

Advancing Cooperative, Community-based Conservation at the Landscape Scale: A Policy Paper for the New Administration

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I. Introduction

America has a long and successful bipartisan land and water conservation tradition. Public opinion polls and the results of ballot initiatives show that a majority of Americans believe strongly in conservation of our natural and cultural resources. An increasing number of people see forests, rivers, healthy shorelines and prime farmland as natural infrastructure that brings real, tangible and quantifiable benefits, such as coastal protection, water quality, and much more to our country and its citizens.

In both Republican and Democratic administrations, the federal government has played an important role in supporting “bottom-up” conservation action from coast to coast and in helping local and state governments, individual federal agencies, non-profit organizations, and private landowners work together across whole landscapes -- the scale needed to produce lasting environmental, economic, and social benefits. These federally supported efforts, like the Cooperative Conservation initiative in the George W. Bush administration, have demonstrated in many places around the U.S. that people with diverse views and backgrounds can and want to agree on plans to conserve and effectively manage the places where they live and work.

Federal programs use a tiny proportion of the federal budget to provide the tools, incentives, and best available science for landscape scale, collaborative conservation. These funds leverage money from other nonfederal sources. Continuing and building upon the progress that has been made in conservation is important from both economic and societal perspectives. For example, according to the Outdoor Recreation Association, America’s outdoor economy generates \$646 billion of annual economic activity and provides 6.1 million jobs. Landscape scale conservation directly supports this economic activity, conserves other natural resource-based jobs, local community health and a cultural sense of place, and brings diverse groups together to build the trust needed to transcend other divisions within our society.

This paper explains the need to maintain federal support to enable landscape scale, collaborative conservation as a cost-effective investment in the future of the land and water so important to our health, happiness, prosperity, and ways of life. Toward that end, our 63 organizations make recommendations for an overall approach to conservation in the 21st century and for specific actions needed to implement conservation at the landscape scale.

II. Background

What is Landscape Scale Conservation?

Landscape scale conservation (or just “landscape conservation”) is the practice of stakeholders with diverse interests working together across jurisdictions and sectors to conserve natural and cultural resources for the benefit of people and nature. Landscape conservation moves beyond piecemeal conservation of individual private or public parcels to a more inclusive process and

more integrated approach of sustaining healthy, connected landscapes across political boundaries for multiple benefits—one that enhances coordination while respecting private property. Landscape conservation is bipartisan in nature with origins in multiple administrations. And it is not just about conserving wild places, but also about maintaining managed landscapes for farming, ranching and forestry, protecting opportunities for hunting and fishing and other outdoor recreation, and conserving cultural and historic resources as well as green space in metropolitan settings. Landscape conservation is also about efficiency—about bringing together federal, state, local and private parties to solve conservation problems in the most efficient way possible.

Benefits of Landscape Conservation

The leaders of the many landscape conservation efforts across the country understand that isolated bits and pieces of conserved land won't achieve lasting conservation outcomes or sustain rural economies. In a changing world, we should think bigger to accomplish watershed protection, adapt to droughts and severe weather, reduce the risks of natural hazards, sustain farming, forestry, and ranching, provide space for outdoor recreation for all Americans, including hunting and fishing, save historic and cultural sites in their context, make metropolitan areas more livable, and conserve fish and wildlife habitat connectivity. A landscape approach can make federal conservation planning and action more cost-effective, expand general public engagement and acceptance, and ensure lasting outcomes.

The Value of a Collaborative, Community-based Approach to Landscape Conservation

When conservation extends beyond the boundaries of parks and preserves, it encompasses people and their communities. This, in turn, requires that decision-making about those larger areas involve those who will be affected by conservation activities. Their knowledge and input about how and where to conserve these places is essential for success. While collaboration with all stakeholders may seem to take longer and be more complex, it leads to more lasting and comprehensive results. State and local governments have critical roles in such collaborative planning. We believe that such processes reflect the statements of Interior Secretary, Ryan Zinke, when he talked about improving the relationship of federal agencies to state governments and local communities.

People Are Organizing to Conserve Their Landscapes Across the United States

In many places across the country, like the ACE Basin in South Carolina, the Houston Metro Area, the Crown of the Continent in Montana, the Northern Forest of New England and New York, the five-state Gulf of Mexico region, and the Yakima Valley in Washington State (to name just a few), diverse groups of public and private participants have come together to conserve the public and private lands and waters that sustain the values of their local communities and broader regions. They are working on large-scale challenges that can only be effectively addressed at the same large landscape scale – such as wildland fire risk reduction, fish and wildlife habitat connectivity, watershed restoration, maintaining working farms, forests and ranches, climate resiliency, and urban green space conservation that provides recreation access, as well as contributing to air quality, stormwater management, and moderation of extreme heat events. Across rural and urban America, people are demonstrating through their growing commitment to landscape conservation that community, economic, cultural, and environmental health go hand in hand.

