

## **Maximizing Efficiency During the Preparation of Regional Habitat Conservation Plans: A Summary of Two Surveys**

*A Collaborative Project of the California Habitat Conservation Planning Coalition<sup>1</sup>*

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### SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

To improve the process of preparing habitat conservation plans, we conducted an online, statewide survey in May 2013 of those involved in conservation plan preparation in California. A second survey was conducted in October 2013 to seek clarification regarding responses to the first survey. Our results indicate that all phases of plan preparation took longer than respondents expected by an average of three or more years.

Perceived delays in plan development were mainly attributed to difficulty reaching agreements and local politics, as well as wildlife agency challenges, including staff shortages, staff turnover, changing requirements, and inconsistent engagement. If plans experienced delays associated with funding, the primary cause given by respondents was the increased cost of unanticipated tasks, which included additional drafts, studies or analyses.

Delays were primarily overcome through negotiations and additional meetings and/or communication. The presence of decision-makers or staff empowered to make decisions, and clearer requirements and expectations, can also surmount delays. Regular wildlife agency engagement and local political will/leadership were identified as the highest ranked factors in maintaining momentum during plan development. 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.

### THE PURPOSE OF SURVEYS

Landscape-level 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 HCP and NCCP practitioners was spearheaded in 2013 by the California

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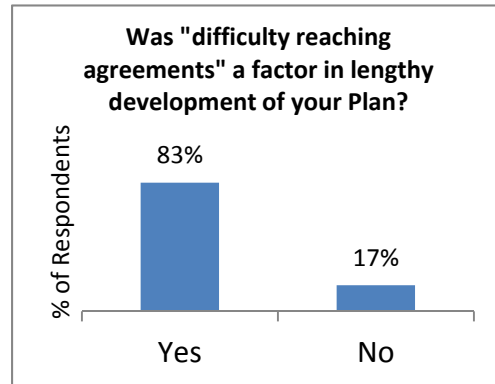
<sup>1</sup> The surveys were developed and analyzed by the California HCP Coalition (John Hopkins), the California Department of Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Planning Branch (Brenda Johnson, Shannon Lucas, Monica Parisi and Cassidee Shinn), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Region 8 (Dan Cox). A brief description of our methodology can be found at the end of this report.

HCP Coalition, in collaboration with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

## SURVEY RESULTS

### Reasons for Perceived Delays in Planning

The top reasons given for delays during plan preparation were 1) difficulty reaching agreements and 2) politics. In Survey #2, respondents were asked what caused difficulty in reaching agreements. The top reasons included differing philosophies and agendas, a lack of cooperation and/or communication, and wildlife agency challenges (such as inconsistently interpreted requirements, and inconsistent engagement). Respondents were also asked to clarify the role of politics, if politics did cause delays. Explanations were primarily related to local politics (such as fears of permittees regarding the cost of the plan, disparities in stakeholder influence, and differing stakeholder goals). Other reasons given for overall planning delays (but not at the top of the list) were unrealistic timelines and turnover of wildlife agency staff.



In Survey #1, respondents were asked whether certain planning phases or plan components took either 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 associated negotiations. In Survey #2, respondents were asked about the actual vs. expected number of years it took to complete each phase. Results revealed that the "administrative draft" took an average of three years longer than expected, and the "review of drafts and negotiations" took an average of 3.5 years longer than expected. In Survey #2, when asked about reasons for these two phases taking longer than expected, respondents indicated 1) the inherently difficult nature of negotiations and consensus-building, 2) wildlife and local agency staff turnover delays and shortages, and 3) unforeseen major changes to the plan. Further analysis is required to determine whether the phases that were perceived by respondents as taking longer than expected were protracted due to some difficulty or because they are inherently time-consuming.

For plans in which problems were related to funding, "unanticipated tasks" were identified in Survey #1 as the primary cause of increased costs. As further revealed in Survey #2, unanticipated tasks included additional drafts and revisions, additional baseline studies, and changed or additional analyses. Reasons for unanticipated tasks were varied, but included lack of guidance from or changing requirements of the Wildlife Agencies.

