

## **Frequently Asked Questions Planning for Priority Species and Vegetation**

**Q: How is this course structured?**

A: This training has two main components:

1. A methodology/thought process to improve rigor and analysis of the biological components of the RMP process (resulting in improved on-the-ground management of resources)
2. An Excel workbook to improve documentation and support the techniques you will learn in the training

**Q: Why was this training developed?**

A: This training was developed to promote better-informed planning decisions for BLM programs and projects, to improve conservation approaches for special status and other priority species and vegetation, to improve documentation and clarification of effects analyses for biological resources, and to provide greater clarity for public, legal and other reviews. The techniques themselves help planning teams more closely meet required planning decisions, while the workbook can improve documentation of planning decisions as a piece of the administrative record.

**Q: Which pieces of BLM's land use planning process are supported by this training?**

A: This training will assist BLM planning teams in identifying priority species and vegetation, establishing desired outcomes (goals and objectives), assessing risks from altered regimes (e.g., fire); identifying corresponding restoration, reclamation, and conservation opportunities and strategies for species, vegetation, and habitats (design and analyze alternatives); and developing monitoring and implementation plans. All these elements are included in existing planning guidance, but it can be challenging to derive them in a consistent, systematic, and well-documented way.

**Q: Is the methodology taught in this training a new or additional technique?**

A: Appendix C of the BLM Handbook H-1601-1 outlines the planning decisions that should be made for each of BLM's resource programs and resource uses; however, it does not mandate or recommend a process to reach those decisions.

This training emphasizes proven conservation planning techniques, adapted to fit BLM's land use planning process. While the application of this specific training to BLM is a new approach, the work of ordering and analyzing information would have to be done through some method. The need to ensure that our planning

decisions are developed in a rigorous, systematic, well-documented and legally defensible way was a key motivation for piloting this method.

**Q: Is this training just for wildlife habitat or Threatened and Endangered Species? Doesn't this "shortcut" the interdisciplinary team process?**

A: These techniques work most effectively when a small core of interested specialists, generally the wildlife, vegetation, fish, and water specialists work together. More generally, in order to engage in effective interdisciplinary work, each individual specialist needs to start with an understanding of the technical aspects of his or her resource (condition, trend, management opportunities) so they can be explained to and adjusted with the ID team; in other words, each specialist generally starts with an understanding of the problems/opportunities based on current management, an initial "wish list" of actions, and some idea of new goals and objectives to guide work. The procedures taught in this training are not meant to shortcut the ID team process, but to give the wildlife, vegetation, fish, and water specialists a rigorous and systematic basis to work from in the interdisciplinary setting, which they can then sort into the framework of alternatives with the ID team.

**Q: Is there a geospatial component to this process?**

A: The Bureau is piloting a spatial tool, VISTA, which may provide this link in the future; however, at this time, there isn't an explicit spatial link between the processes/tools taught in this training and the land use planning process. Iterative spatial analysis should still be used in combination with this process to develop and analyze planning decisions, just as it would be used in a "regular" planning effort.

**Q: How much additional work will it create to use these techniques?**

A: It does take some time to learn to use the Excel tool that operationalizes the training concepts. However, BLM planning team members who have continued using the tool indicate that it provides a method for organizing and understanding the vast amount of available information that must be assessed and adapted for the plan. Committing to the front-end work also allows for greater efficiency down the road; once the information is entered, it serves as its own documentation for the administrative record, and the basic inputs also yield an implementation strategy and monitoring plan, which would otherwise require greater work during the final stages of the plan.

However, it's important to note that, if a team is not early enough in the planning process and is trying to "catch up" with data entry, use of the Excel tool could potentially result in inefficiencies; its value is in helping planning teams understand current and desired condition, and strategies for achieving them. This

information is most useful in the Analysis of the Management Situation and Alternative Development stages of the planning effort.

The Nature Conservancy has offered to provide teams with coaches to assist with this portion of the work.

**Q: Does this process require extensive data entry into the workbook?**

A: The workbook is a decision support tool. It is designed to capture rationale and assessments/conclusions and supporting information. Thus, there is no requirement to feed “raw” data into the workbook; rather, the results of discussions and assessments on condition are entered with rationale captured by a “comments” function.

**Q: What should planning teams do with the workbook? How much of the workbook should be included in the plan? Should we review the workbook in public meetings?**

A: The workbook itself will not appear “as-is” in the land use plan—the results of the discussions between resource specialists are what will make up the content of the RMP sections. Similarly, experienced users of the workbook indicate that it can be very difficult to use the workbook in a large group setting; a better approach would be to explain the concepts, techniques, and outcomes and save the detailed workings and discussions on inputs for a small core group of key internal and cooperator partners.

**Q: Can these techniques be used for other resources and programs?**

A: This process was developed to plan for biological resources (wildlife, habitat, vegetation, water) and is organized around biological principles. However, other organizations have reported some success using the basic thought process for other resources, such as heritage and cultural resources. As taught in this class, however, the techniques apply especially to the resources that focus on vegetation and water (fish, wildlife and plants).

**Q: How does this project fit with ePlanning?**

A: The Excel tables that are developed through this process are not meant to be imported directly into an RMP. Rather, they help document the thought process *behind* RMP decisions and analyses, so use of this tool should not result in technological complications with ePlanning; rather, it should provide information that can be entered into major sections of the RMP. Additional work is ongoing to understand the various implications associated with ePlanning.