The Network for Landscape Conservation

The Network for Landscape Conservation brings together individuals, organizations and local, state and federal agency representatives who are engaged in building the important field of collaborative, landscape scale conservation. The Network's mission is to help people work effectively at large landscape scales and across boundaries to develop innovative strategies, programs and practices to protect and connect natural systems for the benefit of people and nature. As part of its convening role, the Network brought together the conservation organizations that have authored this paper.

III. Recommendations: The Federal Government Role in Landscape Scale Conservation

The Current Federal Government Role

Federal agencies and their programs are both participants and important supporters of landscape scale conservation projects. They are participants because they manage National Parks, Wildlife Refuges, Forests, DOD and BLM lands, and because they have trust responsibilities for fish, wildlife and other resources. But these responsibilities cannot be fully or cost-effectively met without integrated conservation planning and actions in cooperation with and respect for the owners of adjoining private lands. The agencies are, thus, also supporters because federal funding is critical to implementation of large-scale conservation across these broader landscapes.

In many parts of the country, federal investment is providing key services but also catalyzing new conservation leadership by state and local governments and new innovative public-private partnerships. In this way, federal investment is highly leveraged, encouraging a shared responsibility for the stewardship of the natural and cultural resources Americans depend on every day.

Overall Recommendations

As the new Administration develops its conservation agenda, we believe that federal agencies should continue their decades-long support of landscape conservation. In general, federal support and participation should include state-of-the-art science and conservation planning such as that provided by the Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs), and Joint Ventures (JVs) funding, and maintaining federal assistance to private landowners such as through Farm Bill Programs. It is also vital for federal agencies to closely coordinate among themselves and with stakeholders in the public and private sectors.

Specific Proposals for Federal Support of Large Landscape Conservation

While there are a large number of federal programs that can contribute to landscape scale conservation, we recommend these initiatives as important examples of what can be done to create the foundation for further progress:

1. **Ensure that federal agencies look beyond their organizational and geographic boundaries to work together to address large landscape opportunities.** Interagency cooperation among and even within federal natural resource agencies is not what it should be. Additionally, federal agencies can gain capacity and credibility through deeper engagement with other sectors, including private land and community-based interests.

CEQ and OMB should lead changes in expectation and procedures to greatly expand agency cooperation and collaboration with non-federal partners to achieve cost-effective and efficient landscape-scale conservation outcomes. Supporting innovations, for example, like those in which federal agencies share field offices and work together to provide one-stop-shop interfacing with the public can also enhance federal engagement in landscape conservation.

2. **Fully support, coordinate, and expand conservation provisions within the Farm Bill to secure traditional rural economies and ways of life while addressing challenges such as land use and market changes, water scarcity, and loss of water quality.** Continue to focus Farm Bill easement and other conservation programs on priority areas and work to add additional critical conservation areas to achieve greater results within the current Farm Bill. The concentration of Farm Bill Programs in such places as the Mississippi Basin, the Gulf of Mexico and Chesapeake Bay is producing clear and measurable results and should be strengthened and expanded to other priority areas. The competitive Regional Conservation Partnership Program is successfully pulling diverse interests together in focal areas to generate greater conservation impact. The next Farm Bill should build on these initiatives and better codify conservation provisions with additional private land conservation opportunities.
3. **Reauthorize, expand, and provide full funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) to more effectively meet needs for open space, recreation access, and quality habitat.** Over the years, LWCF use has broadened from outright public land acquisition and construction of state recreational facilities to easement acquisitions and the Forest Legacy Program. LWCF was reauthorized for three years, but will expire in 2018 if not reauthorized. This legislation should be permanently reauthorized and fully funded, and should encourage and support collaborative large landscape conservation by local, state and federal agencies, including the use of voluntary conservation easements that maintain ecological health and traditional rural land uses.
4. **Maintain support for Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs) to provide the science and perspective needed to address large-scale threats such as habitat fragmentation.** The LCCs are cooperative scientific ventures staffed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other agencies, but co-led by state natural resource agencies and involving many academic, public sector, and private sector participants. A 2015 report from the National Academy of Sciences affirmed their central value in advancing landscape conservation across the country in ways that enhance efficiency and effectiveness and that complement other regional conservation partnerships such as Joint Ventures. The LCCs work with an array of stakeholders to provide high-quality scientific information for conservation in 22 regions of the country.
5. **Use the mitigation hierarchy at the landscape scale.** The mitigation hierarchy (avoid, minimize, compensate), when applied at the landscape scale, is useful in planning for the future of large landscapes to avoid damage to important natural features while facilitating development in less sensitive areas. This approach can improve the operation of existing statutes and benefit both the environment and the economy. It has been used in ways that

