

Chapter 7. Agency Coordination, Cooperator Interactions, and Public Involvement

Relevant required elements:

#7: Plans for coordinating the development, implementation, review, and revision of the plan with Federal, State, and local agencies and Native American tribes that manage significant land and water areas within the State or administer programs that significantly affect the conservation of identified species and habitats.

#8: Congress also affirmed through this legislation, that broad public participation is an essential element of developing and implementing these plans, the projects that are carried out while these plans are developed, and the Species in Greatest Need of Conservation that Congress has indicated such programs and projects are intended to emphasize.

Focus of Chapter 7:

This chapter describes efforts made by SDGFP to engage internal staff, other agencies, Native American tribes, and the public to inform them of the SDWAP revision process and its various opportunities for input. To better engage internal staff, a more formalized working group structure was used. Lists were generated of appropriate contacts with agencies and Native American tribes meeting required element #7 (manage significant land and water areas and administer programs that affect identified species and habitats). The SDGFP website was used as the primary input tool for the public and partners, which is consistent with other similar SDGFP planning activities.

In keeping with the original Plan and the previous major revision in 2014, SDGFP conducted two attitude surveys. The first was a public attitude survey to monitor opinions about wildlife and habitat issues. The second survey dealt with relevancy of the SDWAP, to assist the agency in identifying and improving upon weaknesses in how and where the information is presented. Highlights of the surveys are included, with links to final reports.

7.1 Public Involvement and Partnership Process

SDGFP used the agency's website (<https://gfp.sd.gov/wildlife-action-plan/>) as an important communication tool during the 2025 plan revision. The website was supplemented with targeted messages, virtual meetings, and email communications with internal staff, other agencies and Native American tribes, species and taxonomic experts, and the public. The roles and expected input for each group are described below. Members of individual teams or working groups are listed in the Acknowledgements Section.

SDGFP staff and their roles:

- Wildlife Action Plan Revision Core Team: This team provided input, overall direction, and continuity in the development of the planning process, work assignments, and plan completion. Members included those with key writing and input-gathering roles and upper-level managers able to facilitate communication with agency directors and the SDGFP Commission.
- Science Team: Members of this team were primarily wildlife diversity biologists and SDGFP staff

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associated with the South Dakota Natural Heritage Program - personnel most familiar with the needs of SGCNs and native habitats important for SGCNs. Members reviewed the most recent SGCN list from the 2022 minor revision and made additional suggestions for inclusion. Members also developed a list of taxonomic experts with knowledge of various plant and animal groups. Taxonomic expert input included review of the new draft list and suggested deletions and additions of SGCNs for consideration. Working group members reviewed expert input for compliance with the established South Dakota SGCN criteria. The result was a final new draft list that was shared with other agencies, Native American tribes, and the public during a comment period. Following consideration of input received, a final list was proposed for the 2025 plan revision. Taxonomic groups were assigned to working group members for preparation of species accounts and classification of conservation threats and conservation actions, using the CMP matrices, versions 2.0.

- Landscapes and Habitat Working Group: Wildlife Action Plans can be more effective when applied across larger landscape level priority areas within a state and across state boundaries and when a shared classification system and terminology are used. This working group explored ways to make South Dakota's Plan a more effective tool in addressing habitat challenges and meeting the habitat needs of species. This group closely monitored tools and communications from the MLI for the possibility of a shared classification system across state boundaries and for relevant data layers useful in review and revision of the terrestrial and aquatic COAs. Working group members also revised chapters related to South Dakota habitats and laid the groundwork for revision of COAs.
- Education and Recreation Working Group: In anticipation of future funding opportunities, this working group developed project ideas and specific products to help the public understand the needs of rare species and vulnerable habitats, offer compatible outdoor educational opportunities, and provide opportunities to allow the public to participate in outdoor recreational opportunities that do not conflict with the needs of rare species.
- Plan website and interfacing: This working group explored methods to incorporate more user-friendly content and topic areas to allow the public and resource managers to understand and implement the Plan at various levels, including appropriate changes to the agency's website.
- Commission Engagement: Terrestrial and aquatic section chiefs informed and involved the SDGFP Commission at appropriate times.
- Public Involvement and Engagement with Agencies and Native American Tribes Working Group: Members of this working group developed and implemented strategies to reach three segments of the public: the public, other key land and natural resource agencies in South Dakota, and tribal nations within the state. Goals for public input were to provide information, offer input opportunities, and incorporate feedback into the revised plan. Agency and tribal engagement efforts focused on informing them of the plan revision process and schedule, offering input opportunities, and seeking areas of common interest to improve the plan's effectiveness for species and landscape conservation.

