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A REPORT FROM THE WILDLIFE DIVERSITY CONSERVATION AND FUNDING COMMITTEE ASSOCIATION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE AGENCIES

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

The purpose of this project was to engage wildlife diversity program managers in a discussion about the past and current state of wildlife diversity programs. It was led by a small steering committee who sought input from current and former wildlife diversity program managers through a survey, listening session, and discussions at the 2024 and 2025 Wildlife Diversity Program Managers Annual meetings. State fish and wildlife agency Directors provided valuable feedback at the 2025 AFWA Annual Meeting. This document is primarily intended for state fish and wildlife agency staff who work on species of greatest conservation need and their habitats but has broader applicability as well.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We express our appreciation to current and former wildlife diversity program managers and state fish and wildlife agency Directors who provided input and reviewed drafts of this report. A special thanks to Judy Camuso and Paul Johansen who provided valuable guidance.

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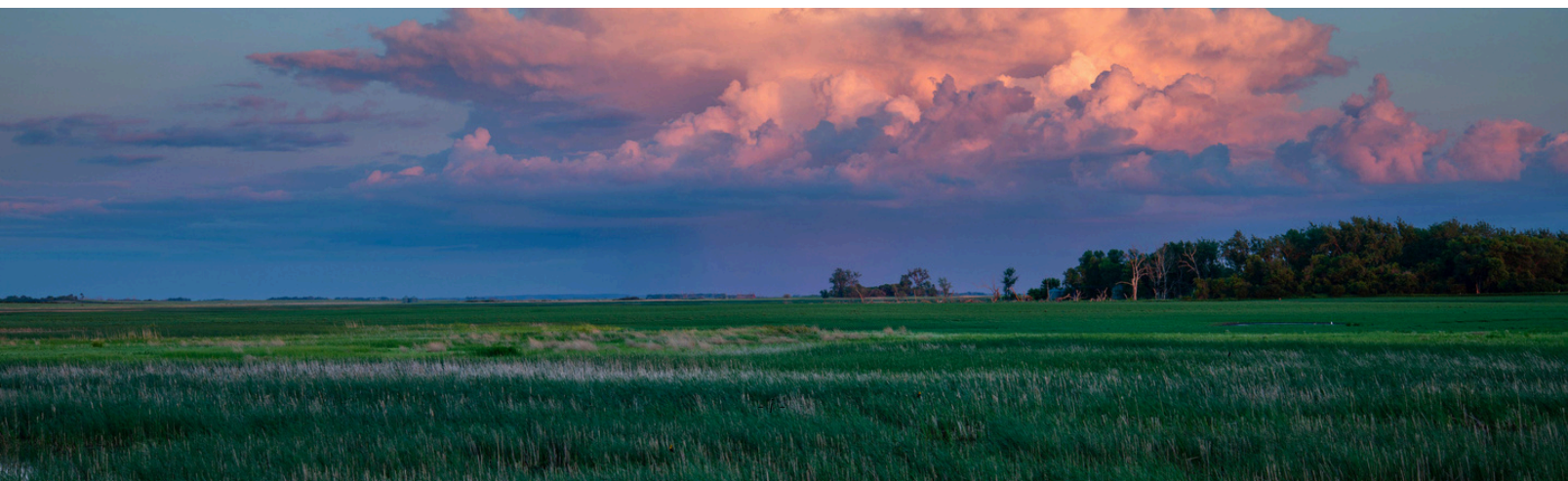


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FOREWORD

Foreword written by Judith Camuso, Retired Commissioner of the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and past President of the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies, and Jenny Dickson, Wildlife Division Director, Connecticut Dept. of Energy & Environmental Protection.



Photo: Judith Camuso



Photo: Jenny Dickson

Fish and Wildlife Diversity Conservation has evolved tremendously since the inception of many wildlife stewardship programs and laws over a century ago. While programs for the conservation of “game and sport fish” species have enjoyed great success, and stable funding, for many decades, the same is not true for all wildlife species. Challenges continue to grow. Now is the time to reflect on what we have collectively accomplished, identify what needs exist, and outline a vision for the future.

We have accomplished a lot in the fifty years since the first recommendation to establish “nongame” programs nationwide and for Congress to pass legislation to provide dedicated funding for implementation. Fish and wildlife diversity programs now exist in every state and territory. We have seen tremendous conservation successes in the twenty-five years that State and Tribal Wildlife Grants have provided basic funding for all Species of Greatest Conservation Need. This also marks twenty years of State Wildlife Action Plans which collectively create a blueprint for the conservation of fish, wildlife, and the habitats they rely on across the nation. Developed through collaboration with partners across government, academia, industry, and the nonprofit community, they are among the most scientifically rigorous, broadly inclusive conservation strategies ever created and are entering their third generation of conservation guidance.

There are numerous success stories to be celebrated across the country. Proactive conservation has reversed declining trends in species such as Lake Erie Water Snake and helped prevent federal listing of species such as Alabama Shad, Pygmy Rabbit, and Columbia Spotted Frog. But many challenges remain. We are facing a biodiversity crisis exacerbated by habitat loss, extreme weather events, invasive species, emerging diseases, and more. Changes in federal programs have shifted many conservation burdens to states without the required resources to adequately address these needs. Continued success relies on dedicated, sustained funding and adequate staffing of state wildlife diversity programs. Without it, our progress cannot keep pace with the needs or challenges our wildlife heritage face.

The vision that is foundational to this report is for wildlife and the natural world we treasure to continue to thrive through well-funded, collaborative conservation led by state and territorial fish and wildlife agencies and their partners. Accomplishing this vision has important economic consequences. Bird watching alone, which is pursued by 96 million Americans, contributes \$279 billion annually in economic output, a substantial part of the \$1.2 trillion outdoor recreation economy.

Discussions that informed this report grew from wildlife diversity program managers' annual meetings where leaders from across the country assessed progress, obstacles, and opportunities associated with the conservation of more than 12,000 Species of Greatest Conservation Need. Current and former wildlife diversity program managers participated in a national survey, listening sessions, work groups, and review of this report. That shared knowledge of where we have been, what we've accomplished, where we've fallen short, and where we need to go was critical in the development of this document. This report calls for the development of a comprehensive communications strategy to address a key shortfall, the limited awareness and use of State Wildlife Action Plans by conservation partners.

When states lead and funding is available, conservation succeeds. We have a proven track record spanning decades and a model that is successful and cost-effective. This approach also provides an opportunity for broader engagement and increased support which in turn expands the reach and relevance of state fish and wildlife agencies to their residents. Achieving this vision requires more than state action alone. Public and private partners, policymakers, and citizens — the broader conservation community — need to work together to adopt and implement State Wildlife Action Plans, establish dedicated and stable funding, and prioritize the conservation of all wildlife.

We have the opportunity to solidify the conservation legacy our nation began a century ago for game and sport fish by expanding it to include all native species. The need is urgent; the time to act is now. We must ensure that the wildlife we enjoy and the natural places that are critical to our physical and mental health are here for future generations. Let's make this vision a reality.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Last century, state fish and wildlife agencies with the support of hunters, anglers, and trappers, successfully restored many of the nation's iconic game species. This unqualified success, which continues today, happened not by chance but because state agencies had the scientific expertise, resource management tools, and sustained and dedicated funding paid for by sportsmen and women. Today thousands of species that are not hunted, fished, or trapped, are declining, many at alarming rates. Recent assessments by the National Wildlife Federation and NatureServe estimate that 30–40% of the nation's fish and wildlife are now vulnerable to extinction, underscoring the urgent need for action.

