

Summary of Input Received at the 1st Meeting of the Stakeholder Advisory Group for Redesign of the Endangered Resources Review Program

Below is a summary of the comments received both during group discussions at the September 10th 2008 Stakeholder Advisory Group meeting and from individuals either at the meeting or via email. Please let me know if you have questions about this information. You can reach me at 608-264-8968 or via email at Sarah.Carter@wisconsin.gov.

Meeting Attendees: Dana Ferguson, Alliant Energy; Lesley Zuehls Brotkowski, Cedarburg Science, LLC; Karen Etter Hale, Madison Audubon Society; J. Scott Mathie, Metropolitan Builders Association; Bill Poole, Natural Resources Consulting, Inc.; Craig Donze, One Source Consulting; John Wagner, The Nature Conservancy; Robert Weihrouch, USDA-NRCS; Gary Casper, UW-Milwaukee Field Station & Casper Consulting; Pamela Linn, Waukesha County Parks; Ray Perry, Wisconsin Cooperating Foresters & Perry Forestry Consulting, LLC.; Dustin Grant, Wisconsin County Code Administrators; Lee Turonie, Wisconsin Towns Association; Susan Foote-Martin, Wisconsin Wildlife Federation; Michael Warwick, Yaggy Colby Associates. WDNR staff in attendance included Sarah Carter (project coordinator), Tim Cooke, Erin Crain*, Angela Engelman*, Signe Holtz, Lisie Kitchel*, Carol Nielsen, Rori Paloski*, and Emily Rusch*.

**Indicates staff member served as a recorder for group discussions.*

1. What program services do you currently use or have you used in the past?

The Stakeholder Advisory Group as a whole was familiar with the entire suite of services, tools and information that the ER Review Program offers (free, online access to county and township level Natural Heritage Inventory (NHI) data on rare plants, animals and high-quality natural communities; access via license agreements to detailed NHI data; Endangered Resources (ER) Reviews; online information on the biology and ecology of rare plants, animals and high-quality natural communities; NHI training; technical support; Endangered and Threatened Species Permits (E/T Permits); and Incidental Take Authorizations (ITAs)). ER Reviews were the most commonly used service followed by access to detailed NHI data and technical support.

2. Of the services that you are familiar with or have used in the past, which are most important to facilitating the work that you do?

The most important service to facilitating the work of participants was ER Reviews followed by access to detailed NHI data. Also listed were technical support, species information, recommended practices for avoiding take, E/T permits, ITAs, NHI training, and consultation with regional ecologists.

3. Of the services that you are familiar with, please tell us your suggestions for how we could improve these services to make them more helpful to you and relevant to the projects you work on.

Consistent, timely and streamlined ER Reviews: The group wanted to see quicker turnaround times for ER Reviews, more consistency and clarity in the format of ER Reviews, and a more streamlined review process. Sharing NHI data more broadly with additional users who could then draft an initial letter (possibly submitted online) for subsequent review and sign-off by DNR staff would save time and decrease duplication of efforts. Customers also wanted the ability to request more detailed information about species present at a site if needed.

Broader access to detailed NHI data: The group was very supportive of expanding data sharing to include more users (user groups mentioned included but were not limited to consultants, Cooperating Foresters, counties, and municipalities). Developers need to access and use detailed NHI data early in the planning process because it can have a huge impact on their projects. Timing is often an issue

with both development and land management projects, and allowing additional trained and certified users direct access to the NHI data to would be very helpful.

Improved quality of NHI data: The group stated strongly and consistently that the quality of the NHI data is very important. They would like to see a focus on improving the quality and completeness of the database in three ways: a faster turnaround time for mapping new records into the NHI database; a focus on tapping other databases (e.g., eBird) for information; and a focus on using citizen monitors and volunteers to help us collect data specifically for the NHI database. We should look to non-profit organizations to fund or help enter NHI data, and require that certified parties with whom we share data submit rare species records back to us. Filling gaps in the NHI data was identified as a priority, acknowledging that limited access to private lands makes this difficult.

