

Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP)

In the early 1980s, Habitat Conservation Planning began in California. At that time, the state became the national leader in habitat conservation and natural community planning, and remains so today. Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs) often focus on conserving multiple species listed under the federal Endangered Species Act as an alternative to single-species management, and may authorize the incidental take of species. Within 10 years of the first HCP approval, the state embarked on an unprecedented endeavor to proactively bridge and balance, at a much larger ecosystem scale, the conflicting needs of biodiversity conservation and the economic use of land. The program that emerged, the Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP) Act, was designed to complement federal HCPs, but with higher standards for scientific input, public involvement, long-term conservation assurances, and all aspects of implementation, funding, management, monitoring and protection for sensitive listed and unlisted species and their habitats, in perpetuity. Today, most new federal and state multiple-species conservation plans are developed jointly as NCCP/HCPs, providing permanent landscape-level conservation in addition to impact mitigation.

These NCCP/HCPs are the preferred landscape conservation tool in California. They are designed to sustain biodiversity and preserve species to provide for the long-term conservation of species, habitat and broader-scale natural communities. They support ecological processes that sustain ecosystem functions, identify adaptive management as a key to monitoring success, and are designed to connect existing publicly and privately owned conserved lands.

Many stakeholders including urban and commercial developers, farmers, ranchers and municipalities recognize the tremendous cost benefit of this program. Supported by wildlife agencies and environmental advocates, NCCP/HCPs have proven to be scientifically and legally defensible, and can be used to leverage federal and state funding.

Some state and federal agencies and legislators, including the White House Office of Management and Budget, are concerned the five to 10 year NCCP/HCP development process is too long and demands too much time in analysis. They are seeking to make it shorter. Additionally, smaller municipalities are concerned with the cost and responsibility associated with long-term implementation and monitoring. They seek guaranteed state and federal long-term support.

The NCCP Program is a high priority for DFG, and it is participating in several that are very complex and innovative in their approach. To date, DFG has permitted 12 plans, has 13 plans under way, and another three plans in the early stages. Collectively, these plans cover 10 million acres with another two million acres already committed to conservation. Two NCCPs in particular with special statewide importance are the Bay Delta Conservation Plan and the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan. The significance of these plans and their vast benefits to California's citizenry and natural resources make these efforts indispensable. DFG maintains a unit dedicated to advancing NCCP policy and practice, which is currently developing more consistent approaches to monitoring preserved lands, more consistently creating biological diversity inventories, and creating internal and external guidance and best practices to streamline processes, and support local government use of NCCPs. DFG also is working with a coalition of NCCP/HCP advocates to secure increased federal funding for the plans, and improve communication and coordination with planning participants.