Region 4 – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Long Range Transportation Plan

Executive Summary

Southeast Region

February 2015

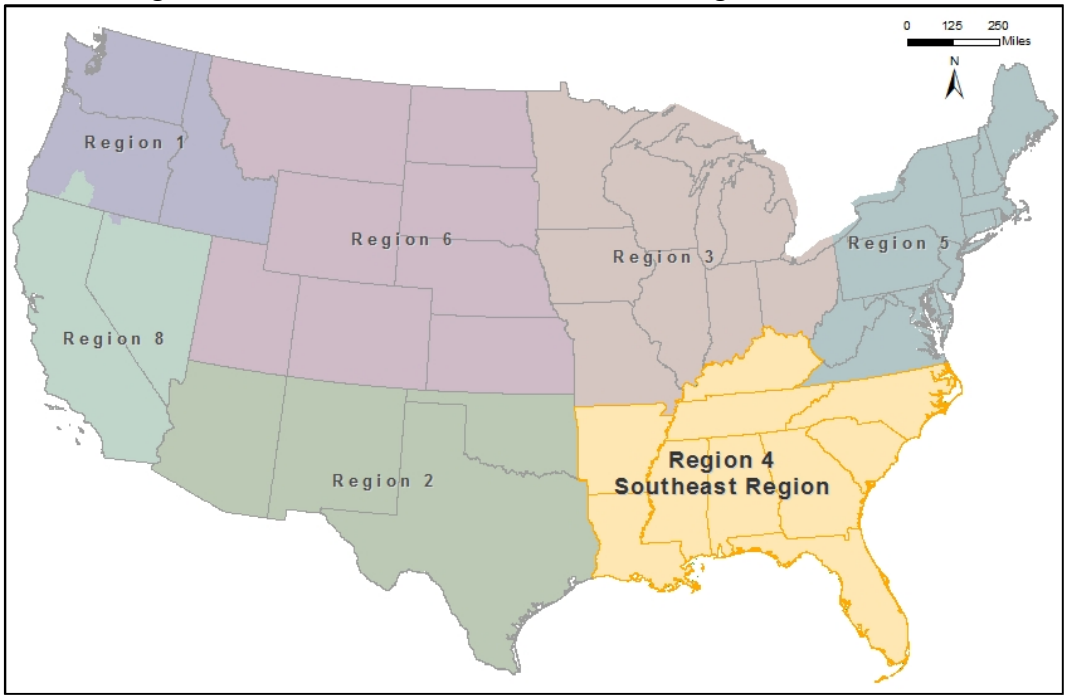
Front page photo credits (clockwise from top left): Paul Tritaik, J.N. "Ding" Darling NWR; Cristina Pastore, J.N. "Ding" Darling NWR; Steve Suder, Alligator River NWR; Paul Tritaik, J.N. "Ding" Darling NWR; Joe Saenz, Black Bayou Lake NWR.

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION TO THE FWS REGION 4 LONG RANGE TRANSPORTATION PLAN

The Southeast Region (Region 4) of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS, the Service) has initiated the development of its first Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP). With the assistance of the Eastern Federal Lands Highway Division (EFLHD) of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the Service's Southeast Region (FWS Region 4) is developing a twenty-year plan for the preservation, enhancement, operations and maintenance of its transportation assets across all of its national wildlife refuges and fish hatcheries in the southeastern states and U.S. outlying areas. The FWS regional boundaries are shown in Figure 1. Region 4 states, territories, and station locations are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 1: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Region Boundaries



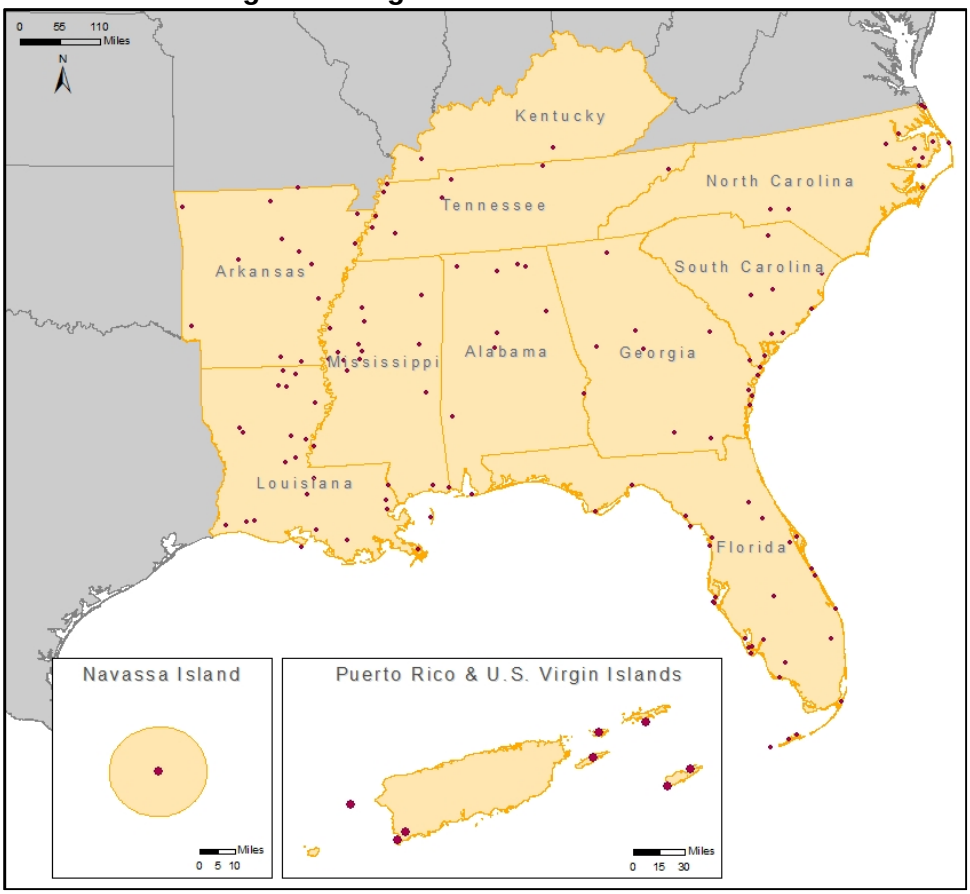
This plan accomplishes the following:

- Assesses the current and future conditions of the Service's transportation assets.
- Determines transportation needs, as well as the identification of those potential projects and policies to address those needs.
- Establishes priorities based on project performance, available funding, and coordination opportunities with other federal, state, and local agencies.

Prior to the commencement of this regional plan, the development of a national level long-range transportation plan for the Fish and Wildlife Service was initiated. The primary purpose of the national plan was to define the overall transportation policy direction for the entire Service as well as for individual regions. Similar to Region 4, many of the other regions across the country have been

completing plans of their own. These plans will aid in the Service's mission to "work with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people"[1] by assisting each region with the development of a safe, efficient, and sustainable transportation system on Service lands.

Figure 2: Region 4 States and Stations



This Long Range Transportation Plan will assist Region 4 in determining its many transportation needs, prioritizing transportation projects to best utilize the funds currently available to the Service, and aid in the development of partnerships with outside agencies for coordinated planning opportunities. This plan also will help to more formally integrate transportation planning into the refuges' comprehensive conservation plans (CCPs) and the fish hatcheries' comprehensive hatchery management plans (CHMPs) to make better use of their existing planning processes.

MISSION AND GOALS

The Mission of the FWS Region 4 LRTP is to support the Service's larger national mission by connecting people to fish, wildlife, and their habitats through strategic implementation of transportation programs.

The goals of this Region 4 transportation plan reflect the six basic categories defined in the FWS National LRTP document. Each of the enhanced FWS Region 4 goals includes distinct objectives that explain how the Service will accomplish each goal. The FWS Region 4 LRTP's goals and objectives are detailed below.

[1] http://www.fws.gov/help/about_us.html

Goal 1 – Access, Mobility, and Connectivity: Ensure that units open to public visitation have adequate access, mobility, and connectivity for all potential users, including underserved, underrepresented, and disadvantaged populations.

Goal 2 – Asset Management: Provide a financially sustainable transportation system to satisfy current and future land management needs in the face of a changing climate.

Goal 3 – Coordinated Opportunities: Seek partnered transportation solutions that support the Service's mission, maximize the utility of Service resources, and provide mutual benefits to the Service and its external partners.

Goal 4 – Environment: Ensure that the transportation program helps to conserve and enhance fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats.

Goal 5 – Safety: Provide a transportation system that ensures visitors traveling to and within Service lands arrive at their destinations safely.

Goal 6 – Visitor Experience: Create and sustain enjoyable and welcoming transportation experiences for all visitors.

This Long Range Transportation Plan will assist Region 4 in determining its many transportation needs, prioritizing transportation projects to best utilize the funds currently available to the Service, and aid in the development of partnerships with outside agencies for coordinated planning opportunities.

REGION 4 BACKGROUND

Region 4 is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's largest region in the country, in terms of the number of transportation assets it contains. Region 4 contains 128 national wildlife refuges and 17 national fish hatcheries, comprising approximately 3.59 million acres of land and water across ten states and two territories: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee, as well as Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Of the 128 refuges, 113 are open to the public for visitation at specified time periods throughout the year; all 17 hatcheries allow public visitation as well. Sixteen of the refuges were specifically established for the preservation and protection of endangered species.

Region 4 maintains an extensive system of transportation infrastructure, including roads, trails, parking lots, bridges, culverts, and low-water crossings. The roads, trails, and parking lots are primarily gravel or native/primitive surfaces, with some additional high-use facilities that have been constructed with either asphalt or concrete materials.

Approximately 3,500 miles of Service roadways exist within Region 4, of which close to 1,500 miles are open to the public. The remaining 2,000 miles are for administrative use only by Service staff. Similarly, of the approximately 1,700 parking lots and 350 miles of trails maintained by Region 4, about 1,400 parking lots and 220 miles of trails are open to the public. This compares to over 7,000 miles of roadways, 4,500 parking lots, and 1,400 miles of trails in the entire Service's nationwide transportation asset inventory. As one of the eight regions, Region 4 comprises a significant amount of the overall transportation assets of the Service nationally.

EXISTING CONDITIONS AND FUTURE TRENDS

Transportation assets receive funding based on condition, importance, and need. The intent of any LRTP is to identify future needs and plan for them proactively. Thus, it is imperative to understand the current and evolving state of transportation in Region 4 to look forward and plan for the future. The data provided in the *Existing Conditions and Future Trends Report* helps to inform the identification of improvement areas and needs to assist in the process of selecting projects.

