

## **Improving Efficiency During Preparation of Regional Habitat Conservation Plans: Results of Survey #1**

*A Collaboration of the California Habitat Conservation Planning Coalition, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service<sup>1</sup>*

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*August 16, 2013*

### SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

To improve the process of preparing habitat conservation plans, in May 2013 we conducted an online, statewide survey of those involved in conservation plan preparation in California. Our results indicate that of all phases of plan preparation, creation and review of administrative drafts, as well as plan negotiations, took longer than respondents expected. Perceived delays in plan development were mainly attributed to difficulty reaching agreements and politics. Delays were primarily overcome by increasing meetings and communication and negotiations. If plans experienced delays associated with funding, the primary cause given by respondents was the cost of unanticipated tasks. Regular wildlife agency engagement and political will/leadership were identified as the highest ranked factors in maintaining momentum during plan development. Stated preferences for a broad diversity of informational formats and tools will inform which targeted educational and guidance materials we develop for conservation planning practitioners. We will soon be conducting a follow-up survey to better understand perceived delays and possible solutions.

### WHY A SURVEY?

Landscape scale Natural Community Conservation Plans (NCCPs) and Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs) identify and provide for the regional or area-wide conservation of plants, animals, and their habitats, while allowing compatible and appropriate economic activities. Due to their complexity and scale, these large multi-species plans (especially joint NCCP/HCPs) can take a long time to prepare -- up to 10 years or more -- which also makes them expensive. With decreasing grant and local funds available for plan development and decreasing political support due to plan delays and costs, increased planning efficiency is needed. To better understand the reasons for lengthy plan preparation, and how to improve efficiency, a survey of practitioners was spearheaded by the California HCP Coalition, in collaboration with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

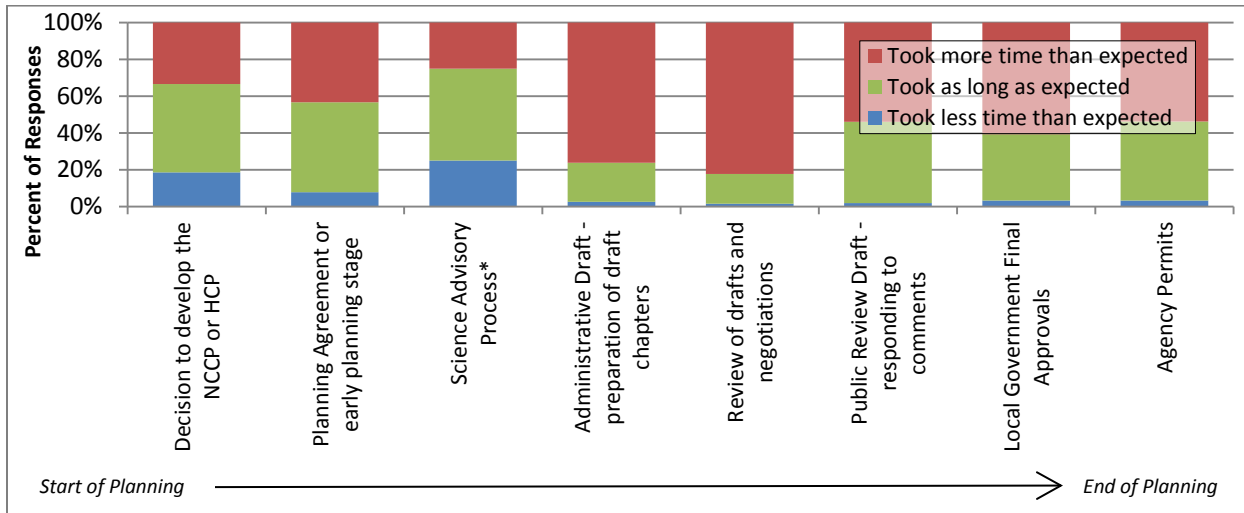
### SURVEY RESULTS

#### Which Aspects of Planning Take Longest?

Respondents were asked whether certain planning phases or plan components took 1) less time than they expected, 2) as long as they expected, or 3) longer than they expected. The phases of plan development that most respondents said took longer than expected were 1) preparation of the administrative draft and 2) review of drafts and negotiations (Figure 1). Several plan components were identified as taking longer to develop than expected, such as the conservation strategy, funding,

governance structure, adaptive management program, monitoring program, EIR/EIS, and local government approvals. Further analysis is required to determine whether the phases and components that were perceived by respondents as taking longer than expected were protracted due to some difficulty or because they are inherently time-consuming.