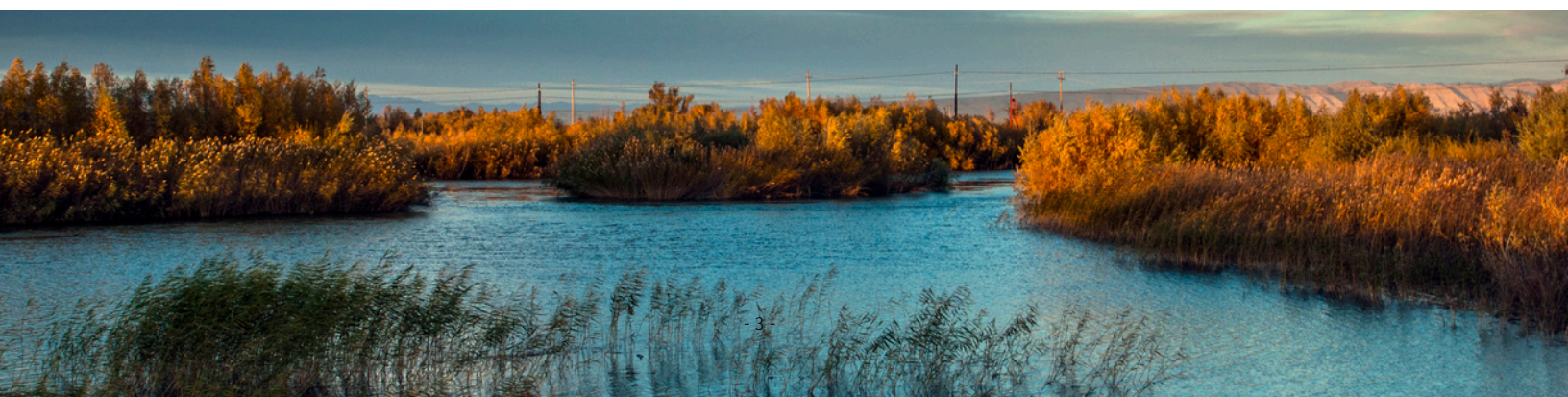
State fish and wildlife agencies are tasked with broad responsibilities to manage all fish and wildlife. In addition to game and sport fish management, these agencies lead efforts to prevent species from becoming endangered and aid in the recovery of species already state or federally listed. This important work is central to their charges and provides opportunities to engage with broader constituencies such as wildlife viewers, helping agencies expand their relevance and gain new supporters.

The development of **State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAPs)**, first completed in 2005 and revised in 2015 and 2025, represent the most comprehensive and collaborative conservation planning effort in U.S. history. These 56 congressionally required plans are funded principally through the **State and Tribal Wildlife Grants (STWG) program** and identify thousands of species of greatest conservation need (SGCN) and the actions needed to overcome key threats. Collectively, these plans serve as the blueprint for conserving our nation's fish and wildlife as well as their habitats.

Despite their proven value, implementation of State Wildlife Action Plans is constrained by a significant funding gap. Current funding of approximately \$73 million annually falls far short of the estimated \$1.3 billion needed each year to fully implement these plans. Replicating the extraordinary conservation successes achieved for game and sport fish will require a comparable long-term investment of dedicated and sustained funding and broad public support.

The purpose of this report is to assess progress being made by state agencies to conserve the full suite of fish and wildlife and offer aspirations for meeting the challenges of the future. Input for this report was solicited from current and former wildlife diversity program managers and state fish and wildlife agency Directors. This report acknowledges the important contributions of the past and proposes aspirations for the future.

We envision a future where wildlife and the natural world are cherished as vital national treasures and flourish through well-funded collaborative conservation led by state and territorial fish and wildlife agencies and our partners.



The following aspirations, when achieved, will position state and territorial fish and wildlife agencies to meet their broad responsibilities to conserve all fish and wildlife well into the future.

- **AFWA and state and territorial fish and wildlife agencies should communicate the importance of SWAPs** to state and federal partners, tribes, NGOs and the business sector and encourage their use to conserve all fish and wildlife.
- **AFWA and state and territorial fish and wildlife agencies should review and update the Wildlife Diversity Functional Model** to ensure it reflects current conservation challenges, needs, and best practices.
- **State and territorial fish and wildlife agencies should examine legal authorities** to determine if there are gaps in responsibility for certain taxa including invertebrates and plants.
- **AFWA and state and territorial agencies should work to secure increased and diversified funding**, with continued advocacy for dedicated and sustained federal investment and new opportunities through state-level funding, foundations, and business partnerships.



INTRODUCTION

Maintaining sustainable populations of fish and wildlife is core to the mission of state and territorial fish and wildlife agencies (agencies). Although these agencies have achieved remarkable success in restoring many of the nation's most iconic game and sport fish, conservation successes for 'nongame' species have been more limited. The alarming decline of thousands of species has been chronicled in the [State of the Birds](#) and [State of the Bats](#) reports and in numerous scientific journals. Population declines are occurring across nearly every major taxon, with reports by the [National Wildlife Federation](#) and [NatureServe](#) estimating that 30-40% of fish and wildlife are now vulnerable to extinction. We are witnessing a dramatic loss of fish and wildlife that remains hidden from most of the public. Multiple recent polls confirm that a great majority of the public care deeply about the conservation of endangered wildlife and the environment.

In 2005, agencies completed their first State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAP), which collectively identified over 12,000 Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN). These plans described a wide range of threats to fish and wildlife such as habitat loss and fragmentation, invasive species, pollution, extreme weather, disease, overexploitation and trafficking, and the actions needed to overcome threats. State and federal agencies, conservation partners, tribes, and the public were involved in the development of the initial plans and their subsequent revisions in 2015 and 2025. This historic and unparalleled planning effort involving thousands of conservation partners and members of the public is the most comprehensive and collaborative fish and wildlife planning process ever completed.

Although the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants (STWG) program was integral to the development of SWAPs, the average annual apportionment of ~\$1 million per jurisdiction for their implementation is far below the ~\$26 million (2015 dollars) per jurisdiction annually that Southwick Associates estimated is needed to fully implement SWAPs. At current funding and staffing levels, only a small number of threats for an even smaller number of SGCN can be addressed each year. This small investment in the implementation of SWAPs pales in comparison to the immense economic benefits provided by fish and wildlife and their habitats. The economic output of outdoor recreation alone is estimated to be \$1.2 trillion annually. And although data are lacking on the total value of ecosystem services in the U.S., within national forests and grasslands alone, these services are estimated to be worth at least \$24 trillion. The immense value of our nation's fish and wildlife and the economic and human costs if lost, is grossly underappreciated.

Although key stakeholders and much of the public understand the role and importance of agencies in managing game and sport fish, their responsibility in conserving 'nongame' species is not as well known. The advent of SWAPs has increased awareness and support for agencies, yet much of the public sector still has little understanding of the critical role and responsibility of state fish and wildlife agencies. The term wildlife diversity came into usage in the 1990s and early 2000s as an alternative to the phrase "nongame" and is used by about half of agencies to describe their programs focused on nongame taxa. While maintaining the identity and expertise of individual wildlife diversity programs is important, conserving the full suite of fish and wildlife cannot be accomplished by any single program operating in isolation. The complex and interconnected challenges facing fish and wildlife today require an agency-wide, "all hands on deck" approach.

Since SWAPs are intended to be comprehensive and include an assessment of species from all major taxa, agency legal authorities may lag behind conservation needs. Although nearly every agency has legal authority and responsibility for fish, mammals, birds, amphibians, and reptiles, only about 80% have full authority over aquatic invertebrates (12% having partial authority), 70% have authority over terrestrial invertebrates, and 70% of those with coastal resources have authority over marine species. Only



Oregon Silverspot Butterfly - USFWS

about half of fish and wildlife agencies have at least partial authority over plants. Legislatures in several states have recently expanded or clarified legal or regulatory authorities pertaining to fish and wildlife. The AFWA Legal Strategy Advisory Council has created a resource on [state authorities](#), however definitions of wildlife vary making direct comparisons difficult.

The origins of this report were borne out of a panel discussion at the 2024 annual meeting of wildlife diversity program managers where Terry Johnson, a retired wildlife diversity program leader from the Arizona Game and Fish Department, challenged the group to think boldly and intentionally about guiding the future of wildlife diversity conservation. This led to the formation of a steering committee whose purpose was to *“engage current and former Wildlife Diversity Program Managers in a dialogue about the current state and future needs of wildlife diversity conservation”*. A survey of wildlife diversity program managers was conducted in early 2025 to obtain information on structures, capacities, priorities, challenges, and funding. Responses were received from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands.

At the 2025 Wildlife Diversity Program Managers' Annual Meeting in Alabama, Judy Camuso, AFWA President and Ron Regan, AFWA Executive Director participated in a plenary session on agency efforts to conserve all species. This was followed by an afternoon discussion to gather content for this report. Input was also solicited from current and retired fish and wildlife diversity staff. In hindsight, this report would have benefited from the thoughts and opinions of a larger cross section of state fish and wildlife agency staff. A draft of the report was presented to fish and wildlife agency Directors at the 2025 AFWA Annual Meeting where valuable feedback was received, discussed at the 2026 Wildlife Diversity Program Managers Annual meeting, and later incorporated into the final draft of this report.

