



THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

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Center Director
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Dear Jonathan:

The Wildlife Society appreciates the opportunity to offer our input on the Draft Strategic Plan titled “Science Strategy: Advancing Wildlife and Ecosystem Health for the Next Decade” prepared by representatives from USGS National Wildlife Health Center (NWHC). Overall, we find that it is well written and provides a broad framework that will help guide NWHC work activities over the course of the next few years.

The format of the plan is logical and makes the document easy to read and digest. The mission, motto, core values, and guiding principles sections are strong and contemporary in approach and vision. The three goals (essentially collaborate, communicate, and conduct good science) are in line with current needs and make sense as “overall vision or purpose to which our endeavors will be directed.”

However, we found the goals, objectives, and related strategies to be ambitious in scope and approach and lacking in enough detail in most sections to make this plan as valuable a document as it otherwise could be. We would also recommend against the implication that NWHC should be the central agency in the United States to deal with any and all wildlife health issues. We recommend using language that instead presents NWHC as a facilitator and coordinator of national and international partnerships and including a clear articulation of how NWHC interacts with the USDA APHIS National Wildlife Research Center and other federal research centers that address wildlife disease. NWHC should be viewed as a foundational component of a larger wildlife disease infrastructure, with appropriate mechanisms and strategies for cross collaboration, better emphasizing the Center’s unique niche.

While specific time frames are provided for each strategy, we suggest that the time frame of the overall plan be specified in the title of the plan (e.g. 2012-2016). In addition, we recommend that current target timeframes be reassessed. Many of the goals have target completion or launch of major systems in 2012. With the strategic plan still in the draft comment stage, these timeline targets seem unrealistic.

Goal 1

Develop a collaborative North American Wildlife Health Strategy (NAWHS) that establishes a framework to address the most pressing wildlife health issues. This NAWHS will emphasize the importance of a collaborative approach to mitigate the impact of wildlife diseases and other stressors on wildlife, domestic animal, and human health.

We appreciate the international scale of the plan. This plan should be linked to other disease related planning documents, including the North American Rabies Management Plan that was signed in 2008 by representatives from U.S., Mexico, Canada and the Navajo Nation. Development of this plan should also be an initiative well beyond that of NWHC and may require the leadership of multiple entities both within and exterior to the Department of the Interior in order to be successful.

Objective 1

Strategy 1: Develop a collaborative Wildlife Health Working Group of key partners that represents diverse perspectives on wildlife health.

We suggest identifying the “key partners” and defining “wildlife disease emergencies of significant magnitude.” Strategies 2 and 4 would be strengthened by including both U.S. and international institutions and agencies in this Working Group. Because the plan lacks essential detail, it leaves the reader wondering how this adds value to existing committees, including those within AFWA, USAHA and TWS. We recommend maximizing these existing committees and working groups instead of creating a new entity that may have both duplicative partners and purposes.

Strategy 2: Strengthen international partnerships, especially within North America (Canada and Mexico), and work collaboratively to enhance wildlife health at an international level.

We suggest that partnerships address the potential negative impact of translocation of wildlife. Also, in addition to OIE, suggested partners may include the Canada/Mexico/U.S. Trilateral Committee for Wildlife and Ecosystem Conservation and Management.

Strategy 4: Identify and develop scientific exchange and relationships with other institutions and agencies.

We suggest identifying “other institutions and agencies” and defining “scientific exchange”. The expectations of this exchange are unclear. For example, the reader is left wondering how the financial aspect of “exchanging staff” will be met and if there is an expectation of publication by partners.

Objective 2

Strategy 1: Publish a white paper on a North American Wildlife Health Strategy.

Publication of a white paper would benefit both wildlife professionals and the public. However, this is an ambitious plan that, as written, contains few details regarding the specifics of the

strategy. We suggest that this strategy *develop the concept and outline the strategy*. The upfront work of getting agreement on many key surveillance and management issues is a huge task requiring many agencies and organizations including university partners. There is a need to make critical distinctions between surveillance, monitoring, management, communication, research, laboratory diagnostics and field activities.

Additionally, other venues for publication should be considered including the potential for a formal Technical Review of a North American Wildlife Health Strategy or a joint publication by partners.

Strategy 2: Build institutional capacity in diagnostics, field investigation, disease management, and sampling techniques for disease control.

Of all sections in the document, this lacked the most critical detail. Our understanding of this strategy is that NWHC will be getting more involved with the on-the-ground management of wildlife diseases. Building institutional capacity takes resources and collaboration. This section requires additional details, including how institutional capacity will be met, how that will be accomplished financially, and who the target partners are.