### Potential Solutions

Respondents strongly indicated in Survey #1 that additional meetings/communication and negotiations were important in resolving delays. Respondents also suggested other approaches that could help

resolve delays, such as 1) structured coordination and communication mechanisms, 2) adequate staffing levels, 3) an effective initial planning framework and timeline, and 4) long-term staff dedication and agency commitment. In Survey #2, respondents suggested additional approaches to reduce or avoid delays, such as 1) decision-maker engagement and/or increased decision-making authority of staff involved in plan preparation, 2) establishment of a process with clear requirements and expectations, and 3) preparation of a regular summary of activities and results as a way to memorialize decisions.

Political will and leadership and regular wildlife agency engagement were identified in Survey #1 as key factors in maintaining momentum during plan creation (Table 1).

Table 1. Rank order of factors critical to maintaining momentum during NCCP or HCP preparation (from Survey #1).

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

Interestingly, the use of a facilitator was considered to be the least critical to maintaining momentum; however, Survey #2 indicated that the reason for this may have been due to respondents’ lack of experience using facilitators, as 60 percent said a facilitator was not used in their plan. Where a facilitator was used, 45 percent of respondents indicated that facilitators were critical to maintaining momentum.

Guidance and Tools for Preparing Conservation Plans

In Survey #1, respondents were asked which types of educational format or tools would help them or others in preparing NCCPs and HCPs. Instead of one or two very clear preferences, the responses were distributed among a broad array of formats (every category had proponents); this may be due to different learning styles 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. In Survey #2, responses suggested that a number of types of templates would be useful, including templates for:

- Process timelines and flowcharts
- Wildlife Agency Findings and Permits
- Plan chapters
- Implementation Agreements

Preferred topics for trainings or workshops based on Survey #2 responses include:

- Lessons learned during plan preparation and implementation
- How to perform a financial analysis (how to prepare an implementation budget, mitigation fee structure, etc.)
- How to prepare a monitoring and adaptive management program
- How to design a conservation strategy

There was also significant support for standardized biological information, especially species distribution data and maps, and for vegetation maps.

### Next Steps

Results from the surveys indicate that there is a critical need for: 1) political will and leadership, 2) guidance and tools, 3) wildlife agency engagement and consistency in staffing, 4) decision-maker involvement/empowerment, and 5) clear and realistic expectations.

To begin to explore normative times, which can inform planning expectations, we are currently comparing the actual length of time that it has taken California conservation plans to complete typical planning phases with the minimum length of time that appears to be achievable, based on standing laws, regulations, and linearity of the planning process.

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

*We conducted both surveys using Survey Methods ([www.surveymethods.com](http://www.surveymethods.com)). The survey questions focused on 1) past experiences of respondents, 2) their perceptions regarding factors that cause or reduce lengthy plan development, and 3) preferences for future guidance and tools. The surveys were distributed to over 1,200 individuals involved in conservation planning in California. One hundred eighty-one (181) people responded to Survey #1 (15 percent response rate), and 100 people responded to Survey #2 (eight percent response rate). Habitat conservation plans of all types and sizes across the state were well represented, including large scale joint NCCP/HCPs as well as small, focused HCPs.*

*Wildlife Agency employees comprised the majority of respondents (29 percent), along with local government (23 percent), a diverse cross-section of stakeholders (20 percent), consultants (11 percent), and "other" (18 percent; including other agencies, districts or utilities, attorneys, and others). More than half the respondents to Survey #1 said they had been involved during 75 percent or more of a plan's development. In Survey #2, 71 percent of respondents indicated that they had worked on only one or two NCCPs or HCPs; however, 67 percent had been working on NCCPs or HCPs for six to 10 years. In sum, the majority of respondents exhibited a somewhat limited experience across plans, but showed considerable long-term investment and expertise.*