HISTORY OF WILDLIFE DIVERSITY FUNDING

Agencies have been managing fish and wildlife for more than a century. Passage of the Lacey Act and Migratory Bird Treaty Act at the beginning of the last century placed new protections on many species. The Pittman-Robertson, Dingell-Johnson, and Wallop-Breaux Acts (PR/DJ/WB) provided state fish and wildlife agencies with dedicated and sustained funding that was critical to hiring professional staff and building long-term programs. Although these Acts were principally focused on game and sport fish, the programs they support provided direct benefits to myriad species that are not hunted or fished. The recovery of bald eagles is just one example of how PR funds aided in the recovery of an iconic species that is not hunted.

Passage of state and federal endangered species acts beginning in the late 1960s and 1970s led to the creation of new agency programs to step up conservation of nongame and endangered species. These nascent programs used a variety of novel funding approaches including revenue from voluntary state income tax checkoffs and conservation license plates, but it was largely insufficient to meet growing conservation needs. Except for a few states like Missouri which receives 1/8th of 1% of state's sales-tax revenue for conservation, funding to conserve all species remained relatively small for most states and territories. In 1975, the Wildlife Management Institute published a report calling for federal legislation to support the development and implementation of nongame plans using a modest excise tax on selected outdoor products. In 1980, the US Congress passed the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act (PL 96-366) that authorized but did not appropriate funding for the development of nongame plans.

In the early 1990s, AFWA launched the Wildlife Diversity Initiative to secure dedicated funding for nongame species. Naomi Edelson was hired to lead the effort and in 1994 the Bridge to the Future Conference was held in St. Louis, MO, to discuss the need for accelerating agency efforts to conserve all fish and wildlife. This led to an initiative to raise \$350 million annually for state-based fish and wildlife conservation through a new excise tax on outdoor recreation products. The following year, the Teaming With Wildlife coalition was launched to build grassroots support for the initiative. The coalition eventually grew to over 6,500 national, state, and local organizations and businesses, including most major national conservation groups. It was the largest coalition of its kind ever assembled.

In the late 1990s, the Conservation and Reinvestment Act ([HR701](#)), or CARA as it was often called, was introduced by Congressman Don Young (R-AK) and included a wildlife conservation section (Title III) to provide agencies with \$350 million annually in dedicated funding for wildlife conservation, education, and wildlife-dependent recreation. The source of funding was existing fees on Outer Continental Shelf gas and oil development. In 2000, the legislation passed the U.S. House of Representatives by a 315-102 margin and despite having the support of 62 bipartisan members of the Senate, the legislation failed to advance, principally because key appropriators were opposed to creating a new mandatory spending program.

That same year the U.S. Congress passed what became known as "CARA-lite" as part of FY2001 appropriations legislation. It included \$50 million for a new program called State Wildlife Grants, later changed to State & Tribal Wildlife Grants (STWG), after funding for tribes was added. Congress also amended the Pittman-Robertson Act, creating the Wildlife Conservation & Restoration Program (WCRP) with a one-year appropriation of \$50 million. Unlike the STWG program, WCRP was permanently authorized and allowed states to use the funding for conservation, education, and wildlife-dependent recreation, consistent with Title III in CARA. Both programs required states to develop a comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy/plan by October 2005. These plans later became known as State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAPs).

Appropriators promised that annual STWG funding would eventually reach \$350 million, but this goal was never realized. Funding for the program peaked at \$90 million in FY10 but plummeted by 30% the following year when Congress cut many programs to address the growing federal deficit. Currently, the program is funded at \$73 million, ~20% lower than peak funding and far short of the \$1.3 billion annually needed to implement SWAPs.

Efforts to secure dedicated and sustained funding continued after CARA failed. The [Teaming With Wildlife Act](#) was introduced in 2007 and 2008 by Senator Tim Johnson (D-SD) which sought to provide agencies with \$350 million annually for implementation of SWAPs using revenue from energy and mineral development on federal lands. Senator Johnson intended to attach the bill to comprehensive energy legislation that he was leading, but the legislation stalled.

In 2014, AFWA formed the [Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America's Diverse Fish and Wildlife Resources](#) (Blue Ribbon Panel) which was co-chaired by Johnny Morris, founder and CEO of Bass Pro Shops, and David Freudenthal, a two-term former governor from Wyoming. The Blue Ribbon Panel included influential leaders from major conservation organizations, the oil and gas industry, outdoor recreation, and academia. The Panel recommended that Congress pass legislation to provide agencies with \$1.3 billion annually using revenue from energy and mineral development on federal lands to fund implementation of SWAPs. Later that year, Congressman Don Young (R-AK) introduced the Recovering America's Wildlife Act ([HR 5650](#)), based on the Blue Ribbon Panel's recommendation. Although it did not advance, in subsequent Congresses, similar legislation gained support and in June of 2022, [HR 2773](#) was introduced by Congresswoman Debbie Dingell (D-MI) which passed in the House of Representatives by a 231-190 vote. Similar legislation ([S 2372](#)) sponsored by Senator Martin Heinrich (D-NM) passed in the Environment and Public Works Committee but did not reach the Senate floor. The legislation nearly made it into a must pass omnibus spending bill, but like CARA, it was another near miss for dedicated and sustained funding.

In 2024 Congressman Bruce Westerman (R-AR) introduced the America's Wildlife Habitat Conservation Act ([HR 7408](#)), which sought to authorize up to \$300 million annually for agencies to conserve SGCN. The bill passed out of the House Natural Resources Committee but did not advance to the House floor. As of July 2026, neither the Recovering America's Wildlife Act nor America's Wildlife Habitat Conservation Act had been reintroduced in the 119th Congress.

It has been more than 50 years since the release of the Wildlife Management Institute report that called for dedicated funding for 'nongame' conservation. Although dedicated funding has not been achieved, the STWG program has provided agencies with over \$1 billion in apportioned funding since its inception in 2000 to develop and partially implement SWAPs. Without dedicated and sustained funding, full implementation of SWAPs will be out of reach, likely leading to more state and federal endangered species listings. Until the long-sought goal of sustained and dedicated funding is reached, AFWA should step up its efforts to secure increased funding through the STWG program.



WILDLIFE DIVERSITY FUNCTIONS & STRUCTURE

State fish and wildlife agencies have a broad charge to conserve all fish and wildlife. In addition to sustainably managing game and sport fish populations, they are also responsible for developing and implementing SWAPs to conserve endangered, rare, and declining species. A core function of agency work is to prevent species from becoming endangered. When species become endangered they require critical emergency room-like care where costs skyrocket and outcomes are uncertain. Proactive conservation can prevent species from becoming endangered, leading to lower costs, more regulatory certainty for industry and private landowners, and a retention of state management authority.

In 1999, wildlife diversity program managers produced the report titled [Functional Model for an Enhanced Wildlife, Conservation, Education and Recreation Program](#) for the AFWA Wildlife Diversity Committee. It's a suggested framework for developing or enhancing agency programs to address the diverse conservation needs of all wildlife. Although the model is still relevant, changing environmental and social conditions as well as the advent of SWAPs necessitate a review of the model to ensure it meets current and future needs. Functions such as conservation planning, social science, fish and wildlife health, One Health, and conservation relevancy were not addressed in the model.

As a preliminary step to updating the model, wildlife diversity program managers were asked to participate in a survey and select the key functions their programs perform from a list of twenty common functions. The number of functions ranged from 4-18 (Table 1). Twenty-one programs performed nine or fewer functions and nine programs performed 15 or more.



Table 1. Functions performed by agency wildlife diversity programs (n = 54).