More information on rare species: We heard consistently and repeatedly that providing online species guidance documents for all rare species (including Special Concern species) was a top priority for our customers. Fact sheets (especially pictures and habitat information), avoidance guidance, and recommended management practices for all rare species (including Special Concern species) and habitats were repeatedly requested.

Better outreach: The group wanted the Review Program to do more outreach to customers and partners (particularly to counties, municipalities and other local units of governments and to Farm Service Agencies) about the availability of our services.

Online NHI county maps & township-level data: These data are helpful for general site assessment purposes, but are not useful for determining species presence on a specific property. In the past, the data printouts were provided in a poor format.

4. Are there additional services that we don't currently provide that would be helpful to you?

Accelerated ER Reviews were suggested as a valuable service if the Program can absolutely guarantee the stated turnaround time.

Increased staffing: Customers requested that we hire additional regional ecologists. The existing 5 Regional Ecologists provide great consultation services and other technical support (including occasional site visits), but are not always able to respond promptly due to the volume of requests and other work priorities. Customers also wanted better access to other DNR staff for consultation, and requested that we provide a list of species experts (particularly experts in the regions) for consultation.

Online tools and forms: Customers wanted to be able to use the NHI Portal (our online tool for providing access to detailed NHI data) as an interactive tool for producing customized maps, and wanted us to provide online forms for submitting rare plant and animal data to NHI.

5. We've had requests to consider sharing NHI data more broadly for the purposes of conservation and project planning. What benefits/drawbacks do you anticipate if we were to pursue this direction?

Benefits: Direct access to NHI data is the top priority for developers and consultants, and the group as a whole strongly supported broadening data sharing services. The group anticipated that this action would make project planning more efficient: customers could plan for avoidance of negative impacts to rare resources early in the project design process, and could identify land disturbing activities that could impact rare species before project dollars are spent. It would also allow better use of both DNR staff and customers' time and energy. Finally, it would result in better on-the-ground conservation because more people would have better knowledge about issues related to rare species and habitats as a result of completing the required training (see #6).

Drawbacks: The two most important drawbacks identified by customers were the potential misuse and potential misinterpretation of the NHI data, which can occur (and has occurred in the past) both intentionally and unintentionally. An incomplete understanding of the limitations of the NHI data can easily lead to misinterpretation. For example, a customer may assume that a species is not present when in fact it may well be (i.e., a false negative). Data can also be intentionally misused, potentially resulting in poaching, destruction of habitats or removal of species. The group felt that both issues

were very important, but could be addressed through a required, comprehensive training and certification program.

6. **It has also been suggested that we create an NHI certification program. The certification program would be required for people with whom we share NHI data, and would likely consist of comprehensive, in-depth training on interpretation and application of NHI data as well as an evaluation component; completion of the introductory NHI training online would be a prerequisite to certification.**

- a. **What kind of training would be most helpful to you and your organization?**

The group agreed that comprehensive training, which addresses the access, use, interpretation, application, and security of the NHI data, must be a requirement for certification. The training should provide information on specific species and habitats, while acknowledging that not everyone can be an expert on all species. Having a face-to-face component to the training was important. It was suggested that training be ½ - 1 day in-person training, followed or preceded by additional training/materials provided in hard copy or online. It was suggested that training content vary by region and over time to maximize the variety of training opportunities available to geographically or topically specialized customer groups. Customers also noted that the training will need to acknowledge and address that in many cases 'correct' interpretation and application of NHI data is complex and variable. The group suggested that we seek help from outside sources in conducting and providing training and informational materials.

- b. **What experiences have you had (positive or negative) with other certification programs?**

Members of the group were familiar with 3 other certification programs (all associated in some way with the DNR): Certified Plan Writers for the DNR Managed Forest Law program; the Wisconsin Birder Certification through the UW-Green Bay's Cofrin Center for Biodiversity, and the DNR Wetland Delineation Professional Assurance Initiative. The first two programs were viewed positively by individuals associated with them. Problems highlighted with the Wetland Delineation Professional Assurance Initiative included a perception of unclear scoring criteria, an unclear approval process, and poor communication with applicants, and issues of liability both for the assured delineator and for the landowner. It was suggested that we examine and learn from all of these programs prior to designing a certification program for sharing NHI data.