GOAL 1 – ACCESS, MOBILITY, AND CONNECTIVITY

Access, mobility, and connectivity collectively ensure that both visitors and refuge staff can have travel-mode choices to equitably, easily, and conveniently travel to, from, and within Service units. ***Access*** addresses the ability of people of all ages, economic groups, and physical abilities, as well as underrepresented populations, to visit Service units. ***Mobility*** considers the ease and convenience for visitors to travel to, from, and within Service units using a preferred mode. Finally, ***connectivity*** addresses the potential to link many modes, both inside and outside units, to maximize possibilities for transportation connections.

The LRTP considered a wide range of spatial metrics for this goal, including access to stations by road, bicycle and trail, transit, water, and air. Spatial analysis through Geographic Information Systems (GIS) was used to complete some of this analysis, while qualitative information also was gathered from the Regional Alternative Transportation Evaluation[2] (RATE) survey. Some highlights from the analysis are included below:

- Approximately 50% of stations are within one-half mile of a navigable waterway with 18 stations within a half mile of both an inland and marine route.
- According to the RATE survey, almost a third of visitors reach stations using water-based transportation.
- Scenic Byways traverse 15 Service units and pass within 10 miles of 60% of the units (79 refuges and nine hatcheries).
- Recreational trail information was available for Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, and North Carolina. Of the 57 refuges and hatcheries within the four states, 20 intersect or are adjacent to facilities that support walking, biking, or multi-use activities and an additional 22 are located within one mile of such facilities.

GOAL 2 – ASSET MANAGEMENT

The Service's transportation system is necessary for refuge and hatchery staff and visitors to safely and easily access as well as enjoy the national network of conserved and maintained lands and waters, but it must be maintained sustainably for future generations. The Service at a national level has implemented an asset management plan that is consistent with the *Asset Management Plan 2009*[3] to manage its diverse set of transportation-related assets in order to provide the best level of service with the available resources.

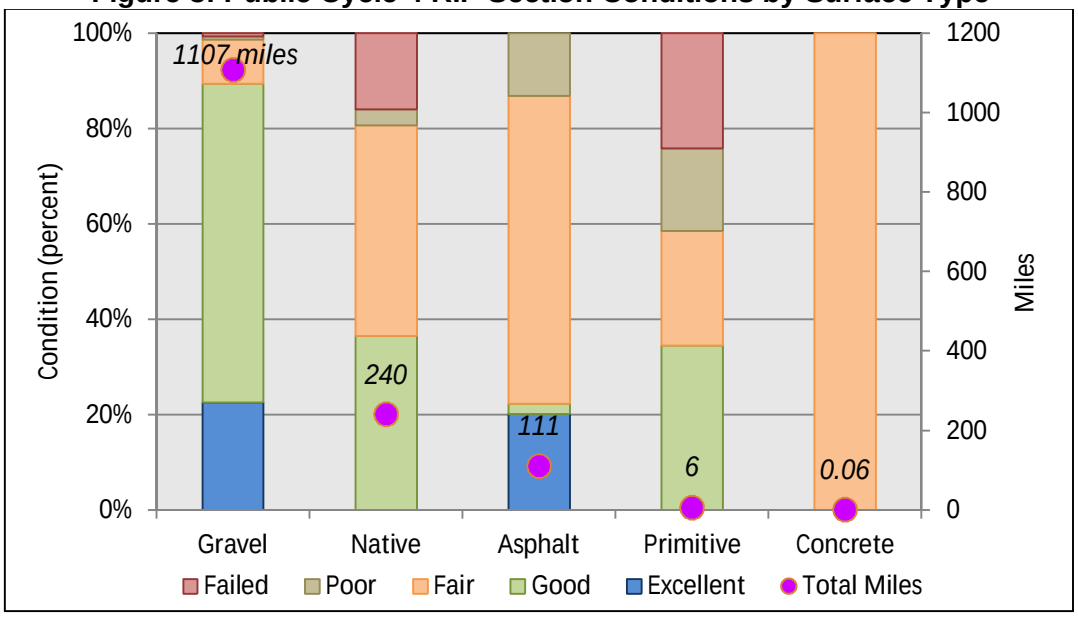
Assets maintained by the Service are inventoried in both the Service Asset Maintenance Management System (SAMMS) and the Road Inventory Program (RIP) databases. RIP is collected on a cyclical basis every five years by the FHWA's Eastern and Central Federal Lands Highway Divisions on behalf of the Service. RIP data served as the primary source for the analysis of this goal

[2] *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Alternative Transportation Evaluation Report – Region 4* (Volpe Center, 2013)
[3] *Asset Management Plan* (Bureau of Land Management, 2009)

area. Figure 3 shows the variation of road conditions for each of the five pavement materials for public use roads in Region 4. Some highlights include:

- According to RIP, Region 4 contains the largest number of inventoried public use roadway miles, 1,463.9 miles, compared to the next highest inventoried road miles in Regions 6 and 2, which have approximately 944 miles and 818 public use miles, respectively.
- Of the 1,463.9 total public road miles, 75.5% (1,105.4 miles) are in "good" or "excellent" condition. Only 5.3% (77.9 miles) are in "poor" or "failed" condition.
- More than 75% of the public use road miles inventoried, or 1,107.4 miles, are gravel roads. The remaining 25% consist of native and primitive surfaces (245.7 miles or 16.8%); asphalt (110.8 miles or 7.6%); and concrete (0.06 miles or <0.1%).
- Nearly 88% of the public use trails (199.0 miles) are classified as being in "excellent" condition. Only 1.3% (2.9 miles) is classified as being in "poor" or "very poor" condition.
- For units that have more than one acre of parking, only 14 have more than 10% of their parking surfaces rated in "poor" or "failing" condition. An equal number of units have more than 80% of their parking surfaces rated as being in "good" or "excellent" condition.