RANK	FUNCTION	NUMBER OF WILDLIFE DIVERSITY PROGRAMS
1	Management of state/federal threatened and endangered species	53
2	Conduct monitoring and surveys	52
3	Conduct research	47
4	Outreach and technical assistance to other government agencies	44
5	Management of terrestrial invertebrates	42
6	Management of freshwater aquatic invertebrates	41
7	Management of fish and other aquatic vertebrates	37
8	Outreach & Tech Assistance to local jurisdictions &/or businesses	34
9	Environmental Review	32
10	Working with Local Jurisdictions	30
11	Working with Private Landowners	29
12	Outreach & Education to Adults	28
13	Disease Surveillance & Response	27
14	Outreach & Education to Children	23
15	Outreach & Education targeting Teenagers	21
16	Natural Heritage Program Functions/Responsibilities (i.e., NatureServe)	20
17	Wildlife Viewing / Watchable Wildlife Programming	17
18	Public Lands Habitat Management	14
19	Management of Marine species (there are only 26 Coastal Agencies)	10
20	Nuisance Animal Control	6

Larger programs generally take on more functions, but the geographic size of the state also seems to play a role, with programs in smaller states often performing a larger number of functions often with fewer staff. Many programs indicated they would like to add functions but only if increased funding and staffing were available. This includes natural heritage functions (26%), watchable wildlife programming (26%), public lands habitat management (22%), technical assistance to private landowners (21%), and collaboration with local jurisdictions (21%). All the functions were performed by at least a small number of programs. These results should be considered in the context that program functions are often distributed across agencies and that agency-wide collaboration and communication on all species conservation is a desired approach.

Wildlife Diversity Program Managers were asked to identify their highest priorities. Revision and implementation of SWAPs were ranked as high priorities for most wildlife diversity programs. Other priorities include threatened and endangered species conservation, monitoring and surveying, species management, habitat restoration and management, land protection, and research. Wildlife diversity program managers were asked to identify their highest priorities for the next 10 years. While most priorities remained the same, new priorities included partnership building, greater on-the-ground conservation, landscape-level conservation, and the identification of biodiversity focal areas.

WILDLIFE DIVERSITY PROGRAMS

Over the past 25 years, state fish and wildlife agencies have significantly expanded their capacity to conserve at-risk species and their habitats. The State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program has provided critical support for building staff expertise, strengthening conservation programs, and advancing the planning, monitoring, research, and management capacities needed to conserve all species. While the organizational structures used by agencies vary, most have established dedicated wildlife diversity or nongame programs that provide leadership and expertise for this work. Nonetheless, the scale of conserving biological diversity requires more than a single program or group of specialists. An agency-wide commitment that integrates expertise, resources, and collaboration across all programs and disciplines is a key ingredient for greater success.

State fish and wildlife agencies are entrusted with the conservation of thousands of species, including both game and nongame wildlife. Wildlife diversity programs provide critical services such as environmental review and taxa-specific expertise to business and industry to minimize impacts to at-risk species. Wildlife diversity programs provide leadership for threatened and endangered species conservation and recovery, State Wildlife Action Plan implementation, and science-based decision support across a broad range of taxa. Comprehensive wildlife conservation happens when this work is integrated throughout the agency and connected with habitat management, private lands, fisheries and wildlife management, education, law enforcement, communications, and other core functions. Integration can foster collaboration, help avoid 'silos', and reinforces a unified approach to fulfilling the agency mission which can lead to improved conservation outcomes.

Wildlife diversity work also plays an important role in strengthening relationships with the growing community of nonconsumptive users who value and support fish and wildlife conservation, including wildlife watchers, photographers, educators and private landowners and industry partners who have a stake or interest in fish and wildlife conservation. These

connections broaden conservation partnerships, increase agency relevancy, and strengthen public support.

The social and ecological landscape for fish and wildlife conservation continues to change. Urbanization, shifting relationships with nature, changing wildlife values, and evolving patterns of outdoor participation present both challenges and opportunities for agencies. Continued investments in recruitment, retention, and reactivation programs remain essential to sustaining hunting, fishing, and trapping traditions. At the same time, expanding opportunities for all people who value fish and wildlife to connect with nature and participate in agency programs helps build broader understanding, support, and engagement in conservation.

Wildlife diversity programs can play an important role by providing expertise, new perspectives, and opportunities for fostering partnerships and connecting with new constituencies. These programs can serve as catalysts for cross-program collaboration and be incubators for innovation. Wildlife diversity programs can provide an important pathway for attracting young professionals who have unique backgrounds, interests, values, and experiences. Involving wildlife diversity staff in employee onboarding and training can help promote an understanding and appreciation for the full breadth of agency responsibilities and diverse constituencies.



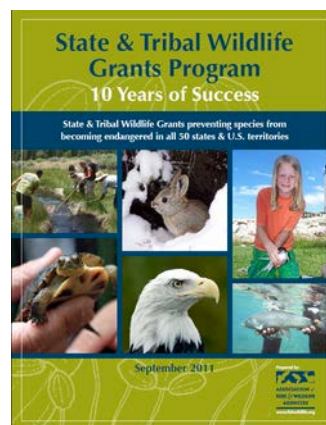
STATE WILDLIFE ACTION PLANS (SWAPS)

Congress first called for the development of state-based nongame plans in 1980 when it passed the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act. Because funding to implement the Act was never appropriated, most states lacked the capacity to undertake comprehensive planning until decades later following creation of the State & Tribal Wildlife Grants program in 2000. Funding through this new program required each state and territory to develop a comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy (SWAP) that addressed eight required elements. Each plan is approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and must be updated at least every 10 years. The completion of the first generation of SWAPs in 2005 marked the first time that comprehensive fish and wildlife planning spanned from coast-to-coast.

A central feature of each SWAP is a comprehensive assessment of fish and wildlife. Nationwide, these assessments identified over 12,000 species of greatest conservation need and their associated habitats. The plans describe key threats, conservation actions, and research and monitoring plans. Agencies coordinate with and solicit input from federal, state, and local agencies, tribes, private conservation organizations, landowners, and the public. Although state and territorial fish and wildlife agencies lead the development of SWAPs, they are collaboratively developed and are intended to serve as a blueprint for each jurisdiction and a resource to all partners working to conserve at-risk species.

Following the completion of the first SWAPs, a bipartisan polling and communications firm was hired by AFWA to develop and test messages to help agencies and conservation partners communicate about SWAPs. A message triangle (Fig. 1) was created that provides an easy-to-use template with effective words and phrases. Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy/Plan was replaced with State Wildlife Action Plan. The message triangle includes phrases like “benefits to both humans and wildlife”, “investment in future generations”, and “cost effectiveness” which tested well with the public. The central message in the triangle is “the need to invest in State Wildlife Action Plans NOW to conserve wildlife and vital areas for future generations”. A review of the message triangle by communications and social science experts would be beneficial to ensure the messaging is still effective. The message triangle emphasizes the “proactive” nature of SWAPs which resonates with policy-makers and industry because of its forward-thinking approach.

Now that SWAPs have been in place for two decades, there are many opportunities to showcase successes. As an example, the Sprague’s pipit was listed as a candidate for federal endangered species listing in 2010, but was found to not be warranted for listing because of monitoring and conservation efforts tied to SWAPs. There are dozens of other examples where species were precluded from federal listing through implementation of SWAPs. Many successes are highlighted in reports that were completed for the [10th Anniversary](#) and [20th Anniversary](#) of the State & Tribal Wildlife Grants Program.



Although not required, most agencies include conservation opportunity areas in their plans that identify focal landscapes to prioritize conservation work. The Northeastern states pioneered a Regional Conservation Needs program, funded by a 4% allocation of each state's STWG apportionment, to address critical landscape conservation needs. The Northeast used information from their SWAPs to create a regional SGCN list, an approach later adopted by the Southeast and Midwest. The Northeast also developed a regional database and coordinated planning for key SGCN in the region. AFWA created an effectiveness measures framework, best practices, and voluntary guidance to support the revision of SWAPs.

Use of SWAPs by the larger conservation community to guide at-risk species work has fallen short of expectations. SWAPs are rich with biological data but sometimes exceed 1,000 pages in length, making them difficult for conservation practitioners to use. To make SGCN data easier to access, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) created a database that includes each SGCN list. The database was revised recently and is now available as a [dashboard](#). To make other information in SWAPs easier to access for multijurisdictional conservation efforts, the USFWS has developed the [SWAP Visualization Tool](#). A beta version of the tool includes Information from the 2015 SWAPs. The USFWS plans to update the tool with information from the 2025 plans when funding and staffing are available.

Agencies in Oregon, Colorado, Texas, California, Massachusetts, Georgia, Virginia, and New Mexico have created interactive websites or tools to facilitate use of their SWAPs and other agencies are developing similar tools. Putting SWAP information in a searchable online format will help conservation partners make greater use of SWAPs. Agencies in Pennsylvania, Colorado, Texas, Idaho, and New Jersey have created or are developing online tools to track implementation of their SWAPs, an important innovation that can promote collaboration on SWAP implementation.