- c. **What suggestions do you have for us if we pursue development of an NHI certification program?**

Technical support: DNR will need to provide adequate technical support to users (especially to local units of government) to ensure broad and appropriate use, interpretation and application of the data. If adequate support is not provided to users, they will not be comfortable using (and therefore will not use) the data. There is a lot of variability between different areas of the state, counties, and local governments in terms of both interest in the information and the expertise and ability of staff to interpret these data. A centralized approach to providing technical support was suggested, e.g., one central "hotline" people could call with questions about projects/impacts.

Training: The training will need to acknowledge and address the varying backgrounds of the participants. If we pursue sharing at the town government level, we will need to be prepared to conduct training on a large scale and frequent basis, with particular attention to data security issues in light of high staff turnover rates and other concerns.

Certification: The certification program should be as simple and straightforward as possible, with clear standards and guidelines, a transparent step-by-step process to certification, a set of attainable goals for applicants, and clear and prompt communication about exactly what is expected and required. The group thought that it will be very important to assess the qualifications (education, experience, training) of applicants to the certification program, and to have a mechanism for removing certification if

warranted. Benefits, limitations, and liabilities (perceived, legal, and otherwise) for all parties (DNR, certified individual, employing organization, landowner) need to be clearly identified and addressed at the outset of the program so that all parties clearly understand exactly what the certification program provides and how it will affect them. A preference was stated for a program that provides oversight with a subsequent concurrence letter from the DNR rather than certification per se. The group also suggested the possibility of differing levels of certification for users with differing needs.

Access to the data: Customers would like training and data access at the staff (rather than organization) level, and provision of data online (rather than via GIS shapefiles) for their specific geographic area of interest (e.g., county).

Costs: Costs should be based on the level of service/access provided, and should be kept low (non-profits and smaller units of government have limited budgets) to encourage broad participation in the program.

7. What additional tools and information (particularly items which could be provided via the web) would be helpful to you?

Information on rare species and habitats: The group strongly and consistently requested that additional training and information be available online, particularly fact sheets and recommended management guidance for all rare species (including Special Concern species) and habitats. The Broad Authorized Incidental Taking Protocols for Grassland & Savanna Management were noted as very helpful in guiding land management activities, and it was suggested that we develop similar guidance for other habitat types. These types of information are very helpful to customers for training field staff, guiding habitat enhancement activities, and avoiding adverse impacts to rare species. Customers also requested a calendar of important dates that may impact the timing of their projects (e.g. important dates for turtle emergence/hibernation which often relate directly to project timing limitations and silt fencing requirements) as a tool to use in their project planning.

Online tool: It was suggested that we look at Illinois' online mapping application EcoCAT (Ecological Compliance Assessment Tool). EcoCAT allows the user to access NHI data for a specific polygon (drawn by the user and recorded by the system), and to begin the consultation process with a button click (the staff person automatically receives the user's data).

8. Please include here any other suggestions, concerns, or guidance for us as we begin this process.

Learn from other states and programs: Examine and learn from services and tools provided by surrounding states, other certification programs, and previous pilot data sharing programs (e.g., with Iowa County) when designing new services and programs for a broader customer base.

Flexible staffing: In addition to previous recommendations, the group suggested that we consider a system in which Review Program staffing might be flexible such that staffing levels could increase during peak times/seasons to maintain (or shorten) turnaround times on ER Reviews during high volume periods.

Costs: Customers understood that each service has a cost. They wanted fees to be linked to the level of service provided, and fees/costs to be kept as low as possible.

Stakeholder Involvement: The group thought it was good that many stakeholders with different perspectives were involved at this stage in the process and that their input would be an important part of the process.

draft 9/26/08 by skc