Stephanie Buckley, SDGFP Human Dimensions Specialist, assisted with the public involvement and

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engagement process by developing and implementing two social science surveys. A survey of the public's attitudes about wildlife and related issues continued the agency's practice of conducting such a survey with each major revision of the SDWAP. Dr. Buckley also conducted a new survey of natural resource professionals from within SDGFP and external partners from governmental, tribal, and key conservation entities to determine how relevant the current Wildlife Action Plan has been and request ideas for improvement with the 2025 plan revision. More information on these surveys is available in Section 7.5.

Agencies and Native American tribes

As part of the relevancy survey conducted by SDGFP, a list of potential survey participants was drafted. From this list, multiple biological staff from key governmental agencies with responsibility for land or natural resource management and natural resource staff from Native American tribes were selected for periodic contacts and input opportunities. A master email list of 54 individuals from 8 federal agencies, 4 state agencies, 2 other entities, and 12 tribal nations was developed and used during the revision process. The specific composition is listed below:

State agencies: SD Dept. of Transportation, SD Dept. of Agriculture and Natural Resources, SD Dept. of Tribal Relations, and SD Office of School and Public Lands.

Federal agencies: USFWS, US Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Indian Affairs, USFS, NRCS, BLM, BOR, and NPS.

Native American Tribes: Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate Tribe, Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe, Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, Rosebud Sioux Tribe, Oglala Sioux Tribe Parks and Recreation Authority, Yankton Sioux Tribe, and Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.

Other entities: Western Area Power Administration and Buffalo Nation Grasslands Alliance.

Species and Taxonomic Experts: A list was assembled of state and regional experts on rare species or species groups to request their assistance at various planning stages. This group included both internal staff, experts from other agencies and private conservation organizations, private consultants, and retired experts. Assistance from these experts was requested by specific invitation, although anyone had the opportunity to comment on the draft SGCN list or the final plan content. These individuals were informed by email in May 2025 of the opportunity to review and provide input on the draft plan. Two individuals responded. Their input is summarized in Appendix M.

External public

The public was informed about the planning process and offered various input opportunities, including the opportunity to provide input on the draft SGCN list and to review and comment on the draft Wildlife Action Plan. The latter opportunity followed a presentation on the topic to the SDGFP Commission on May 9, 2025. Following the presentation, SDGFP issued a statewide news release that included a link

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to the draft SDWAP - 2025 Revision and the comment method. This audience was also surveyed in a follow-up social science survey conducted during the Plan revision process to better understand specific attitudes and to assist the agency in communication strategies.

7.2 Coordination with Other Agencies and Native American Tribes

In addition to involvement of some entities in the relevancy survey, agencies and Native American tribes were contacted at intervals throughout the planning process. Specific contacts were as follows:

- July 23, 2024: Email sent to introduce the revision process; inform them of the Plan website, which included background information and a draft SGCN list; to invite comments on the draft SGCN list; and to offer them the opportunity to contact directly with the SD Wildlife Action Plan Coordinator. An AFWA link to more general information about wildlife action plans was provided. Although no specific SGCN suggestions were provided, much of this input was already gathered through the process of soliciting input from the species and taxonomic experts, many of whom were associated with state, federal, or tribal entities.
- October 4, 2024: Email sent to the same group of 56 individuals to share the final draft of the SGCN list for the 2025 plan revision. This email also included the opportunity for these entities to share information on monitoring activities to be included in a list compiled for the 2025 revision.
- May 20, 2025: Email sent to the same group of individuals sharing the news release that advertised the SDWAP - 2025 Revision comment opportunity, which concluded on June 20, 2025.
- June 21, 2025: No representatives of agencies or tribes submitted comments on the draft plan.

7.3 Public Participation Opportunities

The SDGFP website has provided updates on SWG-funded projects since this funding source became available in 2000. The website also provides information about the previous version of the Wildlife Action Plan and two minor revisions, completed in 2018 and 2022 (<https://gfp.sd.gov/wildlife-action-plan/>).

SDGFP's Wildlife Action Plan website was enhanced for use as a primary communication tool for sharing information about the 2025 revision process. Statewide news releases were used to publicize specific input opportunities.

- A statewide news release was circulated during July 2024, informing the public of the planning process and offering the opportunity to comment on the draft SGCNs. This comment period concluded on August 20, 2024. Three comments were received.
- A statewide news release was circulated during May 2025, informing the public of the opportunity review and comment on the draft SDWAP – 2025 Revision.
- June 21, 2025: No members of the public submitted comments on the draft plan.