Despite the enormous amount of effort to develop SWAPs (~10,000 hours on average per jurisdiction for the 2025 revision), their use by the larger conservation community is inconsistent. Many federal partners and private conservation organizations do not use the plans extensively when working on at-risk species. This could be due to a lack of awareness, ease of access, or lack of personal involvement in development of the plans. Since the plans are required by Congress and approved by the USFWS, the lead federal agency for fish and wildlife conservation, they should be seen by all federal agencies as a key resource for at-risk species conservation.

Private funding to implement the plans also has not met expectations, despite billions of dollars being directed to biodiversity conservation. Although the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation invested tens of millions of dollars in implementation of the plans initially, their support later waned as priorities shifted. Most major foundations that fund fish and wildlife conservation do not explicitly link their priorities to SWAPs. The same is true for businesses and corporations, many of which are increasingly investing in biodiversity conservation. Although Tandem Global (formerly the Wildlife Habitat Council) has included SWAPs in its corporate habitat certification program, few businesses invest directly in the plans even though they could support sustainability initiatives. AFWA entered into an MOU with the National Alliance of Forest Owners that encourages the voluntary conservation of SGCN on over 43 million acres of private forest lands. A similar agreement is being considered to encourage conservation of SGCN on gas pipeline right-of-way.

A national communications strategy is needed to help raise awareness and tell the story of SWAPs and the critical role agencies play in conserving all species of fish and wildlife. The strategy should include an evaluation of current messaging and branding, identification of target audiences, recommended communication channels, tactics, effectiveness measures and also use lessons learned from previous internal and external communication efforts. Examples of SWAP successes could be compiled and tools developed to make the plans more visible. Stronger partnerships between wildlife diversity programs and agency communication and education staff could result from these efforts and complement and support the [Fish and Wildlife Relevancy Roadmap](#).

The development of a communications strategy should be followed by the design and implementation of a training program. The training should include best practices on storytelling, engagement, and branding so agencies can raise awareness and support for SWAPs internally and externally. Key audiences could include agency staff, federal partners, tribes, conservation organizations, academic institutions, foundations, policymakers, and business/industry.

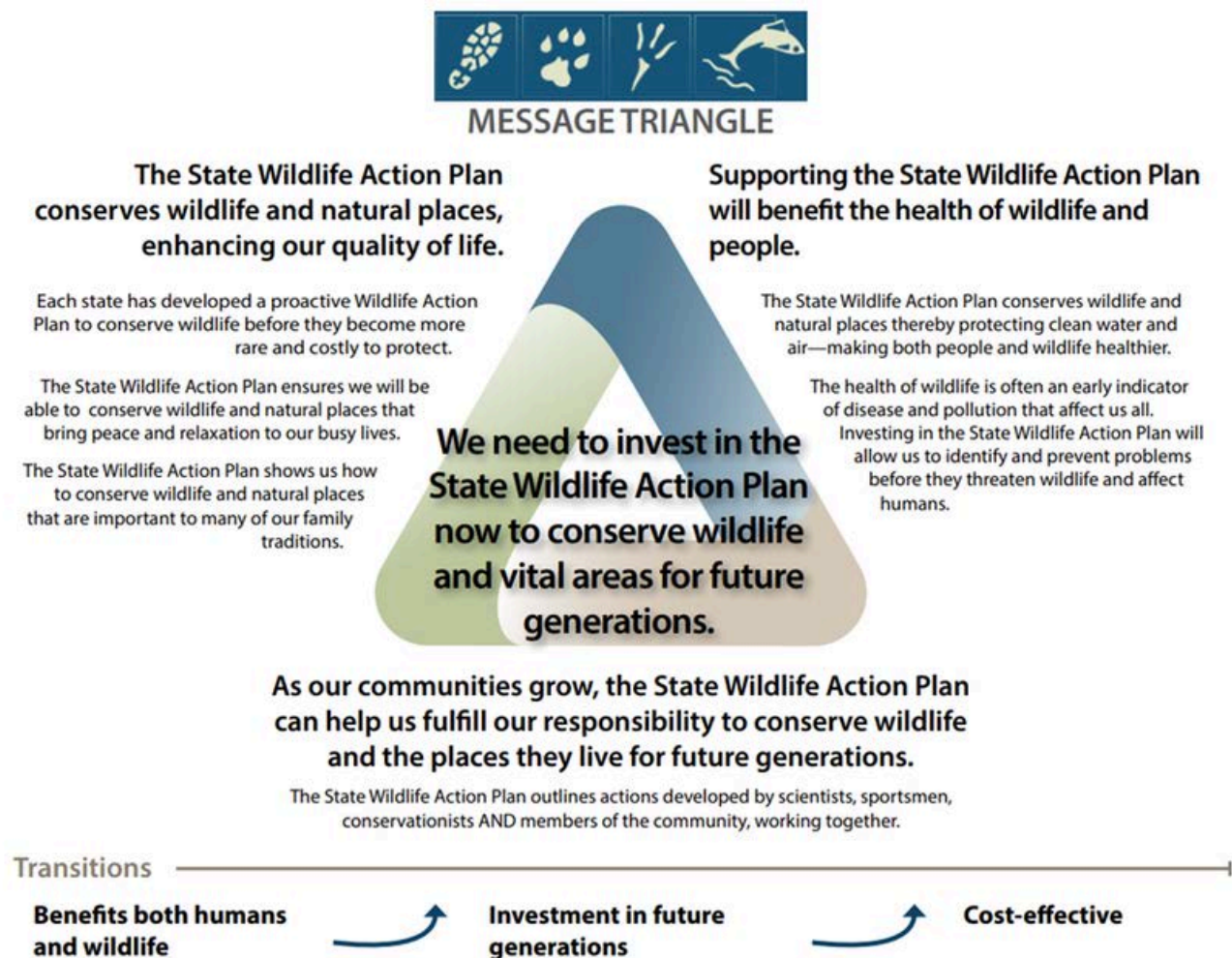


Figure 1. The SWAP Message Triangle was developed after completion of the first State Wildlife Action Plans to communicate about the plans.

FUNDING

Funding remains the largest barrier to full implementation of SWAPs. The longstanding need for increased, dedicated, and sustained funding, whether through the Recovering America's Wildlife Act or other legislation, is urgent and should continue to be AFWA's priority. Agency budgets for the direct conservation of SGCN are often relatively small compared to the large number of species needing conservation. The median level of funding for wildlife diversity programs is \$2.8 million, and ranges from \$25 million (Hawaii) to less than \$1 million in five states and one territory. Only 14 states have annual budgets > \$4 million for nongame work (Fig. 2). These figures are conservative as they don't take into account agency spending that provides benefits to SGCN through land protection and habitat management for game and sport fish.