Goal 2

Become the Nation's source of comprehensive wildlife health information based on collective knowledge and make this information available to a broad audience of professionals, general public, media and decision makers.

This goal represents an ongoing and essential function of NWHC. We would suggest reexamining dates and deadlines under this goal and looking for ways to better prioritize strategies. Again, we recommend using language that instead presents NWHC as a facilitator and coordinator of national and international partnerships. Additional consideration needs to be paid towards the critical roles other centers, federal agencies, and other entities play in contributing to the knowledge of wildlife health related information. Although NWHC may want to be the nexus for wildlife health information, it is a piece of a large system that needs to be articulated in order to maximize the effectiveness of NWHC initiatives.

Additionally, issues with data security and confidentiality needs to be addressed if NWHC seeks to maximize data sharing relationships with other federal partners or state agencies. Particular attention needs to be paid to protecting critical data layers that may impact threatened or endangered species, private landowners, or other factors. Without these considerations and protections in place, partners may be hesitant or unwilling to share data.

Objective 1

Strategy 1: Develop a data management plan for the National Wildlife Health Center.

We suggest identifying if this will be accomplished by NWHC staff or in partnership with other groups.

Strategy 2: Update informatics support structures to collect, generate and disseminate information.

We support the idea of a “help-desk”. Easy access and dissemination of vital information is important for both professionals and the public.

Strategy 3: Evaluate and annotate existing NWHC data sets and make them more accessible online.

Users from government, public, and private sectors need a resource such as this. If possible, we would like to see more detail on collaboration with partners that can assist with the mining and utilization of this data.

Strategy 4: Explore options for users to document and track wildlife disease events with centralized, standard reporting and user-generated reports.

We recommend defining “users” and the various levels of access they might be allowed. Because of the potential for misinformation to be added by the general public without some form of quality control, it might be prudent to provide two reporting systems, one for Citizen Science and the other for professionals, or include a way to identify data sources (citizen, agency, etc.)

Because of differing agency missions and policies, data accessibility and sharing agreements with partners should be made before database development, and should clearly identify the rights of data owners to make decisions regarding disseminating the information.

Objective 2

Strategy 1: Explore data analysis methods and practices used for early detection of disease issues for adaptability to wildlife health data to allow for earlier situational awareness of wildlife health issues.

We would like to see more detail in this strategy, specifically related to the potential hiring of statisticians, modelers, etc.

Objective 3

Strategy 1: Establish NWHC’s online presence as a priority for communication with stakeholders.

Again, we would like to see more specific detail in this strategy. For example, will NWHC utilize popular social media sites or a CDC-like format for dissemination of information to managers or the public? We also recommend identifying update time frames for the update of new information.

Strategy 3: Increase the visibility of NWHC science, staff and two campus locations.

Visibility is most respected by professionals through peer-reviewed publications and by the general public through information they can use, like factsheets and up-to-date websites on current concerns. We suggest investing more in publications like the Field Guide to Wildlife Diseases and possibly appointing a public liaison (a scientist whose entire responsibility is

conveying information to the public) to manage fact sheets, web sites, hold meetings, provide lay presentations etc.

Goal 3

Conduct exceptional science to anticipate, detect and assess wildlife diseases, and support the management of wildlife and ecosystem health.

This goal best articulates the function of NWHC, in terms of surveillance and epidemiology in support of wildlife disease management. It is critical that this section identify some primary collaborators (e.g., accredited zoos and aquariums) and emphasize areas of cooperation with other federal agencies with wildlife research and management responsibilities, as well as underscore the authority of states to manage wildlife. We recommend offering research grants to motivate additional studies and create new partnerships

Objective 1

Strategy 1: Develop and maintain a comprehensive knowledge of priority threats to North American wildlife health.

We would like to see more detail regarding how this knowledge will be compiled and maintained, specifically if this will be a collaborative effort and if it will tie in with the white paper.

Strategy 2: For prioritized diseases, develop and deploy laboratory and field diagnostic assays and services, and expand capacity to design and implement disease investigation and surveillance.

We appreciate the detail in this section. It provides a template for other sections in terms of the type of detail that should be provided in the “What will be done?” section.

Objective 3

Strategy 1: Explore tools and applications to manage wildlife diseases.

We recommend that an analytical economic component though collaboration be considered. A measure of disease impacts will logically include economic impacts to help determine if this is a priority disease.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to provide input and for considering the views of wildlife professionals. If you have any questions or would like additional assistance, please contact Terra Rentz, Assistant Director of Government Affairs (terra@wildlife.org).

Sincerely,

Winifred B. Kessler
President-Elect