Figure 3: Public Cycle 4 RIP Section Conditions by Surface Type



While many of the transportation assets maintained by Region 4 are in "good" or "excellent" condition, Region 4 is working to reduce their Deferred Maintenance (DM) backlog. Currently, road repairs and maintenance are estimated the same despite differences in mission support, design, or usage, resulting in inflated costs for roadway maintenance. The Service has created a new tiering structure that will complement the existing asset codes and classifications while addressing other critical aspects of design, usage and maintenance, and how it supports the overall mission and purpose of the station. In future RIP inventories, administrative roads and low tier roadways may not be inventoried and included in DM estimations.

GOAL 3 – COORDINATED OPPORTUNITIES

Transportation resources can be used to help support the mission of the Service. As a result, coordinated opportunities with other entities can go beyond merely leveraging funding and

perhaps consider broader maintenance goals that would be mutually beneficial to both the partner(s) and the Service. Identifying key partners in the region and at the unit level will be a valuable exercise to consider during future planning and coordination. The Service's mission to work with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people is perfectly aligned with considering partnerships and coordination with other non-Service entities.

GIS was used once again to identify possible partners through analysis of political boundaries that intersect or are near to Region 4 refuges and hatcheries. Some highlights include the following:

- Florida and Louisiana host the greatest numbers of refuges in the Southeast, with 30 and 24 refuges and hatcheries within their borders, respectively.
- Seven refuges within Region 4 straddle state lines, including one that intersects the Commonwealth of Virginia, outside of the northern boundary of Region 4 and extending into the territory of FWS Region 5 (Northeast).
- Refuges and hatcheries are located within 183 counties, parishes, and municipios (Puerto Rico) with 58 refuges crossing more than one county boundary and 23 crossing more than two counties.
- A total of 40 refuges and fish hatcheries intersect the planning boundaries of 30 separate metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs).
- Only 10 Region 4 refuges and two hatcheries are not located within 5 miles from another federal land management agency area. Five of those are located on small isolated islands.

GOAL 4 – ENVIRONMENT

The National Wildlife Refuge System provides benefits to human communities as well as wildlife populations. Protecting natural habitats, wetlands, coastal resources, grasslands, forests, and wildernesses, refuges maintain and even improve air and water quality. They have the potential to relieve flooding from the built (manmade) environment, improve soil quality, and help trap greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming. However, while the Refuge System can alleviate stresses on surrounding areas, it is important to also consider the effects that the surrounding built environment may have on the System.

For this goal area, analyses were performed to identify the proximity of environmentally sensitive areas to refuges and hatcheries. Some interesting results are included below:

- One hundred (100) of the 145 Southeast Region Service Units (about 69% of all units) are home to at least one species listed as endangered or threatened, of which 87 units serve to protect species that are listed as endangered.
- Over a third of the Service's Region 4 units (47) intersect areas or waterways identified as critical habitats for 29 different species.
- In Alabama, Cahaba River NWR supports the largest number of species with designated critical habitats (eight species).
- Region 4 has 19 refuges with designated wilderness areas located in six states.
- 110 of the Region's 145 units (about 76%) intersect at least one classified wetland system.

In addition to LRTP efforts across the country, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) worked closely with both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service on a project known as "Strategic Research Initiative: Integration of Federal Lands Management Agency Transportation Data, Planning, and Practices with Climate Change Scenarios to Develop a Transportation Management Tool (2014)." This project, conducted by ICF International, is a separate yet parallel

effort to the LRTP planning process. Two components, *Vulnerability Assessment* and *Adaptation Planning*, are being considered as a part of the tool. The *Vulnerability Assessment* takes into account a large amount of data to determine which park and refuge transportation assets are the most vulnerable to climate change.

Photo Credits: Joe Saenz, Black Bayou Lake NWR; Cristina Pastore, J.N. "Ding" Darling NWR

Once identified, the staff from the parks and refuges can work with the FHWA and ICF International team to determine the best adaptation options for each. Results from the climate change analyses and research provide an environmental context to the larger transportation assessment and recommendations.

GOAL 5 – SAFETY

The Service supports reliable and safe access to and from its network of lands and waters. Roadways, while an essential component of the national transportation system, can be hazardous due to road pavement conditions, traffic volumes, high speeds, and the potential for both vehicle-vehicle and vehicle-wildlife collisions.

Safety is a concern not only for refuge and hatchery staff and visitors but also for wildlife. Roadways are a major component of the United States transportation system, and FWS areas located near high speed, high volume roadways pose greater risks for vehicle-wildlife collisions.

An analysis of safety hot-spots was conducted to determine areas requiring additional focus. Four key criteria were considered, including 1) high volume roadways within a mile of a unit, 2) high vehicle collision rates or fatalities within one mile of a unit, 3) road conditions considered to be "poor" or "very poor," and 4) high Asset Priority Index (API) according to the Service.

- In FWS Region 4, 51 refuges and four fish hatcheries qualified for at least one of the criteria above. Of those, 35 refuges and three hatcheries each have one criterion that falls within the 95th percentile for that specific criterion.
- Twenty-two total units qualified for at least two criteria, with three, Mississippi Sandhill Crane NWR, Pinckney Island NWR and Waccamaw NWR, qualifying for three criteria including high annual average daily traffic volumes (AADTs), high vehicle collision rates, and high API.
- Only one unit qualified for all four categories, and managed to do so in the 95th percentile of reported data for three of the four (Private John Allen National Fish Hatchery in Tupelo, MS).