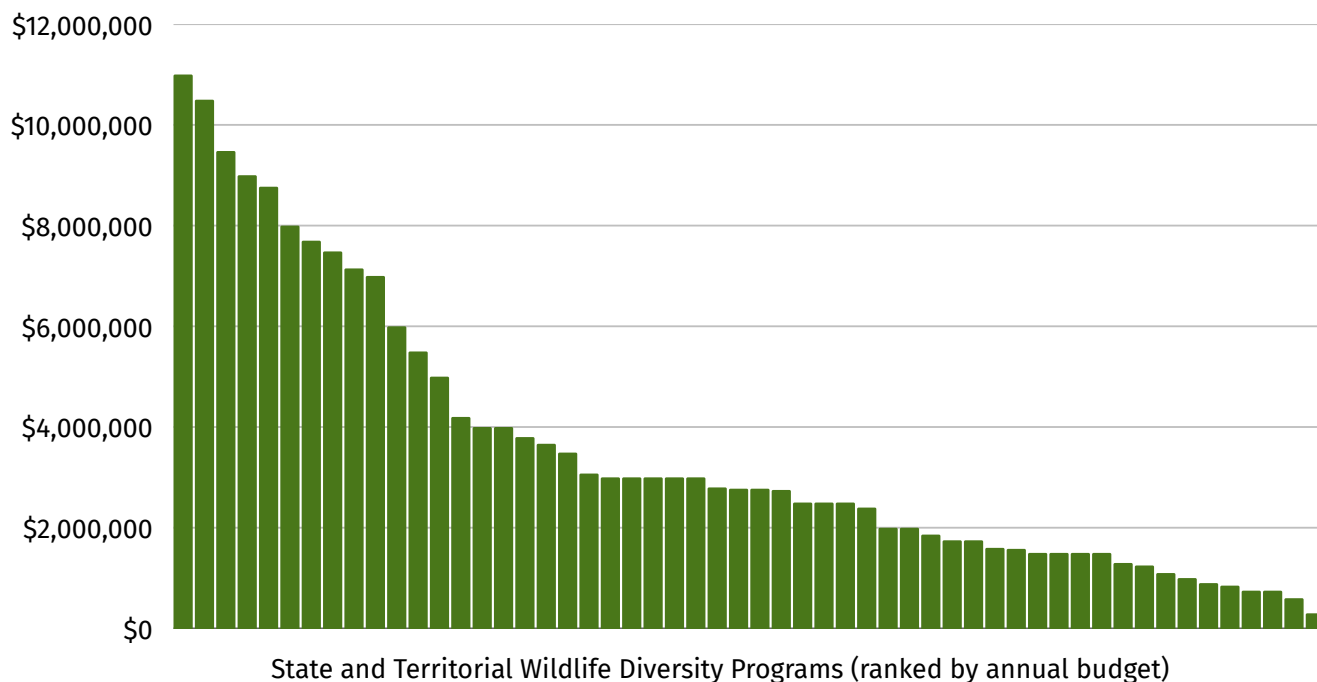


Figure 2. Annual budgets for wildlife diversity programs for states, territories, and Washington, DC. Hawaii's budget, at \$25 million, is not shown. Note, these figures do not account for all agency spending that benefit SGCN.

The source of funding varies considerably amongst programs, but federal funding is essential as over 80% rely on federal sources for at least 50% of their wildlife diversity program (Fig. 3) and sixteen states depend on STWG for >50% of their program budget (Fig. 4).

Portion of Annual Budget from State and Federal Sources

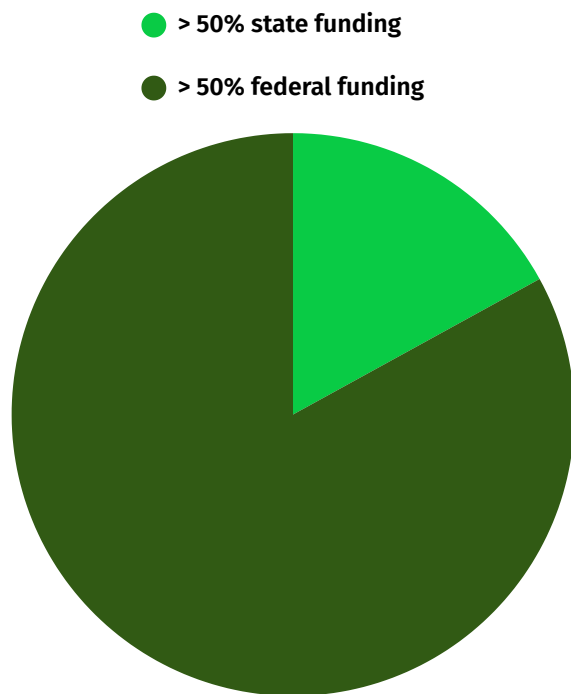


Figure 3. Proportion of agency wildlife diversity program annual budgets from state and federal sources.

State and Tribal Wildlife Grants

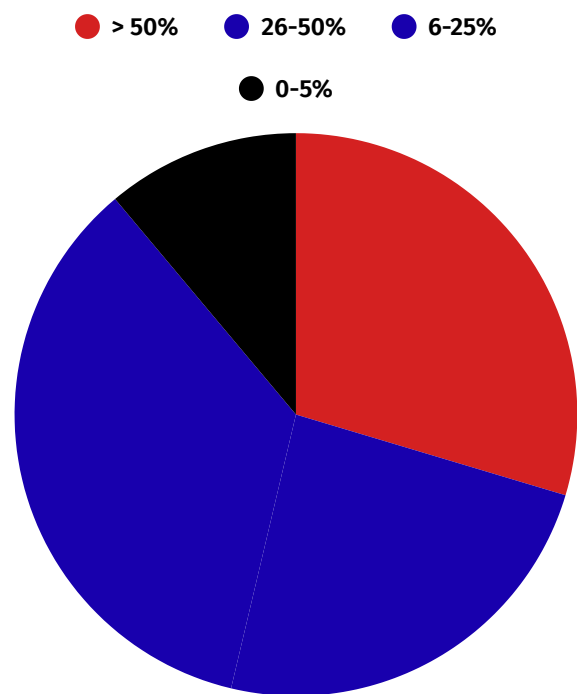


Figure 4. The proportion of State and Tribal Wildlife Grant program funding that comprised agency wildlife diversity program budgets.

Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration (PR/DJ/WB) funding is a source of funding for 78% of wildlife diversity programs, contributing at least 5% of their budget in half of those agencies, and over 25% of funding in 37% of the programs. Programs in 12 states do not currently use PR/DJ/WB funds directly for wildlife diversity conservation.

Eighty-five percent of agency wildlife diversity programs receive funding through Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and this accounts for more than 25% of the budget for 7% of wildlife diversity programs. Section 6 funding makes up < 5% of the annual budget in 63% of agencies. Sixty-five percent of agencies receive funding from at least one other federal funding source, but that contribution makes up < 5% of the annual budget for 13% of wildlife diversity programs (Fig. 5).

Percentage of Annual Budget from Federal Funding Sources

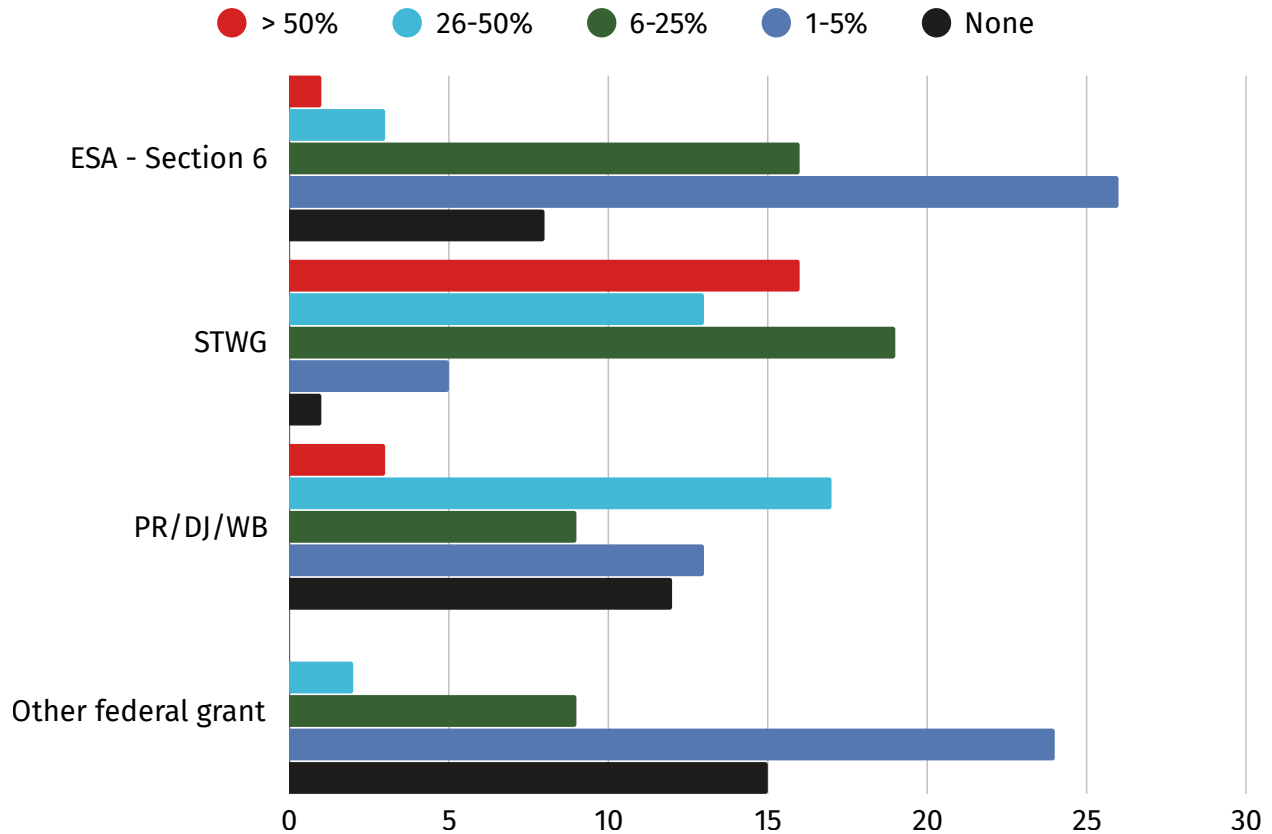


Figure 5. The percentage of annual wildlife diversity program budgets comprised of four federal funding sources.

