

**Focus Area Review Meeting**  
**June 18, 2014**  
**9-12 am**  
**MNAP**

**In attendance:** IFW (Charlie Todd, Bethany Atkins, Bill Hancock, Merry Gallagher, Don Katnik, Ryan Robicheau, Sarah Demers, Amanda Shearin, Mark Stadler, Judy Camuso), MCHT (Steve Walker), TNC (Barbara Vickery), ME Audubon (Sally Stockwell), MNAP (Molly Docherty, Andy Cutko, and Wade Simmons), Maine Municipal Planning Assistance Program (Liz Hertz)

**Meeting Purpose:** To identify needs and develop a work plan to review Focus Areas of Statewide Ecological Significance for 2014 SWAP Update.

**Agenda:**

1. Introductions
2. Setting the stage- Focus area background, 2015 SWAP update
3. Needs to be addressed in focus area update
4. Next Steps: How do we accomplish this?

**Meeting Notes**

**Setting the Stage:**

*Andy provided a review of Focus Areas:*

- *What are they?* Areas with unique concentrations of at-risk species and habitats. They are considered areas of *statewide* ecological significance.
- *Who designated them?* Focus areas were identified by Beginning with Habitat (BwH) partners. The concept was initiated 15+ years ago as a result of eco-regional surveys. About 85 focus areas were identified in southern Maine first. Near-shore coastal features were added to the criteria list during the Maine Coast Protection Initiative effort and, in 2008, focus areas in northern Maine were finalized. They were adopted in the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP), but without a map. Descriptions of the majority of the now 140 focus areas are available online.
- *How were they designated?* Designation of focus areas combined map-based GIS data and knowledge of experts. See attached criteria diagram. Delineation criteria were published to make designation of focus areas more transparent.
- *Uses/Applications?* Focus areas are incorporated in the BwH data package and are used in conservation and growth management planning by towns, land trusts, and the state. Grant funding mechanisms (LMF, etc.) award 'points' for projects within focus areas, making them potentially more competitive. They are also used to direct the selection of mitigation projects (DOT, MNRCP, NRCS).
- *What is new?* It has been 10 years since focus areas were originally designated. We now have considerable new and improved data and are faced with new issues and opportunities.

*Discussion Summary:*

Analysis was identified as a need in the focus area update process. Suggested analyses include: Assessment of how well SGCN and priority habitats are covered by focus areas and an assessment of current conserved lands portfolio and how well SGCN and priority habitats are captured in these areas. Andy and Justin have begun some of this work already.

The need to formalize a clear process for addition of focus areas was also identified. Some land trusts do not have focus areas within their regions. Occasionally we are asked to add them.

Steve also identified the importance of addressing community and suggested better communicating within focus area descriptions how conservation is meaningful to the people who live there. The question of how to address focus areas that are entirely conserved came up. Liz suggested inviting LUPC into the focus area review discussions.

*Charlie provided a review of the 2015 SWAP update:*

The SWAP is a requirement to maintain State Wildlife Grant (SWG) eligibility. The focus of the plan is on avoiding species listing. The updated plans need to be consistent across states, but also must be adaptable documents. Partner participation is essential. The update process will be focused less on a comprehensive inventory of species and habitats, but more on threats and actions. Like the 2005 Plan, the update requires 8 elements. For this discussion, Charlie focused primarily on the first two.

*Element 1: Species of Greatest Conservation Need:* States are given latitude in how to identify Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN). More focus will be put on species of regional responsibility (based on range and core populations). MDIFW has pulled together a draft SGCN list. It consists of 300+ species divided into two tiers. The draft list will be reviewed at the July partners meeting.

*Element 2: Habitats:* In an attempt to make plans more consistent across states, TNC's Northeast Terrestrial Habitat Classification System was adopted as a standard habitat classification. MDIFW is currently developing a hierarchical cross-walked table of habitat associations that relates previously used classifications to TNC's Northeast Terrestrial Habitat Classification System. This table will also link with species and ultimately with threats as well.

As part of Element 2, states are required to identify Conservation Opportunity Areas (COA). These are intended to represent the best opportunities and potential for SGCN conservation. They are similar to focus areas but many not be exactly the same. For example, the needs of certain SGCN may not be captured by the focus areas whose designation is driven by concentrations of SGCN and at risk

habitats. We will need to review focus areas to determine what other “conservation opportunities” are necessary to address those species not captured within the focus area model. Focus areas and COAs are expected to be important conservation actions identified in the plan (Element 5).

