



ENVIRONMENTAL
LAW • INSTITUTE®

Making Open Space Dollars Work for Wildlife
A Roundtable Discussion hosted by the Environmental Law Institute

December 11, 2007

Sponsored by:
Doris Duke Charitable Foundation

Roundtable Results and Recommendations

Making Open Space Dollars Work for Wildlife

A Roundtable Discussion hosted by the Environmental Law Institute

Background

In 2001, Congress created the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program and State Wildlife Grants Program to prevent wildlife from becoming endangered. As part of the effort, each state and territory developed a wildlife action plan to proactively conserve wildlife and critical habitat. Every state and territory submitted their plan to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for review and approval in October 2005. As of 2007, plans from each state and territory had been approved. The development of the 56 state wildlife action plans is marshalling habitat conservation information to an extent unmatched by any prior planning effort. The plans have tremendous potential to inform and support conservation action in many areas, including the protection of open space. However, open space program administrators in many states are unaware of the wildlife action plans as a potentially powerful resource, or do not have a clear sense of how the plans can inform and support decision-making regarding statewide land conservation goals.

In December 2004, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation provided funding to the Environmental Law Institute (ELI) to support a multi-year project, *Leveraging Wildlife Strategies To Protect America's Biological Heritage*. As part of this effort, ELI conducted research to identify opportunities for states to redirect existing open space acquisition programs to protect lands identified as priorities in statewide wildlife strategies. Results were published in a 2007 report, *The Nature of Open Space Programs: Linking Land Protection and Biodiversity Conservation*, which examines state open space programs to determine whether or not they have the legal authority to acquire lands in a biologically meaningful manner. The report also outlines options for states seeking to maximize the effectiveness of their conservation investments for the long-term sustainability of native plants, animals, and ecosystems, including incorporating elements of the state wildlife action plans into program selection criteria, planning, and guidelines.¹

On December 11, 2007, ELI hosted a roundtable discussion entitled *Making Open Space Dollars Work for Wildlife* to continue dialogue and to identify specific opportunities for state open space programs to utilize the state wildlife action plans in open space protection decision-making. Roundtable participants included managers from state open space programs and state wildlife agencies, representatives from nongovernmental conservation organizations, and staff from selected federal natural resource agencies, as well as other key members of the conservation community.²

This report represents our efforts to summarize discussions and highlight key opportunities for collaboration identified by meeting participants. Additional materials from *Making Open Space Dollars Work for Wildlife: A Roundtable Discussion hosted by the Environmental Law Institute*, including presentations and informational background documents and websites, are available on ELI's website at:

<http://www2.eli.org/research/events/openspace12.11.07.htm>.

¹ For more information on ELI's research and information on individual states, please visit: <http://www2.eli.org/research/openspace.htm>.

² For more information on *Making Open Space Dollars Work for Wildlife: A Roundtable Discussion hosted by the Environmental Law institute*, please visit: <http://www2.eli.org/research/events/openspace12.11.07.htm>.

Making Open Space Dollars Work for Wildlife

A Roundtable Discussion hosted by the Environmental Law Institute

Roundtable Results and Recommendations

Several ideas emerged regarding the potential for the state wildlife action plans to guide and enhance statewide land protection strategies. Meeting participants discussed the following key opportunities:

- ❖ ***State wildlife agencies should engage open space program administrators, as well as conservation organizations and local governments, as they are implementing the state wildlife action plans.*** State wildlife action plan coordinators should identify other environmental programs (e.g., state and local open space programs, as well as watershed groups, local government agencies, hunting and angling groups, farmland preservation programs, agricultural cost-share and incentive programs, federal natural resource agencies, or other non-traditional partners) that can help implement the goals and objectives, and associated action items, outlined in the state wildlife action plans. Organizations such as the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies should help state wildlife agencies, which may be short of staff time or resources, identify and reach out to potential partners and/or their constituent groups (e.g., National Association of Counties, American Planning Association, etc.). National journals and newsletters (e.g., *Natural Areas Journal*) and campaigns (e.g., Teaming With Wildlife) may also be used to conduct outreach to potential partner organizations and agencies.

State wildlife agencies should provide these groups with detailed but straightforward information about the state wildlife action plans, programmatic needs, and priorities. If available, spatially explicit maps should also be provided. Information and maps should be tailored for each program, based on their missions and goals, so that they can readily see how the state wildlife action plan might be integrated with their conservation strategies, which may not focus exclusively or primarily on wildlife. This will not only create opportunities to collaborate on implementing state wildlife action plan items, but also increase ownership of the plans as statewide conservation strategies.