Funding from state and territorial sources comprises a relatively small portion of the annual budget for most wildlife diversity programs. This source of funding makes up >50% of the annual budget in only 11% of states. Wildlife diversity programs in 57% of agencies receive a portion of their agency's hunting and fishing license revenue, which makes up > 25% of those programs' budgets in only 13% of agencies. About half of agencies receive general fund support for their wildlife diversity programs, which is a significant revenue source for just 17% of wildlife diversity programs.

Fifty percent of wildlife diversity programs receive funding from income tax checkoffs and 44% receive revenue from specialty license plates. Tax checkoffs comprise < 5% of the annual budget in 78% of agencies that have them, and license plate revenue comprises < 5% in 50%. Other sources of funding include lottery revenue, which fund >50% of Colorado's wildlife diversity program, sales taxes which fund > 75% of Missouri's program, and real estate transfer taxes which fund 80% of the Illinois program. Montana receives 65% of its program budget from a portion of a tax on the sale of recreational marijuana and Utah receives approximately 50% of its program funding from a portion of a tax on commercial brine shrimp. Utah will begin receiving additional funding from a new tax on renewable energy, which could triple their funding for wildlife diversity work. Other sources of funding include interest, private foundations, and fundraising which account for 6-25% of the budgets in Georgia, Minnesota, and New Hampshire (Fig 6).

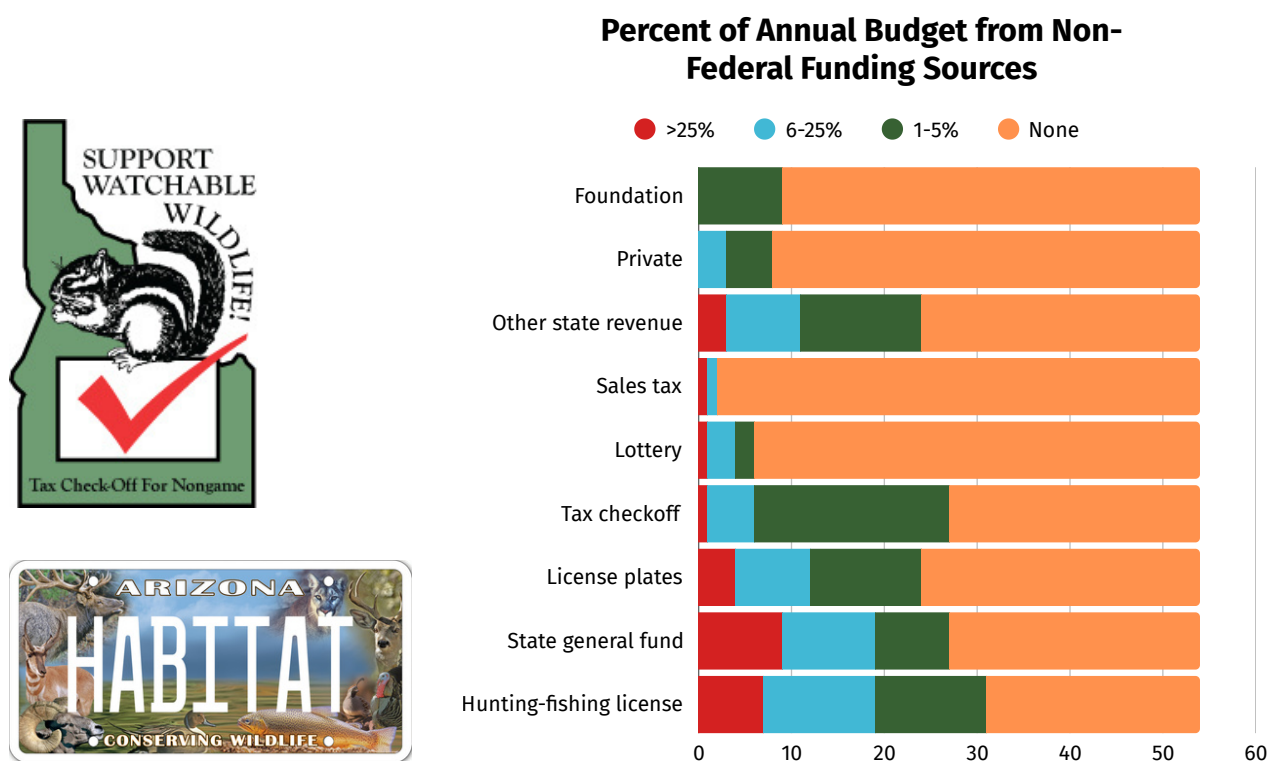


Figure 6. Bars sum to the total number of wildlife diversity programs and colors indicate the percentage of the annual budget provided by nonfederal funding sources.

ASPIRATIONS

The purpose of this report is to assess the current status of state agency wildlife diversity conservation work but to also aspire to even greater success in the future. Based on input from wildlife diversity program managers and agency leaders, the following voluntary aspirations (not in priority order) were identified to address future needs. They will be carried out by AFWA in close coordination with state and territorial fish and wildlife agencies.

AFWA AND STATE AND TERRITORIAL AGENCIES SHOULD COMMUNICATE THE IMPORTANCE OF SWAPS AND THE LEADERSHIP ROLE OF AGENCIES IN CONSERVING ALL FISH AND WILDLIFE.

State fish and wildlife agencies led the successful recovery of game and sport fish and are integral to their continued stewardship. The work of agencies is also critical to the sustainability of Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN). The role and importance of SWAPs and agency leadership in the conservation of fish and wildlife need to be better communicated to local, state, and federal agencies, private conservation groups, tribes, foundations, and business/industry. SWAPs should be a primary resource that guides the conservation of at-risk species in every state and territory. To facilitate their use, a communications strategy that raises awareness, support, and use of SWAPs should be developed and implemented through customized training.

AFWA AND STATE AND TERRITORIAL AGENCIES SHOULD REVIEW AND UPDATE THE WILDLIFE DIVERSITY FUNCTIONAL MODEL TO REFLECT CURRENT CONSERVATION NEEDS AND BEST PRACTICES.

In 1999, AFWA approved the [Functional Model for an Enhanced Wildlife Conservation, Education and Recreation Program](#), a framework for enhancing wildlife programs to address the full range of conservation, education, and recreation opportunities. The model was used by agencies to build their wildlife diversity programs. Because the functional model preceded the development of SWAPs, it should be reviewed and updated to determine if changes are needed to better support wildlife diversity programs and SWAPs. The review should examine if additional functions are needed, identify best practices, provide examples of effective organizational structures, describe core staff positions, and examine how technological advances can be used to support wildlife diversity conservation.

STATE AND TERRITORIAL AGENCIES SHOULD EXAMINE LEGAL AUTHORITIES TO DETERMINE IF THERE ARE GAPS IN RESPONSIBILITY FOR INVERTEBRATES, PLANTS, AND OTHER TAXA.

The public is increasingly recognizing the importance of and need for conserving all species. However, existing legal authorities may not fully address current conservation needs and changing expectations of the public. SWAPs have broadened the scope of species conservation for many agencies, particularly for invertebrates and plants. Fish and wildlife agencies should review their authorities, responsibilities, and relationships with sister agencies that may hold authority for certain species or taxa (e.g., invertebrates, marine species) to see if there are opportunities to improve conservation of all at-risk species.

AFWA AND STATE AND TERRITORIAL AGENCIES SHOULD WORK TO SECURE INCREASED AND DIVERSIFIED FUNDING, WITH A CONTINUED PUSH FOR DEDICATED AND SUSTAINED FEDERAL INVESTMENT AND PURSUE NEW OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH STATE-LEVEL FUNDING, FOUNDATIONS, AND BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS.

No issue is more important to the successful implementation of SWAPs and nongame conservation programs than increased funding. Funding is essential for ensuring that states and territories have the resources needed to employ expert staff and implement programs that will lead to improved understanding and conservation of SGCN. While securing additional federal funding should continue as a priority, opportunities for new state and private funding also should be pursued.

