

Threatened and Endangered Species Team Approach – USACE Southeastern Region Opportunity Assessment Meeting Atlanta, GA; September 3-4, 2014



*Advancing Cost-Effective & Efficient ESA Compliance
& Mission Sustainability Through Engineering With Nature
& ESA Section 7(a)(1) Conservation Plans*

September 9, 2014

Background: Recently, USACE and the USFWS finalized a Section 7(a)(1) Conservation Plan for the Lower Mississippi River (LMR) that incorporates principles and practices consistent with Engineering with Nature (EWN) (www.engineeringwithnature.org). This approach contributed significantly to the Mississippi Valley Division's receipt of a non-jeopardy Biological Opinion for its Channel Improvement Program in the Lower Mississippi River. The return on investment in this case is estimated at more than five to one. In addition, highly collaborative monitoring and technical modeling in combination with conservation measures for the Interior Least Tern (ILT) have contributed to the proposed delisting of the Interior Least Tern by the USFWS. The benefits of these achievements and the related EWN and ESA Section 7(a)(1) approaches to threatened and endangered species (TES) management have gained attention and interest at the highest levels of both the USFWS and USACE.

The USACE Threatened and Endangered Species Team (TEST) approach, sponsored by the Dredging Operations Environmental Research Program, was recently developed for the purpose of accelerating the development of solutions to priority threatened and endangered species issues affecting USACE mission sustainability. The TEST utilizes strategic collaborations between Headquarters, Division, District and ERDC project staff and scientists, and stakeholders to identify issues and develop and implement cost-effective and efficient approaches, methodologies, and technologies. Building upon the successful collaborations and experiences from the LMR and ILT work, the USACE TEST and USFWS committed to exploring other demonstration opportunities for combining the use of EWN principles and practices and ESA Section 7(a)(1) Conservation Planning within the U.S. southeast, including the Gulf of Mexico. The TEST sponsored this meeting with the overarching goal of advancing a strategic and more systematic approach to TES and mission execution in a manner that simultaneously produces benefits for species, increases operational flexibility, and results in long-term cost and time savings.

Meeting Overview: On September 3-4, 2014, 30 participants from Operations and Planning in 3 USACE Divisions and 7 Districts from the southeast (SAD, MVD, SWD, SAC, SAS, SAJ, SAM, MVN, MVM, SWG), ERDC, and USFWS Southeast Region came together for a facilitated working meeting in Atlanta hosted by USACE, South Atlantic Division. The



purpose of the meeting was to enable early identification of opportunities to make use of Section 7(a)(1) using EWN and other means to achieve ESA compliance and TES conservation in an effective and efficient manner within the southeast and Gulf region. The desired outcome for this initial meeting was to identify actions that could be considered for inclusion in ESA Section 7(a)(1) Conservation Plans and develop a short-list of defined opportunities for FY15 collaboration.

Summary Meeting Outcomes: The workshop design enabled an open, in-depth exploration of the EWN opportunities within ESA Section 7(a)(1), a first of its kind meeting for these sister agencies. Excellent rapport and candor, along with frank dialogue, led to a shared understanding of Section 7(a)(1), EWN, and the generation of several focused opportunities to assess for further development in FY15. The following summarizes the key outcomes.

Alignment of USACE and USFWS

- Achieved high alignment on the need and the opportunity to conserve endangered, threatened, and at-risk species by developing Conservation Plans under ESA Section 7(a)(1) on a wide range of projects, enabled by EWN principles and practices.
- Shared perspectives on the need for foresight to proactively address emerging and anticipated TES issues. For example, in the next 10 years, the USFWS Southeast Region will have to evaluate a record number of species for possible listing under the Endangered Species Act. The USACE can use voluntary and innovative techniques within their authorities to help recover listed species, and to conserve at-risk species in the hope that listing them will not be necessary. Productive dialogue revealed many shared interests and led to better understanding of, and respect for, each agency's missions, roles, responsibilities, challenges, and opportunities.
 - Much greater understanding of accomplishments to date by both agencies, including identification of some potential leading practices that should be shared broadly.
 - Acknowledgement that implementation of Section 7(a)(1) will be a paradigm shift for both organizations – from reactive cultures focused on “take” reduction, to working proactively and collaboratively to efficiently and cost-effectively broaden project benefits.
 - Recognition that approaches pursued by USACE and USFWS within the southeast region can serve as a model for other areas of the U.S.

High Value Results from this Approach: Clear recognition by participants that collaboration on projects will produce more value to the nation. Agreement that:

- USACE projects have been/can be designed, delivered, and maintained to provide benefits to TES while reducing costs. Both formalization of these practices through 7(a)(1) Conservation Plans and documentation of the conservation outcomes would focus attention on these benefits and be advantageous to USACE and USFWS.
- The use of EWN practices and collaborative development of ESA 7(a)(1) Conservation Plans has the potential to substantially streamline the Section 7(a)(2) process, thereby reducing time, effort and frustration; resulting in accelerated schedules and beneficial project outcomes, including for TES.



- There is high value in applying the broad, holistic approach made possible through Section 7(a)(1) Conservation Plans which: support an ecosystem approach; enable conservation of TES; and focus on strategies and actions which can benefit species within existing authorities and projects/programs.
- Getting ahead of upcoming ESA species listings by including at-risk species in the proactive application of Section 7(a)(1) on appropriate projects may result in substantial benefits.
- There is a high need to share, and keep current, data on TES and at-risk species.
- Ongoing collaboration through productive, solutions-focused relationships is critical to success. USACE and USFWS relationships, and the results they produce, can demonstrate to other agencies the value of working collaboratively.

Next Steps: The USACE and USFWS participants agreed to continue to work collaboratively to identify ESA Section 7(a)(1) project opportunities that incorporate EWN principles and practices. Immediate next steps include:

- TEST meeting participants will refine near-term project opportunities from the list developed during the meeting.
- Work collaboratively to develop a basic guidance template for Section 7(a)(1) that incorporates EWN.
- Expand existing R&D efforts on this initiative to speed support and implementation, including development of decision support tools, a TES GIS database, etc.
- Systematically document case studies and demonstration project results within the southeastern region to support technology transfer across both agencies and beyond.

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