help expedite permitting while also achieving improved environmental and community results.

6. **Encourage private investment in restoration through public-private partnerships.** Foster opportunities for businesses and non-profit organizations with relevant expertise to successfully achieve restoration and conservation objectives and align mitigation goals with landscape scale conservation partnerships. Investments in community conservation capacity strengthen our collective ability to manage resources and landscapes and sustain a healthy balance of uses for the benefit of our children and grandchildren going forward.
7. **Provide executive direction to federal land and water management agencies in the USDA, DOI, DOC and DOD to identify, designate and manage for fish and wildlife connectivity on federal lands and waters across administrative and jurisdictional boundaries.** This recommendation follows the lead of the Western Governors Association for connectivity and should include incentivizing connectivity conservation on non-federal lands through existing federal programs (i.e., Farm Bill conservation programs, State and Tribal wildlife grants, federal transportation program). Fish and wildlife habitat connectivity at the landscape scale is increasingly threatened by various kinds of human development. The federal land and water management agencies should also be directed to work closely with state, tribal, and local governments as well as private landowners to build on past efforts to invoke landscape-level planning, climate adaptation, military installation readiness, and administrative designations of wildlife corridors.

IV. Summary: People and Conservation

A common element in all of these proposals is the important role of people in landscape conservation. Gone are the days of artificial lines and thinking about nature separate from people. Today we know that conservation is about sustaining whole landscapes for both people and nature. This means involving a broad range of people in planning for and investing in the future of the places where they live and work. It also means recognizing the economic, ecological, cultural, recreational, health, and other benefits that our natural infrastructure of land and water provide to local communities and citizens across America. Our natural and cultural landscapes are under escalating pressures from multiple causes, and their irreplaceable benefits are at risk. A long-recognized and vital role of the federal government is investment in sustaining the natural landscapes that fueled the growth, prosperity and independence of this country and continue to sustain us today.

Adirondack Council
Adirondack Wildlife Refuge
Alaska Center for Conservation Science
Algonquin to Adirondacks Collaborative
Appalachia Ohio Alliance
Appalachian Trail Conservancy
Baltimore - Washington Partners for Forest Stewardship (BWPF)

California Invasive Plant Council
Center for Chesapeake Communities
Center for Large Landscape Conservation
Chesapeake Conservancy
Coastal Conservation League
Cold Hollow to Canada
Conservation Biology Institute
Conservation Northwest

Defenders of Wildlife
EcoAgriculture Partners
Field Museum of Natural History
Firebird Foundation
Friends of Nevada Wilderness
Geos Institute
Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy
Heart of the Rockies Initiative
Jefferson Land Trust
Kentucky Natural Lands Trust
Long Branch Environmental Education Center
Lyme Timber Company
Maine Appalachian Trail Land Trust
Maine Mountain Collaborative
Maryland Forestry Foundation
MassConn Sustainable Forest Partnership
Mountain Conservancy of New England
National Wildlife Foundation
Naturaland Trust
NatureServe
Norcross Wildlife Foundation, Inc.
North Woods Resource Group, Inc.
Northeast Wilderness Trust
Open Space Institute

Partnership for Gulf Coast Land Conservation
Partnership for the National Trails System
Pinelands Preservation Alliance
Point Blue Conservation Science
Rocky Mountain Wild
Sea to Shore Alliance
Sky Island Alliance
South Florida Wildlands Association
Southern Conservation Partners, Inc.
Southern Oregon Forest Restoration Collaborative
St. Lawrence Land Trust
State of the Rockies Project
Tennessee Parks & Greenways Foundation
Texas Land Conservancy
The Conservation Fund
The Nature Conservancy
The Wilderness Society
Trust for Public Land
Two Countries, One Forest
Warren Wilson College
Western Landowners Alliance
Wild South
Wildlands Network