*Discussion Summary:*

The group agreed on the purpose and uses of focus areas (areas with concentrations of at-risk species and habitats at the statewide scale that are intended to communicate and direct conservation priorities). The group also agreed to go ahead and review focus areas and see how they meet the needs of SGCN. If they don't meet the needs of all species, we can re-address and identify conservation opportunity areas for those species.

**Needs to be addressed in Focus Areas Update:**

The group brainstormed information that should be considered in the update of focus areas. Results of the brainstorming discussion follow:

- *Aquatics*- Inland and coastal fisheries and other aquatics species should be better addressed in focus area designations. Also need to address unfragmented sections of river and stream. Consider using Active River Area data. Addressing aquatics and identification of aquatic specific focus areas is big undertaking and a more long-term discussion. However, some data is available now (heritage waters, open river networks, etc.) that we could include and consider how to tweak the current suite of focus areas. An analysis of how well current focus areas address aquatic priorities is necessary.
- *Managed Landscapes*- SGCN that require managed landscapes need to be better addressed. Species include New England cottontail, lynx, grassland birds, and species that need intact forests. The group felt that some of these species would be captured in the updated SGCN data. Adjustments to the delineation standards may be necessary to better capture these habitats within focus area boundaries.
- *Coastal Features*- The selection and design of coastal focus areas needs to be reviewed. Consider sea level rise scenarios, sea run fish populations, mudflats, mussel bars, and how to deal with fluctuations in eelgrass.
- *Updated Data*- Create/incorporate updated data including: SGCN Priority 1 and 2 species, and large blocks.
- *Resilient Landscapes*- Using TNC's resilient sites data, assess resilience of focus areas individually, assess resilience of suite of focus areas, and complete a gap analysis of system types and landscape types within conserved lands and focus areas.

- *Evaluate intersection of focus areas with other conservation planning efforts:*  
How do focus areas intersect with Important Bird Areas, North East Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (NEPARC) areas, Eastern Brook Trout Joint Venture and National Fish Habitat Partnership Action Plan priorities

*Other information discussed:*

- Incorporate development tracking data.
- Address boreal forest refugia. These areas are highly vulnerable changing climate conditions.
- Airspace protection- this could be folded in during conservation action discussions if certain species are threatened by the development of airspace.
- Restoration- the group considered restoration opportunities differently to high quality sites that drive focus area designation. Restoration opportunities should be identified within focus area descriptions, but not necessarily incorporated in to focus area boundaries.
- Consider connectivity between focus areas. Group decided to address this at a later date.
- Need to define what is included in high value habitats category listed in criteria diagram.

**Summary of Next Steps:**

Based on the discussion and the ideas brainstormed, the group decided to convene three separate subcommittees to address how to incorporate the above listed information into the review of focus areas.

*Analysis Subcommittee-* This group will complete gap analyses of the original 140 focus areas and how well they capture updated SGCN and priority habitats and will complete an assessment of the current conserved lands portfolio and how well SGCN and priority habitats are captured in these areas. They will also assess resilience within individual focus areas and within the suite of focus areas and among conserved lands. *Leaders: Andy Cutko and Don Katnik. Possible participants: Bill Hancock. Justin Schlawin*

*Updates Subcommittee-* This group will focus on defining high value habitats and collecting, evaluating, and incorporating new data including: updated EO's and SGCN priority 1 and 2 species, updated large blocks, conservation planning data from other initiatives (IBAs, NEPARC, etc.). It will also focus on refining criteria and/or delineation standards to better consider aquatics and managed landscapes. *Leaders: Bethany Atkins, Molly Docherty. Possible participants: Sally Stockwell, Don Katnik, Merry Gallagher, Ryan Robicheau, Bill Hancock*

*Coastal Subcommittee-* This group will evaluate and tweak coastal focus area selection and design. Data highlighted to consider includes: sea level rise scenarios, sea-run fish, mudflats, mussel bars, and how to deal with fluctuations in eelgrass.

*Leaders: Liz Hertz, Bob Houston; Possible participants: Someone from DMR, Steve Walker, Don Katnik Don Cameron, Pete Slovinsky, and Bill Hancock*

*Additional questions to address: Clarify process for nomination and selection of candidate focus areas.*