Figure 1. Planning phases and expectations of time required

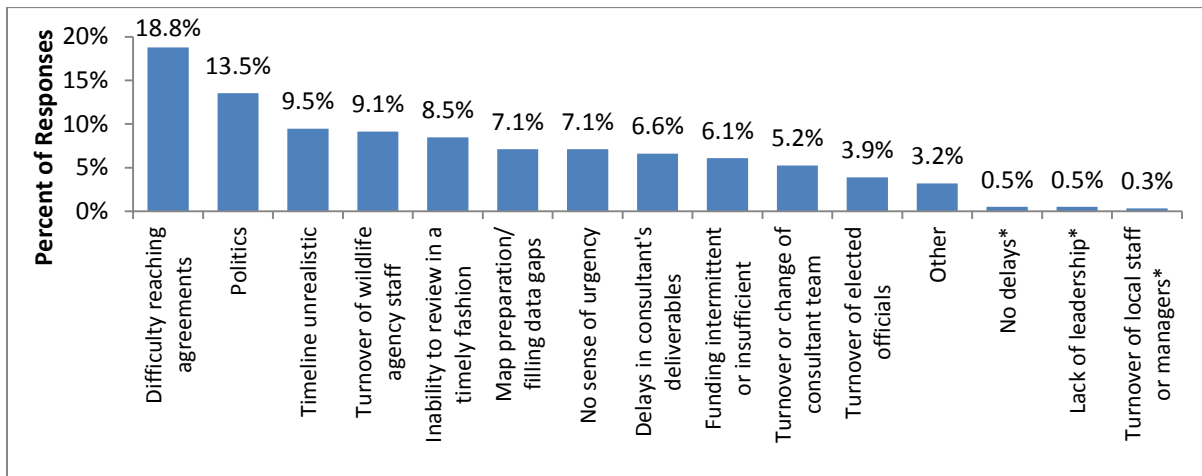


\*Category derived from additional information provided by respondents

### Reasons for Perceived Delays in Planning

Respondents were asked several questions in an effort to identify main factors responsible for perceived delays in plan development. The top reasons given for plan preparation delays were difficulty reaching agreements and politics (Figure 2). Also important, but not at the top of the list, were unrealistic timelines and turnover of wildlife agency staff.

Figure 2. Reasons for lengthy plan development



\*Category derived from additional information provided by respondents

Potential Solutions

Respondents strongly indicated that additional meetings/communication and negotiations were important in resolving delays. Respondents also suggested other approaches that could help resolve delays, such as structured coordination and communication mechanisms, adequate staffing levels, an effective initial planning framework and timeline, and long-term staff dedication and agency commitment. Political will and leadership and regular wildlife agency engagement were identified as key factors in maintaining momentum during plan creation (Table 1), with several other important factors ranking in the middle range of answers. For plans in which problems were related to funding, “unanticipated tasks” were identified as the primary cause. Surprisingly, approximately 22 percent of responses alluded to the fact that the plan continues to face obstacles that have not been resolved.

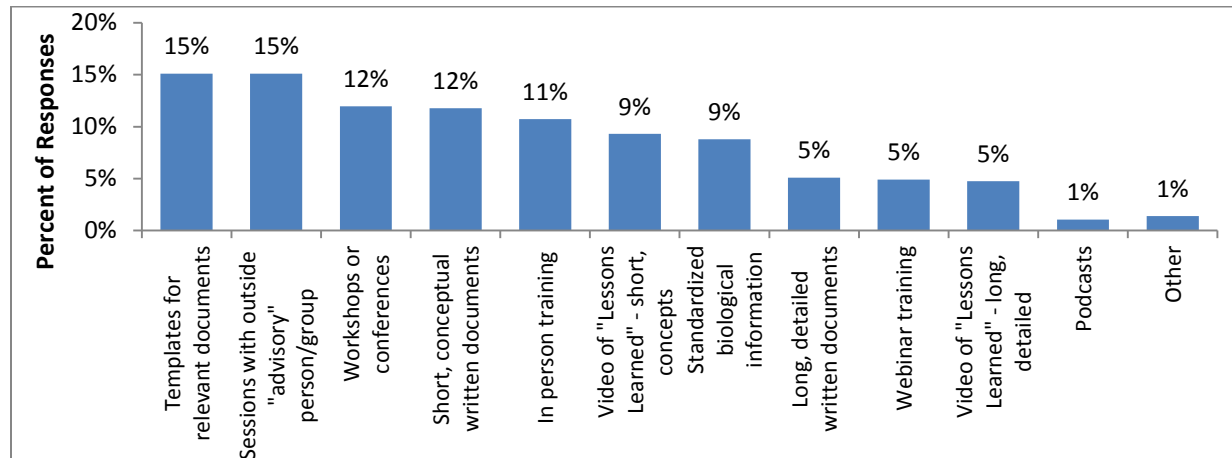
Table 1. Ranking of factors critical to maintaining momentum during NCCP or HCP development

Factors that maintain Plan momentum	Rank
Regular wildlife agency engagement	High
Political will and leadership	High
Local government commitment of resources	Medium
Effective consultant	Medium
Plan “champion” or advocate	Medium
Stakeholder leadership	Medium
Public involvement	Low
Public process transparency	Low
Use of a facilitator	Low

Guidance and Tools for Preparing Conservation Plans

Respondents were additionally asked which types of informational format or tools would help them or others in preparing NCCPs and HCPs. See Figure 3 for a summary of responses.

