



## USDA Forest Service 180-day Progress Report: March 21, 2023 CEQ Guidance for Federal Departments and Agencies on Ecological Connectivity and Wildlife Corridors

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### Introduction

In close coordination with CEQ on the Guidance for Federal Departments and Agencies on Ecological Connectivity and Wildlife Corridors, the USDA Forest Service has been working to carry out the actions directed by the Secretary of Agriculture in [Secretary's Memorandum 1077-004: Climate Resilience and Carbon Stewardship of America's Forests and Grasslands](#) (June 23, 2022). The Memo (section 2a) calls for the Forest Service (FS) to spatially identify climate change vulnerabilities and risks to key National Forest System resources, including habitat and ecological connectivity for important wildlife and at-risk species and areas important for biodiversity (e.g., areas important for connectivity), to assist in identifying where changes or additions to policy/direction may be needed to enable more effective adaptation or mitigation actions.

Further, the Memo (section 2b) directs the FS to develop **specific policy recommendations for climate resilience and carbon stewardship** related to wildlife habitat and connectivity, in addition to other topic areas, by November 1, 2023. In an effort to be responsive to both the Secretary's Memo and the CEQ guidance, the FS is working to develop policy recommendations for Wildlife Habitat and Connectivity to *"increase and replicate successful cross-jurisdictional partnerships and programs to foster increased biodiversity, enable wildlife migration, and enhance habitat integrity and resilience"*.

### Progress to date

1. **Ongoing activities:** The FS continues to implement ongoing work related to wildlife connectivity. A reminder of responsibilities associated with "Habitat Connectivity and Migration Corridors in National Forest System Planning and Decisions" was sent to FS Regional Foresters from the National Forest System Deputy Chief on August 19, 2022. Ongoing work related to connectivity includes collaborations with multiple Federal, State, Tribal, county, and private land managers. Examples include:
  - Cross-jurisdictional on-the-ground efforts like those related to Department of the Interior Secretarial Order 3362: Improving Habitat Quality in Western Big-Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors (SO3362); [https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/uploads/so\\_3362\\_migration.pdf](https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/uploads/so_3362_migration.pdf);
  - Cross-USDA collaborations like the Joint Chief's Landscape Restoration Program, which enables FS and NRCS to jointly invest in conservation and restoration at a landscape scale across public and private lands. Example projects that promote fish and wildlife habitat and connectivity include sage-grouse seasonal habitat restoration, with benefits to elk and mule deer, in Idaho ([Conservation in Southern Idaho Receive Federal and NGO Awards — Partners in the Sage](#)) and restoration in the Salmon Superhighway in Oregon ([Building the Salmon SuperHwy | US Forest Service \(usda.gov\)](#)). The Salmon Superhighway Joint Chiefs' project helped to connect communities to their watershed by reconnecting salmon, steelhead, trout, and lamprey to their native habitats and opened up over 30 stream miles of spawning and rearing habitat. This work was done as part of a broader community effort to restore connectivity to 180 miles of blocked habitat throughout 6 major salmon and steelhead rivers of Oregon's North Coast;
  - Cross-unit collaborations like the Northern Arizona Landscape Connectivity Alliance



- (NALCA), established to enhance landscape connectivity for wildlife. NALCA's primary objective is to strengthen partnerships and build efficiencies in designing, implementing, and monitoring landscape and wildlife projects;
- Land management plan revision efforts within individual units (like those on the Custer Gallatin and Lolo National Forests; [Incorporating wildlife connectivity into forest plan revision under the United States Forest Service's 2012 planning rule \(usda.gov\)](https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/lolo/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fseprd993646), <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/lolo/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fseprd993646>); and
  - Collaborative science and information development efforts at various scales, including development, still in the early stages, of a West-wide connectivity atlas and a national connectivity dataset evaluating multiple connectivity modeling methodologies.
2. **Development of new policy and information:** The following new activities are underway, in response to the Secretary's Memo (as described above) and consistent with recommendations in the CEQ memo:

- A. **Data and information:** On April 20, 2023, the FS released a beta version of a new tool to assess climate risks and vulnerabilities called the Forest Service Climate Risk Viewer (CRV; [Forest Service Climate Risk Viewer \(arcgis.com\)](https://arcgis.com)). Developed with over 28 high-quality datasets, it shows how resources overlap with climate exposure and vulnerability to inform the need for climate adaptation. The CRV team examined available CONUS-wide and US-wide datasets for connectivity and included a Forest-Cover Weighted Human Modification Connectivity Model in the beta version. This dataset uses human modification information and forest cover data to identify key areas of importance for forest landscape connectivity across North America. On August 11, 2023, updated firehatched information was incorporated into the CRV beta version 0.2, including species-specific connectivity information for 9 wide-ranging wildlife species in the Western US.

*Next steps:*

- FS will continue to both identify and develop additional connectivity datasets to inform management decision making for climate adaptation. Incorporate additional datasets into the Climate Risk Viewer and other information tools.
  - FS is reviewing public feedback on the CRV received through our Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPR). Feedback will help us determine how the CRV can be used to support decision making, and what other data layers would be useful or necessary.
  - As we continue to improve the CRV, the FS also intends to further the analytical capabilities of the CRV by working with partners to foster innovation and improve technical capabilities to support climate-informed forest management.
  - FS is partnering with American Forests to convene a network of partners that could develop a shared vision for climate-informed management and advance the applicability and power of the CRV or suite of similar spatial tools.
- B. **Policy and guidance:** In February 2023, FS formed a national team to draft Wildlife Habitat and Connectivity policy recommendations. The team has met regularly over the last 180 days, reviewed existing policy, and is developing draft policy and guidance recommendations for internal consideration. The draft recommendations focus on four main areas:
- Updating wildlife, fish, and sensitive plant habitat policy and guidance to be consistent with other existing policy and to improve our ability to foster climate resilience,
  - Improving monitoring and adaptive feedback loops,
  - Developing data and information standards and assessing data sharing needs and options, and
  - Fostering cross-jurisdictional coordination and collaboration.



*Next steps:*

- FS will conduct an internal review process and submit recommendations to USDA by November 1, 2023. Implementation of the recommendations is expected to begin in 2024, pending concurrence by USDA Secretary.
- The policy recommendations are an early step in a long process. Although these recommendations could impact how future work is implemented, there is no guarantee the recommendations will become policy.
- In conjunction with these internal policy recommendations, FS is requesting public feedback and tribal consultation on how the agency should adapt policies and develop new policies to manage national forests for climate resilience, through the Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking ANPR comment period, which ended July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023. We will consider input received from the public, stakeholders, and partners on the ANPR and associated engagements to inform any decisions about policy or actions.
- Any resulting proposals to change policy or regulations will follow the relevant process, including Tribal consultation and opportunities for formal public comment.

**C. Public engagement:** Complementing and supplementing our work responding to the Secretary’s Memo and the CEQ guidance memo, the Forest Service issued an Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPR) to seek input on how we can develop new policies or build on current policies to improve our ability to foster climate resilience, recognizing that impacts are different in different places across the country. The purpose of the ANPR is gather public input to gain insights into public perceptions of climate risks to forests and acceptable ways to address those risks. The ANPR includes questions about how the agency can adapt to climate change, which relate to biodiversity, connectivity, and work with cross-jurisdictional partnerships.

*Next steps:*

- The ANPR comment period closed July 21, 2023, and the FS is reviewing the comments currently.

