behavioral intents post-program. In addition, they must consist of a sustainability plan for continuation beyond the end of the grant period.
Proposals that emphasize translation of research findings into actionable steps with evaluation plans for state fish and wildlife agency practitioners will be prioritized.

Projects will also be considered for fishing participation under this category using funds from the Traditional MSCGP - Sport Fish Restoration.

Potential Proposals

A. Marketing: Identification, development, and implementation of strategic marketing (including outreach and communication) tools, tactics, and resources with defined and measurable R3 outcomes intended to:

1) maximize social support for hunting and/or recreational target shooting from increasing broad societal awareness and acceptance to connecting participants with opportunities and
2) increase participation in hunting and/or recreational target shooting.

Potential projects might include but are not limited to:

- applied market research that includes real-world testing or application.
- marketing best practices that influence the behavior of individuals or groups in a manner that can be tracked and evaluated for desired outcomes.
- development and placement of regional or national R3 marketing or ad campaigns and toolkits that have been previously developed.
- increase R3 community-wide engagement and implementation of marketing tactics.
- marketing public target ranges and the opportunities available to them.

B. Engaging Participants

a. Mentoring and Volunteering: Identify and evaluate elements of successful mentoring programs and current mentor/mentee motivations and application of that knowledge to expand and promote effective mentoring or instructional efforts from the existing base of hunting and/or recreational target shooting participants. Outlining a plan for a positive return on investment for state agencies is encouraged.

Potential projects might include but are not limited to:

- development of program guidance to increase partners' effectiveness, capacity, scalability, and collaboration.
- efforts to increase understanding of mentors and mentees.
- efforts to increase transition of current program participants and mentees to mentors.
- efforts to increase understanding and engagement of potential mentees.
- efforts to facilitate effective brokering of mentoring or instructional experiences within populations of mentors/instructors and prospective mentees/students.
- Reference to previous MSCG research and programs regarding mentoring efforts is encouraged.

b. ***Adaptable Solutions for Sustained Outdoor Recreation Participation*** facilitate continuous improvement by integrating emerging trends, societal shifts, and participant feedback to ensure long-term engagement in hunting, trapping, and shooting sports. These solutions help organizations

expand their reach by introducing existing programs to new audiences, growing current participation, and developing ***R3 (Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation)*** strategies through technological innovation, enabling large-scale engagement efforts.

The **Outdoor Recreation Adoption Model (ORAM)** guides participation growth by emphasizing:

- **Social Support** – Community and mentorship foster long-term involvement.
- **Conservation Impact** – Increased participation in outdoor activities supports conservation funding and advocacy.
- **Adoption Stages** – Awareness, interest, trial, commitment, and continued participation shape engagement strategies.

Potential projects might include but are not limited to:

- development of new automation engagement tools to increase the effectiveness of targeted R3 efforts.
- expanding the scope and adoption of existing strategies and toolkits.
- research projects to understand potential technologies that promote increased reach and create efficiencies within teams and processes.
- development, application, and evaluation of new technology such as artificial intelligence, data expansion, and applications for mobile devices...
- Standardization of R3 community-wide best practice training and implementation (Practitioner's Guide and WAFWA Definitions implementation) with a focus on clear ORAM pathway development, implementation, and adaptation

C. Monitoring and Evaluation: Development of tools, training, technologies, analyses, or reports that allow R3 practitioners to evaluate the impact(s) of R3 effort implementation on the behavior (initiation or avidity) or behavioral intent of its target participants.

Potential projects might include but are not limited to:

- Develop tools for R3-related data collection and create data dashboards to improve staff capacity for evaluating, managing, and interpreting data for decision-making.
- Create systems for measuring R3 program outcomes, including the collection and analysis of participant and license sales data at regional or national levels.
- Conduct analyses to assess the effectiveness of R3 programs, delivery mechanisms, and outreach campaigns to optimize resource use and improve program outcomes.
- Develop evaluation tools for measuring the impact of R3 efforts on hunting and shooting sports participants.
- Identify effective stakeholder engagement strategies and "gateway" programs to introduce the public to fishing, hunting, trapping and shooting sports.

D. Hunting and Shooting Sport Access and Infrastructure: Development or expansion of projects, plans, tools, or programs to increase hunting and/or target shooting access and infrastructure at regional or national scales. Implement strategic initiatives that effectively unify or leverage R3 efforts by state and federal fish and wildlife agencies, NGOs, and industry partners to yield measurable outcomes.

Potential projects might include but not limited to:

- Develop resources (e.g., best practices, guidelines, case studies) to improve R3 efforts in hunting and recreational shooting, including accessibility and regulatory compliance.
- Foster partnerships with industry, NGOs, and regional associations to enhance collaboration and capacity for hunting and shooting sports R3 efforts.
- Enhance mapping and virtual resources to connect hunters and recreational shooters with participation opportunities.
- Conduct research on usage patterns at shooting ranges and public hunting areas to identify key areas and best practices for optimizing R3 efforts.

4. *AFWA Priorities Identified in AFWA Funding Principles (submitted by ExCom)*

A. Management Assistance Team (MAT)

B. Management of Multistate Conservation Grant Program (MSCGP)
C. CITES and International Conservation Programs and Their Impact on State Agencies
D. Coordination of Conservation on a National Scale
E. National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation

RATIONALE

This strategic priority recognizes the important role that AFWA (the Association) and its members play in coordinating and implementing conservation in North America. It includes opportunities for professional development within state fish and wildlife agencies, coordination of national and international policies to meet conservation needs more effectively, and coordination of the Multistate Conservation Grant program. This priority is intended for grants to the Association based on the Association's funding priorities, which limit the amount of funding that can be awarded to the Association.

Proposals

- Leadership Training for State Fish and Wildlife Agencies and Conservation Partners (MAT)
- Multistate Conservation Grant Program Management
- Coordination of State Fish and Wildlife Agencies Authority to Manage Wildlife Resources in Concert with Federal Actions Required by International Treaties, Conventions, Partnerships, and Initiatives
- Coordination of National Scale Conservation Efforts by State Fish & Wildlife Agencies
- National Survey
    - National Survey of Fishing Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation -FHWAR (USFWS/States)
    - Coordination of National Survey of FHWAR – USFWS
    - AFWA National Survey Technical Workgroup Coordination