GOAL 6 – VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Visitation is one way the Service can support its mission to grant current and future generations the opportunity to interact with wild lands, fish, wildlife, and plant species, where appropriate. People care about what they can experience, and the knowledge that they gain from the experiences. Thus, in the end, promoting the relevance of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to the lives of Americans is about access. Wildlife refuges should be accessible to all, regardless of an individual's location or physical abilities.[4]

Information examined in regard to this goal area came from the Refuge Annual Performance Plans (RAPP), analysis of the US Census, and the RATE survey results. Some interesting highlights from the analysis include the following:

- According to the RATE report's findings, 44 percent of the FWS Region 4 stations do not believe that their refuge or fish hatchery has sufficient signage present on access roads and trails.[5]
- For the system of refuges and fish hatcheries that are open to the public, the local population within a 25-mile radius of the Region 4 system stations increased from 24.3 million people to 26.8 million people (an increase of about 2.5 million persons or about 10.4%) from 2000 to 2010 (excluding residents of the U.S. Virgin Islands).[6]
- Population is expected to grow between 2010 and 2030 from 26.0 million people (excluding residents of both Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands[7]) to 30.5 million people (an increase of about 4.5 million persons or 17.2%) within the same 25-mile radius of the R-4 stations.
- The percent of the total regional population classified as living in poverty who are estimated to be residing within a 25-mile radius of all refuges and fish hatcheries in the Southeast Region is 17.3%,[8] which is higher than the overall national poverty rate of 15.9%[9].

Photo Credit: Donald McIntosh, J.N. Ding Darling NWR

SUMMARY OF CURRENT STAKEHOLDER OUTREACH

The LRTP has included multiple levels of stakeholder outreach, resulting in valuable insight into the processes, operations, and transportation considerations of the Southeast Region of the Fish and

[4] *Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation*, USFWS October 2011.
[5] *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Alternative Transportation Evaluation Report – Region 4* (Volpe Center, 2013)
[6] Using 2000 and 2010 county-level census data; excluding the U.S. Virgin Islands, where data is only available for 2000.
[7] State Population Predictions by county – various sources
[8] US 2010 Decennial Census and American Community Survey data, excluding U.S. Virgin Islands
[9] US Census 2011: http://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/acsbr11-01.pdf

Wildlife Service and its individual stations. The following groups of stakeholders have been involved in the process:

- Project Management Team, PMT (FWS Region 4, FWS Headquarters, and Eastern Federal Lands Highway Division of the Federal Highway Administration) – This team coordinated on a regular basis with the Consultant Team to guide the completion of the LRTP document.
- Coordination Team (FWS national, regional, refuge, and hatchery leaders from across the Southeast Region along with members of the PMT) – This team served as a sounding board for the PMT, provided feedback on the overall planning process, plan Goals and Objectives, productive ways to engage the individual stations for data collection and input, and opinions on final deliverables and their value to the region and stations.
- Regional Leadership (Division Chief of Budget & Facility Management and Branch Chief of Facility Management, as well as others) – These regional leaders participated in some Coordination Team meetings and provided input into the process and supplementary tools along the way.
- Station Leadership (Refuge and Hatchery Management)
    - The station leaders participated in Area calls and webinars at three key points in the process: 1) Kick-off, 2) Draft *Existing Conditions and Future Trends Report*, and 3) Draft *Recommendations Report*. These webinars allowed for both the dissemination of information to station managers about the planning process and the gathering of valuable feedback from them on report deliverables.
    - Refuge and hatchery leadership also was asked to participate in one substantial data call consisting of the RATE survey and additional planning-related questions.

FUNDING AND FINANCIAL GAP

A NEW SURFACE TRANSPORTATION BILL

With the October 1, 2012 effective date of the newest federal surface transportation bill, ***Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21)***, the structure of federal funding programs has changed since its predecessor, SAFETEA-LU. This LRTP includes details on current key funding sources through MAP-21 as well as other non-traditional funding mechanisms that have previously awarded funds to the Service, or could be possible future funding sources. Under MAP-21, many discretionary grant programs that were provided to the FWS have been eliminated or consolidated into programs with broader applicability. New funding programs focus on performance of the transportation system, setting key transportation goals, and focusing on high-use and recreational areas in particular.

While many familiar SAFETEA-LU discretionary grant programs no longer exist in MAP-21, the magnitude of future funding levels to support the FWS transportation program, and particularly Region 4 funding levels, are not anticipated to experience significant change from that which has been observed since 2006 when the initial SAFETEA-LU allocations were set. It is anticipated that future surface transportation bills beyond MAP-21 will likely continue to provide Region 4 with an annual amount comparable to the current $5.83 million annual allocation. The LRTP focuses on current funding allocation, while additional consideration is given to new transportation funding opportunities that could be explored through partnerships with outside agencies.

KEY FUNDING SOURCES

The LRTP has identified the most relevant existing and new funding programs for the FWS, including the Federal Lands Transportation Program (FLTP), the Federal Lands Access Program (FLAP), and

the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP). Additional sources are detailed in the *Funding and Financial Gap* section of this report.

