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STEWARDSHIP ON THE HORIZON: INTEGRATED PLANNING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

Currently, highway projects are planned, funded, and designed before considering the potential impacts to wildlife and habitat. Often, this can lead to expensive delays, lawsuits, and unnecessary loss of habitat. Streamlining project delivery and reducing unnecessary delays is important to state transportation agencies. By utilizing natural-resource data in early stages of planning, state transportation agencies can avoid, minimize, and mitigate early and avoid costly delays later in the life of their projects.

As part of the federally funded State Wildlife Grants Program, all state fish and wildlife agencies have recently completed comprehensive, wildlife conservation strategies, called State Wildlife Action Plans. These Action Plans will prioritize efforts and maximize investments to protect the state's natural resources. While fish and wildlife agencies are leading the charge, the aim is to create a strategic vision for conserving the state's wildlife—not just a plan for the agency.

Each Action Plan includes eight required elements, including “distribution and abundance of wildlife species” and “descriptions of locations and relative condition of key habitats and community types.” Many states produced maps of prioritized habitat throughout the state. Correspondingly, the new transportation bill, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) included provisions that integrate consideration of wildlife conservation into the transportation planning process.

Under the new law, each metropolitan planning organization (MPO) and state department of transportation (DOT) will consult with resource agencies in developing long range transportation plans and compare the transportation plan with conservation maps or natural resource inventories—such as the new State Wildlife Action Plans.

The State Wildlife Action Plans are an opportunity for states to adopt a proactive approach to habitat conservation and an effective tool for transportation planning. For the first time, transportation agencies will have access to comprehensive natural-resource data at the planning stage, rather than waiting until environmental review.

Biographical Sketch: Trisha White is the Director of Defenders of Wildlife's Habitat & Highways Campaign at their national headquarters in Washington, D.C. The Habitat & Highways Campaign seeks to reduce the impact of surface transportation infrastructure on wildlife and encourage state and local authorities to incorporate wildlife conservation into transportation and community planning. In partnership with the Surface Transportation Policy Project (STPP), Trisha authored a best practices report, *Second Nature: Improving Transportation Without Putting Nature Second*, which has since been awarded the 2004 Natural Resource Council of America Award of Achievement for best publication. White is also:

- International Conference on Ecology and Transportation (ICOET) sponsor and member of steering and program committees
- Member, Federal Highway Administration's Europe Scan tour on wildlife mortality
- Member, Transportation Research Board Task Force on Ecology and Transportation
- Board Member, Southern Rockies Ecosystem Project

Prior to Defenders, Trisha spent three years with World Resources Institute's Biological Resources program and one year as environment policy consultant to the U.S. Agency for International Development's Global Environment Center. In 2000, she received her Masters degree in environment & resource policy from the George Washington University.