Figure 3. Preferred guidance and tools for preparing conservation plans



The reason for the relatively even distribution among answers (every category had proponents), instead of one or two very clear “winners,” may be due to different learning styles or preferences of respondents, or their roles in plan preparation. For example, the percentage of consultants preferring templates or problem-solving sessions with an outside advisory person or group was high compared to other groups of respondents.

### Next Steps

Results from this survey indicate that there is a critical need for 1) political will and leadership, 2) guidance and tools focused on process, timelines, and problem-solving, and 3) wildlife agency engagement and consistency in staffing. A targeted follow-up survey is being conducted to obtain more detailed information about perceived plan delays in an effort to better understand how to address and remedy them. To further illuminate this, we are analyzing the actual length of time that various conservation plans have taken to complete typical phases and components, as well as what minimum length of time is required per step, and the normative times that are taken to bring steps to fruition.

Results from the surveys will be used to develop best practices, including targeted educational materials in a variety of media. Next steps are to increase political support through directed outreach to local and agency leaders and to provide procedural guidance and applied tools, such as examples of planning frameworks or structures.

### METHODS

#### The Survey

*We conducted the survey using Survey Methods ([www.surveymethods.com](http://www.surveymethods.com)). Fifteen survey questions focused on 1) information about the experiences of respondents (the plan they worked on, their role in developing that plan, and the amount of time they worked on the plan), 2) their perceptions regarding factors that cause or reduce lengthy plan development, and 3) preferences for future guidance and tools. The survey was distributed to over 1,200 people involved in conservation planning, including wildlife agency staff, local government staff, consultants, and a diverse cross-section of stakeholders. One hundred eighty-one (181) respondents (15 percent) submitted 193 separate surveys (some respondents returned multiple surveys if they worked on several different plans). Although 33 of the surveys were only partially completed, the data were still included in our analysis of fully completed surveys. The median response time for respondents to complete the survey was less than 14 minutes.*

#### Statewide Representation

*Plans of all types and sizes across the state were well represented, including large scale NCCP/HCPs as well as small, focused HCPs. Figure 4 shows the general location and abundance of survey responses throughout the state.*

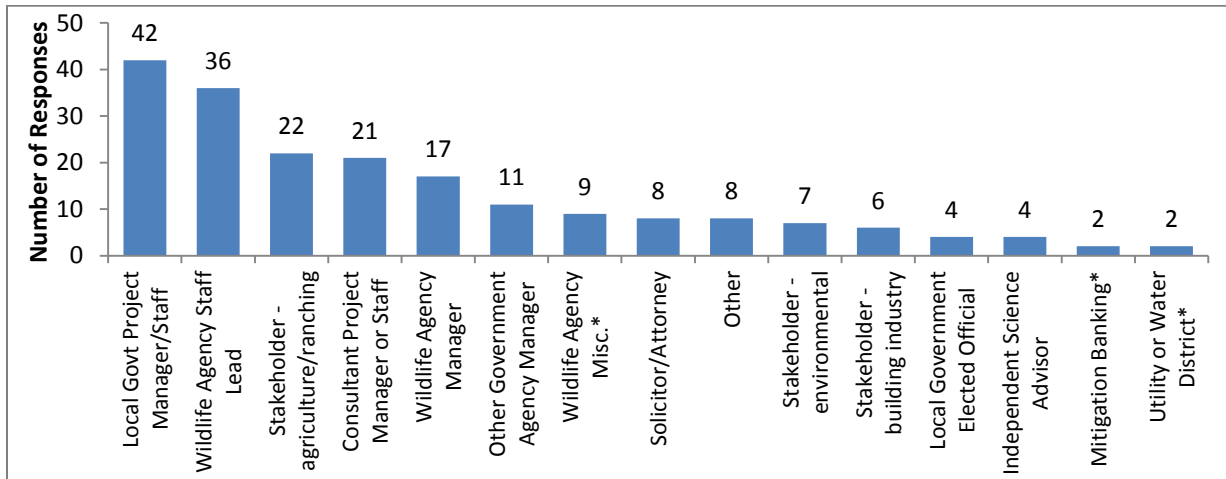
Figure 4. Location and abundance of survey responses



Roles of Respondents in Planning

Respondents were asked what role they played in plan preparation or who they represented during development of a particular NCCP or HCP. See Figure 5 below for a more detailed depiction of categories of respondents.

Figure 5. Roles of Survey Respondents in the Development of the NCCP or HCP



\*Category derived from additional self-identification by respondents

Respondents were also asked about the length of time they had been involved in plan development, and more than half said they had been involved during 75 percent or more of a plan's development.

<sup>1</sup> Survey was coordinated by the California HCP Coalition (John Hopkins), the California Department of Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Planning Branch (Brenda Johnson, Shannon Lucas, Monica Parisi and Cassidee Shinn), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Region 8 (Dan Cox).