- While Federal Agencies are not eligible to apply for or receive funds directly, **FLAP** authorizes improvements on State or Local access facilities that connect to Federal Lands, benefitting the FLMAs.
- **FLTP** authorizes funding for improvements on transportation related assets within the Federal estate that are generally owned and maintained by the respective FLMA.
- **TAP** combines several previous funding programs, including the Transportation Enhancements and Recreational Trails Programs which state and local agencies can use to enhance FLMA transportation facilities and services.

MAP-21 also has set a clear intention for agencies to coordinate projects and funding to mutually benefit a variety of users and agencies. For example, FLAP funds go directly to non-Federal entities such as state or local government agencies, but are intended to specifically improve access to Federal Lands. This makes it important for FLMAs to coordinate and collaborate directly with adjacent state, county or local government agencies. The Service's mission to work with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people is perfectly aligned with considering partnerships and coordination with other non-Service entities. The LRTP already emphasizes this coordination through *Goal 3 – Coordinated Opportunities*. Identifying key partners in the region and at the unit level will be a valuable exercise to consider during future planning and coordination of funding, particularly through MAP-21 programs.

OTHER FUNDING SOURCES

While the majority of transportation funds for Region 4 are anticipated to come directly through either the FLAP or FLTP programs, it is important to consider alternative means to fill funding gaps and finance transportation projects. Whether through other programs in MAP-21 or from non-Federal sources at the state or local levels, transportation funding can be leveraged from a variety of programs throughout the country.

The *Emergency Relief for Federal Roads Program (ERFO)* and the *Emergency Relief Program (ER)* are two programs that have provided relief for repairs and replacement needed due to serious damage from presidentially declared natural disasters or catastrophic failure from an external cause. While these programs have obvious limitation to applicability, Region 4 currently has $2.3 million in active emergency relief projects. Additional funding sources that have not yet been utilized by FWS Region 4 are described in detail in the ***Funding and Financial Gap*** chapter.

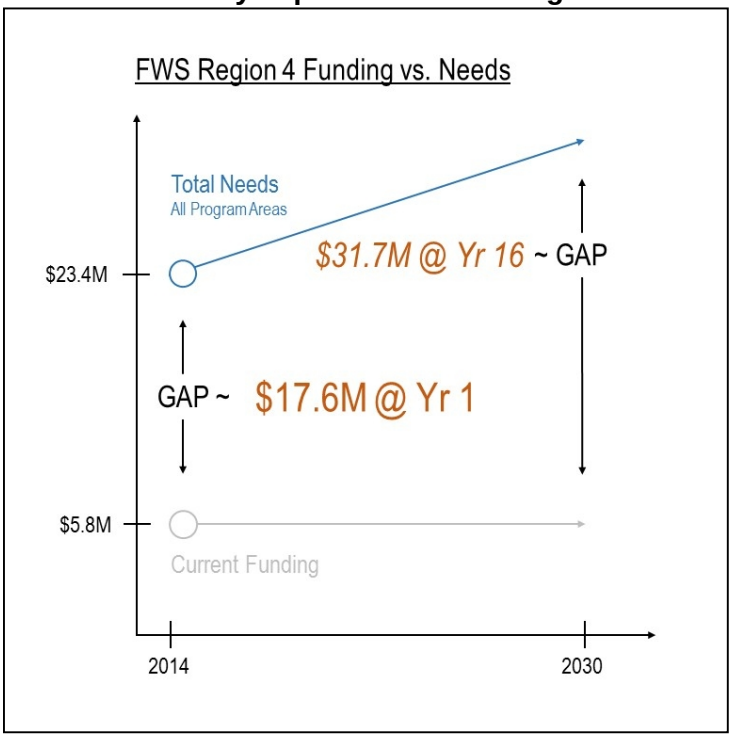
REGION 4 ASSET CONDITIONS AND FINANCIAL GAP

FWS Region 4 contains a very large share of both public-use and overall national FWS transportation infrastructure assets, as inventoried in RIP and SAMMS. In general, the majority of Region 4 public road and trail miles are in 'good' or better condition, while parking surface conditions include nearly 60% of total acreage in 'good' or better condition. While these inventories suggest that Region 4 is managing its transportation assets very well, maintaining funding levels for routine maintenance to keep these assets rated in 'good' or 'better' condition is essential to sustain and improve public transportation facilities for the long haul.
Two plans focusing on transportation assets and funding have recently been completed at the national level: The *Fish and Wildlife Service National Reauthorization 2013 Prioritization Pilot and*

Work Optimization Analyses Report[10] and the *PLAN 2035 – the National Long Range Transportation Plan*.[11] The 2013 Prioritization Pilot concluded that $30 million are being spent annually throughout the entire FWS. In order to complete an enhanced transportation program, approximately $60 million would be needed, and to complete a fully implemented plan, $95 million would be needed. At the highest level of implementation, that equates to an annual funding shortfall of approximately $65 million.

The report also determined that Region 4 paved roadway assets make up 24.4% of the national assets (25% was used to approximate the regional share of other assets such as bridges, trails, transit assets, etc.). Therefore, in order to implement an enhanced program or fully implemented program at the regional level, approximately $14.8 million and $23.4 million would be required each year, respectively. Assuming a 3% annual inflation rate, this equates to a total need of $321.6 million and $509.4 million, respectively, through FY 2030. Considering the $5.83 million annual funding allocation that is anticipated to continue for Region 4, there is estimated to be a total of approximately $99.1 million available through FY 2030, which results in a cumulative funding gap of $222.5 million for an enhanced program or funding gap of $17.6 million at year one, and a funding gap of $31.7 million at year 16, with a cumulative funding gap of $410.3 million for the fully implemented funding scenario.

