

Background

For the past decade regional conservation groups across the West have been working to identify and protect wildlife corridors that are critical for both the dispersal and migration needs of native wildlife. These conservation groups have been working region by region and state by state and have developed strong relationships with wildlife agencies, departments of transportation, landowners, and other conservation groups along the way. Conservation successes are beginning to come to fruition in states such as Montana, Colorado, and California. The groundwork has been laid, but there is much work to be done and challenges to overcome.

On Feb. 2, 2007, the United Nations scientific panel studying climate change declared that the evidence of a warming trend is "unequivocal" and that human activity has "very likely" been the driving force in that change over the last 50 years. Climate change is currently and will continue to alter ecosystems in ways still to be seen and force wildlife and people to change their daily patterns and adapt to the inevitable changes. Scientists are currently informing us that global-warming impacts are closer than we realize, and we must immediately begin to plan for the changes in the landscape that will exacerbate environmental stresses, including water quantity, native species persistence, and ecosystem viability. Wildlife corridors are vital in that planning because they provide a means of movement for wildlife and will assist in their adaptation to climate change.

In the same year as the United Nations issued its seminal report on climate change, the Western Governors' Association (WGA) adopted the *Protecting Wildlife Migration Corridors and Crucial Wildlife Habitat in the West* policy resolution (07-01) to protect "wildlife corridors" and crucial habitat. The resolution instructs WGA to "identify key wildlife migration corridors and crucial wildlife habitats in the West and make recommendations on needed policy options and tools for preserving those landscapes." At the end of June 2008, the governors reviewed a suite of policy recommendations aimed at protecting wildlife corridors and adopted them for implementation. The policy recommendations fall within five main working groups: climate change, transportation, renewable energy development, oil and gas, and land use.

The most substantial short-term outcome of the final adopted report is the creation of a Western Wildlife Habitat Council (WWHC) comprised of one state employee and policy expert from each member Governor's state. The mission of the WWHC is to identify key wildlife corridors and crucial habitats in the West and coordinate implementation of needed policy options and tools for preserving those landscapes. Of note, is that the governors prioritized four recommendations for the WWHC to carry out, one of which is to:

Make the WGA Western Renewable Energy Zone project (REZ) a model for applying the wildlife corridors recommendations. In particular, WGA, in coordination with the (Wildlife Council) WWHC, should ensure that development of the renewable energy zones 1) includes identification of relevant wildlife corridors and crucial habitat from the relevant state DSS, and 2) considers appropriate policies and actions to avoid, minimize, or mitigate impacts in these sensitive areas.

The other three priorities identified include: the establishment of a "Decision Support System"; the development of policies that ensure information from the Decision Support System is considered early on in the planning process; and funding to support the

WWHC.

Renewable Energy

Rapid population growth, heightened homeland security, and rising fuel costs is creating a demand for a diverse energy portfolio that includes new energy sources and provides America with a secure energy future. At the same time, concerns about air pollution, climate change and energy independence are raising the public's and policy makers' expectations that this new energy future must involve renewable and clean energy sources.

In June 2004, The Western Governors' adopted policy resolution 04-13 entitled a "Clean and Diversified Energy Initiative." The resolution specifically states the goal of developing 30,000 megawatts of clean energy by 2015 from resources such as energy efficiency, solar, wind, geothermal, biomass, clean coal technologies, and advanced natural gas technologies; and a 20% increase in energy efficiency by 2020.

In May, 2008, the Western Governors and the U.S. Department of Energy launched the Western Renewable Energy Zones initiative to identify Renewable Energy Zones (REZ) in the Western Interconnection based on commercial potential and cost of development. The project will then seek to develop transmission plans of service to priority REZs to facilitate environmentally-sensitive development of the most cost-effective renewable resources located in the Western Interconnection. The project will evaluate all renewable resources, including solar, geothermal, wind, biomass and hydro and hydrokinetic resources. Participating in the project are 11 states, two Canadian provinces, and areas in Mexico that are part of the Western Interconnection.