AFWA should redouble its efforts to secure sustained and dedicated federal funding that will support full implementation of SWAPs, as recommended by the Blue Ribbon Panel (2015). Until this goal is reached, AFWA should continue to vigorously advocate for increased funding for the STWG Program, as it is a bedrock program for the development and implementation of SWAPs.

Approximately 80% of state wildlife diversity programs use Pittman-Robertson, Dingell-Johnson, and/or Wallop-Breaux funds for nongame bird, mammal, and fish conservation. Even a modest increase in the use of these funds could provide a significant boost to implementation of SWAPs. States that are considering expanding or using these funds for the first time for nongame purposes could benefit from exploring how other states use them to co-benefit harvested and non-harvested species. Use of these funds for SWAPs should follow federal guidance and be consistent with agency priorities.

AFWA should play a greater role in sharing information about state-based funding initiatives by maintaining a registry of funding successes and failures and facilitating training session focused on successful state initiatives. Efforts in other states to secure funding to support SWAPs through real estate transfer fees, outdoor equipment taxes, public bond initiatives, sales/lodging taxes, and conservation license plate fees should be communicated among the states. AFWA also should coordinate with national partners on state funding initiatives and support coalition development if appropriate and needed.

AFWA should explore opportunities to partner with the private sector to support implementation of SWAPs. This could include direct support through corporate grants or opportunities such as register round-ups with retailers (e.g., L.L. Bean, Bass Pro Shops, Dick's Sporting Goods, and REI), wildlife labeling or branding, and sustainability programs. Foundations like the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Bezos Earth Fund, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and others provide billions in funding to conserve biodiversity. Relationships should be built to encourage foundations and private conservation groups to align, use, and support SWAPs to meet their biodiversity conservation goals.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Securing increased and dedicated funding was identified as an important measure of public support and conservation progress. Whether it is the passage of the Recovering America's Wildlife Act or similar legislation at the federal level, and/or increased state and private funding, more resources would allow for greater implementation of SWAPs, which would lead to better outcomes for more SGCN. AFWA should track and share progress on federal and state funding successes and failures.

Other measures of success could include changes in the status of SGCN and their habitats, the number of federal endangered species listings, agency staffing levels, measures of public support and awareness, extent of interjurisdictional and landscape-level collaboration, and examples of alignment of broader conservation efforts to SWAPs. Although tracking progress is important, measures should be selected that are not onerous to AFWA or agencies and are best at assessing progress towards implementation of the aspirations.

CONCLUSION

Conservation of the nation's fish and wildlife is critically important to the economy, environmental sustainability, and human well-being. Agencies play an essential role in safeguarding these vital resources for the benefit of current and future generations. SWAPs are the blueprints for conserving thousands of SGCN, and the third generation of these plans hold the key to preventing the need for listing and recovering endangered species. Development and implementation of a communications strategy would help improve awareness of SWAPs which should lead to greater use by the conservation community, thus increasing efficiency and effectiveness of at-risk species conservation.

Wildlife diversity programs are a cornerstone within agencies, but these programs alone are not sufficient to conserve biological diversity. An all-hands-on-deck approach is needed for success. A review of the wildlife diversity functional model could help agencies determine if new capacities are needed to successfully implement SWAPs and serve broader constituencies. The statutory authorities should be reviewed to determine if the needs of all species are being and can be addressed. Finally, dedicated and sustained funding for SWAP implementation is paramount to building capacity and the long-term programs that are needed to duplicate the success of the last century when agencies led the charge to recover game and sport fish populations.

The aspirations outlined in this report are intended to serve as a north star for the future of fish and wildlife conservation. Achieving this will require a broader public understanding of the value of conserving fish, wildlife, and their habitats, as well as recognition of the indispensable role that state and territorial fish and wildlife agencies play in safeguarding these resources. As that understanding grows, so too will the public support, partnerships, and investments needed to sustain conservation success. The remarkable conservation achievements of the past provide both inspiration and proof of what is possible. Building on that legacy and meeting the challenges and opportunities of the future will depend on strong, well-supported state and territorial fish and wildlife agencies leading the way.

APPENDIX 1

RESOLUTION 2025-04-05

A VISION FOR WILDLIFE DIVERSITY CONSERVATION IN THE FUTURE

WHEREAS, many populations of native reptiles, amphibians, fishes, insects, mussels, birds, mammals, plants and other taxa are declining, as documented in the State of the Birds Report, State of the Bats Report, and other reports including a National Wildlife Federation publication that estimated $\frac{1}{3}$ of all U.S. species are facing an increased risk of extinction; and

WHEREAS, State fish and wildlife agencies (“agencies”) play a leading role in conserving the nation’s wildlife diversity, which is intertwined with the health and well-being of the Nation’s communities and economy; and

WHEREAS, this year marks the 25th anniversary of the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants program, which provides agencies with critical funding to proactively conserve a wide variety of species, address declining species, eliminate the need for additional listings under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and aid in the recovery of ESA-listed species; and

WHEREAS, this year marks the 20th anniversary of the launch of the first science-based and collaboratively-developed State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAPs) that are blueprints for conserving over 12,000 species of greatest conservation need (SGCN) nationwide; and

WHEREAS, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other partners have been crucial in supporting and collaborating with state fish and wildlife agencies to develop and support implementation of State Wildlife Action Plans;

WHEREAS a lack of dedicated and sustained funding for agencies remains the largest obstacle to conserving thousands of SGCN identified in SWAPs; and

WHEREAS, state wildlife diversity program managers provided input into a Wildlife Diversity Visioning Report, which calls for a future where wildlife and the natural world are cherished as vital national treasures and flourish through well-funded collaborative conservation led by state fish and wildlife agencies and partners;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (Association) adopts the findings, conclusions, and recommendations in the Wildlife Diversity Visioning Report; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Association shall lead efforts to raise awareness of, promote the use of, and secure funding for implementation of the third generation of State Wildlife Action Plans.

*Submitted by the Wildlife Diversity Conservation and Funding Committee
Adopted by the Association on September 24, 2025 in Tucson, Arizona*

APPENDIX 2

LINKS TO STATE & TRIBAL WILDLIFE GRANTS REPORTS AND STATE WILDLIFE ACTION PLAN RESOURCES

State and Tribal Wildlife Grants 20th Anniversary Report _

⇒ https://www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/2616/0087/6829/STWG_2020_Report_Final.pdf

State and Tribal Wildlife Grants 10th Anniversary Report

⇒ www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/9315/1856/3406/StateWildlifeGrants_10YearSuccess-Report.pdf

Links to State Wildlife Action Plans

⇒ www.fishwildlife.org/afwa-informs/state-wildlife-action-plans

Species of Greatest Conservation Need Dashboard (US Geological Survey)

⇒ www.usgs.gov/programs/science-analytics-and-synthesis-sas/science/species-greatest-conservation-need-national

State Wildlife Action Plan Data Visualization Tool (US Fish & Wildlife Service)

⇒ experience.arcgis.com/experience/45c94f0a195f41ed9cd7770f5d35fde3/page/Home/

Framework to Enhance Landscape-scale & Cross-boundary Conservation through Coordinated State Wildlife Action Plans

⇒ www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/6916/8496/3800/SWAPLandscapeConservationReport_2021-FINAL.pdf

Integrating Connectivity into State Wildlife Action Plans

⇒ www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/2617/2779/3669/SWAP_Report_Connectivity.pdf

Best Practices for State Wildlife Action Plan Revision and Review

⇒ www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/3215/1856/0300/SWAP_Best_Practices_Report_Nov_2012.pdf

State Wildlife Action Plan Message Triangle

⇒ www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/5915/1856/1229/SWAP_Message_Triangle_new_June_2013.pdf

State Wildlife Action Plan Fact Sheet

⇒ www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/8217/3446/8268/SWAP_Fact_Sheet_-_Oct2024-Final.pdf

SUGGESTED CITATION

Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA). (2026). Fish and Wildlife Diversity Program Status Assessment (J. Dickson, P. deMaynadier, M. Howery, M. Humpert, K. Kinkead, K. Smucker, & D. Whitehurst, Eds.). Report to the AFWA Fish and Wildlife Diversity Conservation and Funding Committee. Washington, D.C.: AFWA. 28 pp.

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Fish & Wildlife Diversity Program
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