- ❖ ***Provide training on the state wildlife action plans.*** The state wildlife action plans provide a wealth of information on species and habitat, but data may not be provided in a format that is “user-friendly” for conservation managers that are unfamiliar with the plans. State wildlife agencies should consider providing training so that open space program administrators, land trusts, local governments, and other conservation organizations and individuals know how best to use the plans for land conservation planning and project evaluation.
- ❖ ***Provide wildlife and habitat information in an accessible format.*** State wildlife agencies should provide spatially explicit maps for land conservation programs to reference in open space protection decision-making. If spatially explicit maps are not feasible, they should provide a proxy to open space planners, e.g., a list of important habitat types identified in the state wildlife action plans. In addition, states may learn

Making Open Space Dollars Work for Wildlife

A Roundtable Discussion hosted by the Environmental Law Institute

from other states' experiences in developing spatially explicit maps, including the challenges faced and overcome in the process (e.g., Delaware).

- ❖ ***Integrate the state wildlife action plans with open space project selection process.*** Open space programs should reference wildlife action plans in their project and/or grant evaluation process. In addition, applicants to grant-oriented open space programs should be encouraged to refer to the state wildlife action plans in developing project proposals. Open space programs should provide incentives by clearly including the state wildlife action plans in their grant evaluation criteria and awarding points projects that support state wildlife strategies. To this end, however, meeting participants emphasized the importance of a transparent evaluation process. Open space programs may also include relevant state wildlife action plan objectives in the terms of purchased conservation easements, or provide guidance to grantees on doing so.
- ❖ ***Integrate the state wildlife action plans with open space planning.*** Open space programs that are developing land conservation plans and strategies should refer to their state's wildlife action plan for information on key species and habitats.
- ❖ ***Take open space program priorities into account during future revisions to the state wildlife action plans.*** As required by Congress, state wildlife action plans must undergo periodic revision. This presents an opportunity to broaden conservation goals outlined in the plan by involving open space programs (and other conservation organizations) that may have overlapping objectives. Meeting participants felt that involving these groups would increase ownership of the plan as a statewide conservation strategy and ultimately improve the effectiveness of plan strategies and associated tasks.
- ❖ ***Identify overlapping priorities and constituencies and team up to protect land.*** State open space programs and state wildlife agencies should meet to identify overlapping priorities, both programmatically (i.e., program goals and objectives, as well as program needs) and geographically (i.e., priority areas within the landscape). Identifying common goals will allow programs to partner—and potentially pool or leverage funds—on a variety of wildlife and land conservation activities, including: land acquisition and associated planning, long term management and stewardship of purchased lands, public education and outreach, and building support (in terms of both awareness and funds) for conservation.

Meeting participants suggested that partnership among programs is easier to accomplish states when open space and wildlife programs are housed under the same organizational umbrella (i.e., within the same agency or division) or are located near each other (i.e., in the same building or floor). States should consider re-organizing natural resource programs to facilitate collaboration.

Meeting participants also suggested that a statewide conservation needs assessment, such as those conducted in Florida and Virginia, might jointly inform

Making Open Space Dollars Work for Wildlife

A Roundtable Discussion hosted by the Environmental Law Institute

both wildlife and open space program needs and priorities and facilitate collaborative efforts.

- ❖ **Document and share successes.** Meeting participants felt that both open space programs and wildlife agencies need to do a better job of tracking and evaluating long-term success, including documenting funds spent, acreage acquired, and other accomplishments that may be used to demonstrate effectiveness and build program support. When open space and wildlife programs collaborate successfully, these experiences should be documented and communicated with mutual constituencies. Demonstrating success not only helps to build long-term support and funding, but also provides a model for other states seeking to build similar partnerships.

Next Steps for States

State wildlife action plan coordinators and state open space program staff should establish a process for regular communication. This could be accomplished by using existing networks or by establishing new workgroups, steering committees or teams. Given the numerous opportunities for collaboration described above, staff from each state program could benefit significantly by having a forum to discuss current and future program goals and objectives, availability of data and maps, funding sources, program needs, and potential to partner on individual projects, among other topics. Moreover, because every state wildlife action plan and every state open space program is unique with respect to size, focus, resources, and challenges, it is essential that this discussion take place at the state level.