Figure 3: Region 4 Transportation Funding Gap for a Fully Implemented Funding Plan



The current level of transportation funding available to Region 4 limits the Service's ability to maintain current assets and to implement new innovative and meaningful projects, now and in the future. New sources of funding should be explored wherever possible, including opportunities to partner with neighboring jurisdictions on mutually beneficial projects.

The Service's Deferred Maintenance (DM) backlog has been a high profile topic since Congressional Hearings in 2011. The magnitude of funds indicated in the national backlog at that time were astronomical and likely lacked informed differentiation between asset design, use, and maintenance needs, which resulted in a highly inflated bottom line. In parallel with the FWS Region 4 LRTP development process, the *FWS Roads Tiers and Decision Tree* was employed to complement existing asset classifications and address additional critical aspects of design, usage and maintenance to better inform maintenance and funding needs. These tools are discussed in the ***Asset Management*** chapter of the *Existing Conditions and Future Trends Report* and are anticipated to help mitigate some of the estimated funding gap by better interpreting the usage and maintenance needs of transportation assets.

[10] *Fish and Wildlife Service National Reauthorization 2013 Prioritization Pilot and Work Optimization Analyses Report* (Stantec, 2013)
[11] *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service PLAN 2035 the National Long Range Transportation Plan* (2014)

PROJECT SELECTION PROCESS

The culmination of the LRTP effort is the development of an enhanced project selection process. In light of guidance set forth by MAP-21, performance-based planning will be at the core of all transportation funding decision-making. It is imperative that the refuges and hatcheries in Region 4 develop creative and impactful transportation projects that can compete not only within the region but also at the federal level within the FWS, with other FLMAs, and within regions and states across the country.

PROJECT IDENTIFICATION AND SELECTION

The Southeast Region of the Service annually updates and develops a 5-year project plan for transportation improvements, which includes both asset management projects and more substantial capital projects. Of the $5.8 million that the region annually receives through MAP-21, $250,000 is set aside for regraveling projects and an additional $140,000 is set aside for urgent bridge repairs. The remaining funding of approximately $5.4 million is used for larger capital projects.

Currently, stations notify the region of various project needs, and the region creates a list of potential projects. This list is then submitted to area managers for their review and feedback. With the assistance of area managers, the region creates a 5-year project plan for implementation. Much of the project identification process will remain the same as it has been, but performance-based requirements of MAP-21 will necessitate a more quantitative analysis of projects. A Project Evaluation Tool has been developed as part of the FWS Region 4 LRTP process to assist in project prioritization.

PROJECT EVALUATION CRITERIA AND TOOL

The Project Evaluation Criteria and Tool provides station, region, and national leadership with a quantitative process for evaluating transportation projects. The projects that provide higher transportation value should be funded before those that provide lower value. The National LRTP for the Fish and Wildlife Service outlines six primary metric categories for the evaluation and selection of projects. Region 4 has maintained those six categories and has included subcategory metrics using National Plan guidance, analysis conducted through the regional LRTP process, and RATE survey responses from station leadership.

The six project evaluation categories are provided below:

1. Improves transportation safety
2. Improves “state of good repair” of transportation assets
3. Enhances transportation choices to, from, and within FWS stations
4. Enhances environmental conditions in the field and/or helps to meet programmatic goals
5. Meets a local priority: (a) documented in a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP), (b) other transportation plan; (c) is within a Region’s high-use or urban station; or (d) provides economic benefit to local partners
6. Supports transportation partnerships and leveraging of transportation funds/programs to benefit FWS

An illustration of a portion of the project evaluation worksheet associated with the “*Improves Transportation Safety*” category is presented below. This tool will be used to assist Regional leadership with the identification of priority projects across the Region. Technical merit is part of the prioritization process, as it is in all planning processes, but stakeholder involvement also will play an important role. Qualitative considerations for project prioritization will include availability of funds, project development delivery schedules, and time constraints for right-of-way and environmental

work. Area, regional, and national leadership will discuss high-scoring projects from a qualitative perspective to determine which projects should be advanced for implementation.

Project Evaluation Tool - Criteria Excerpt

1. Improves transportation safety of humans and wildlife	National Plan Recommended Points = 20
Goal	***Points***
Existing Conditions / Crash History (choose all that apply, maximum of 10 points)	***(max 10 points)***
Documented or anecdotal crash history where the project is planned	
High numbers of human or wildlife injuries (may include station staff anecdotal information)	/3 points
High number of human or wildlife fatalities (may include station staff anecdotal information)	/5 points
Station identified as a safety hot spot (crash) in the Region 4 LRTP (Table 14 of the Appendix)	/4 points
Project Safety Improvement (choose if applicable, maximum of 10 points)	***(max 10 points)***
Project improves safety of location *(examples - adding turn lanes, flattening horizontal curves, sight distance improvements or enhancements/countermeasures such as road safety audits, safety edge, signs and markings, traffic calming and movement restrictions, wildlife crossing, barriers, vegetation control, surface improvement, visiting hours, tools such as Highway Safety Manual, Interactive Highway Safety Design Mode, etc.))*	/10 ***points***
Goal #1 Total Points	***0 /20 points***

= Project score determined using data from the Long Range Transportation Plan

PLAN IMPLEMENTATION AND FUTURE USE

LRTP USE BY THE REGION

The Long Range Transportation Plan is meant primarily to serve as a regional planning document. The *Existing Conditions and Future Trends Report* provides a regional snapshot of transportation assets and needs with additional detail listed by station in the **Appendix** document. The *Recommendations Report* includes policy guidance and evaluation tools that the region can use to prioritize projects in light of new federal funding guidance and the FWS National LRTP that seeks to fund projects that will provide a strong return on investment. The *Recommendations Report* also includes suggested data collection efforts that the region or individual stations should consider over the next few years prior to the next update of the LRTP.

Stations for Further Transportation Study – Regional Evaluation Tool

The *Project Evaluation Tool* is an important resource for prioritizing transportation projects within the region by determining which projects provide the greatest value. Another tool has been created as part of the Region 4 LRTP effort that provides value at an earlier stage of the transportation planning process. The *Stations for Further Transportation Study* tool is meant to be primarily an evaluation tool for use by regional staff to determine which refuges and hatcheries may warrant further, more detailed transportation study.

The tool uses only information that has been analyzed or gathered as a part of the Region 4 LRTP or the voluntary RATE survey responses collected from station management. It scores each refuge on a scale of 0 to 100 points. Metrics are broken down into the six main goal areas of the LRTP. Each goal has multiple metrics for which the refuges can score points, and awarded points identify areas where there is a need or challenge that could be rectified with transportation enhancements that would require further analysis. Thus, stations with the highest scores can be considered for additional detailed transportation study.

LRTP USE BY STATIONS

The LRTP document is valuable for regional-level planning; however, it can be challenging for individual stations to extract relevant local-level information that is useful for their planning efforts. Recognizing this difficulty, as well as a lack of time and resources to consider the full LRTP process at the station and regional levels, some additional tools and resources were developed as a part of the LRTP process to provide greater value at the station level.

Incorporating Transportation into CCPs

The primary resource that the LRTP will provide at the station level is through production of an amendment to the Comprehensive Conservation Plan process for refuges to incorporate transportation considerations. Regional funding for CCPs has been discontinued at this time; however, refuges have the option to update their CCPs on their own. While CCPs may not be done regularly, the PMT decided to amend the necessary documents to include transportation so that any refuge deciding to update their plan will have the tools to adequately consider transportation. These documents include *Station Fact Sheets*, the *User Guide*, an updated *Work Plan*, and an updated *Template*. It is important to remember that the LRTP is a long range planning document with a 20-year planning horizon. Future federal funding levels are not known at this time, and it is practical to anticipate changes that may occur 5-10 years from now. A similar process can be undertaken to update Comprehensive Hatchery Management Plans (CHMPs) as well.

STAKEHOLDER OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATION PLAN

Stakeholder input is critical to the success of any planning project, no matter the size. It is important to recognize that different types of outreach are applicable to different types of planning efforts. The following guidance is provided to assist the region and its stations with tailoring outreach to the scale and intensity of the plan.

LRTPs for FLMAs

LRTPs are by nature multi-decade plans that consider large geographic areas. In the case of the Region 4 FWS LRTP, the plan has developed 20-year capital investment and maintenance needs estimates and recommendations for stations across ten states, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. It is thus prohibitively expensive and time consuming to conduct traditional outreach through public meetings and open houses in multiple locations. Following the completion of this plan, the Regional Transportation Program Manager with support from other regional, area, and station staff should reach out to key state and regional transportation planning agencies and other FLMAs to advertise the completion of the plan. The plan should be posted on the Region 4 website as well as the websites of individual refuges and hatcheries where they exist. The notice of availability of the FWS Region 4 LRTP will also be published in the Federal Register, which will provide an additional opportunity for broad public access to the plan.

Transportation step-down plans and other small area studies

Small area plans allow for more localized outreach efforts than the higher-level LRTP due to the shorter planning horizon and smaller study area. Some of these plans include subregional plans between a smaller grouping of stations (such as a refuge complex) or in partnership with other FLMAs as well as transportation step-down plans at individual refuges or hatcheries. In addition to gathering input within the Service and EFLHD, it also is prudent to engage relevant local, regional, and state agencies whose boundaries overlap with Service boundaries. Outreach to the general public as well as to refuge and hatchery visitors and Friends Groups is not only feasible but strongly encouraged at this scale as well.

Project studies

Project-level studies are the smallest and most focused of all the planning studies and therefore encourage a more targeted outreach plan than some of the broader studies. In addition to the general public meetings and surveys, stakeholders directly impacted by the project must also be involved. At this scale, all projects using federal funding must comply with the NEPA process, which includes public outreach during project scoping and feasibility, the draft environmental document, and the final environmental document. In the case of a Categorical Exclusion, less public outreach may be required.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PLAN ACTIVITIES

This is the first ever Long Range Transportation Plan for the Southeast Region of the Service, and many opportunities for additional data collection, process and policy refinement, and outreach and partnership have been identified for future planning activities. Additionally, transportation conditions and needs change over time, so aspects that were not considered as a part of this plan may need to be studied in the future.

One overarching data collection item to which FWS Region 4 should commit will be the continued search for updates in available geospatial information system (GIS) databases. Cataloging resources in GIS is an ongoing process throughout the U.S., including updates to keep up with changes in the landscape of the built environment in proximity to existing and any future Region 4 stations.

Region 4 – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Long Range Transportation Plan

Executive Summary

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
1 800/344 WILD
http://www.fws.gov

February 2015