7.4 Review of Draft South Dakota Wildlife Action Plan

- The public and representatives of natural resource agencies and tribal nations were given the opportunity to provide input on the SGCN list and to comment on the draft Plan. See more details in previous sections.

7.5 Understanding South Dakota Citizens – Wildlife Values

SDGFP has a long history of surveying its citizens and resource users to track attitudes and trends and to identify areas that may need additional public involvement or better communication between the agency and its constituents. As part of the Plan revision, SDGFP conducted two social science survey efforts. First, SDGFP coordinated with ETC institute to conduct a public opinion survey of South Dakotans. The survey repeated some questions asked during previous surveys conducted during the original Plan's preparation and subsequent revisions in addition to new questions reflecting new wildlife or environmental issues. Second, SDGFP conducted a survey of internal staff, government agencies, and key NGO personnel on how to make the SDWAP more relevant. Human dimensions survey efforts help address the 8th key element in the WAP: "Congress identified eight required elements to be addressed in these wildlife conservation plans. Further, the plan must identify and be focused on the 'species in greatest need of conservation,' yet address the 'full array of wildlife' and wildlife-related issues" (Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies 2022). The 8th key element requires broad public participation as part of developing and implementing these plans and associated projects (Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies 2022).

Public opinion survey

Methodology

ETC Institute administered a public opinion survey for SDGFP during the winter months of 2024 (ETC Institute 2024). The purpose of this study was to measure South Dakota residents' opinions related to various wildlife and environmental issues. ETC Institute mailed a survey packet to a random sample of households in South Dakota. Residents who received the survey were given the option of returning the survey by mail or completing it online. 1,474 completed surveys were collected, and the results for the sample had a precision of at least ± 2.6 at a 95% level of confidence.

Results

- Importance of Fish and Wildlife Populations
 - Most respondents (85%) say it is "very important" for South Dakota to conserve and protect as many fish and wildlife populations as possible. In addition, 70% of respondents say that fish and wildlife "contribute greatly" to their quality of life.
- Agreement with Statements about the Ecosystem
 - Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with nine statements about the ecosystems in South Dakota. Respondents most often agreed (selecting "agree" or "strongly agree") that maintaining a healthy native prairie ecosystem in South Dakota is important for water quality (96%), wildlife and fish diversity (95%), and recreational opportunities (90%).

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- Views on Bats in South Dakota
 - Regarding bats in South Dakota, over two-thirds of respondents (67%) felt bats are important and should have some legal protection from harm. Sixty percent of respondents (60%) were concerned about the impact of diseases such as white-noise syndrome. Almost half (48%) of respondents were concerned about the potential transfer of diseases from bats to people.
- Non-Game Species Protection
 - Regarding non-game species protection, respondents most agreed (selecting “agree” or “strongly agree”) that riparian areas are a valuable component of South Dakota’s habitats (96%), they are concerned about declining pollinator populations (92%), and they would support efforts to control commercial harvest and unregulated take of turtles, snakes, lizards, frogs, and toads (77%).
- Interest in Wildlife Programs
 - Respondents were most interested (selecting “somewhat interested” or “extremely interested”) in pollinator programs (70%), wildlife identification classes or online resources (65%), and wildlife viewing programs (64%).
- Importance of Wetland Functions
 - Respondents thought it was most important (selecting “moderately important” or “very important”) that wetlands provide wildlife habitat (97%), provide clean water (96%), and provide critical stopover sites for migrating birds (93%).
- Environmental Perspectives
 - Respondents were asked five questions to assess the relevancy of SDGFP. Most respondents (87%) either “agree” or “strongly agree” that they understand the threats facing fish, wildlife, and habitats. Most respondents (87%) disagree (selecting “disagree” or “strongly disagree”) that spending time in nature is not a priority. Forty nine percent of respondents reported they face barriers to their outdoor recreation pursuits. Over half of respondents (52%) reported they feel neutral about having other ways to engage with SDGFP that are not currently provided by the agency. Nearly half (48%) of respondents believe that current environmental laws do not do enough to protect species or their habitats.
- Support for Funding Allocation Options
 - Respondents think it is most important (selecting “moderately important” or “very important”) to use funding for working with private landowners for voluntary conservation and management (91%), understanding species population declines (90%), and conserving state and private lands for SGCNs and their habitats (88%).
- **Final report:** Appendix S; https://gfp.sd.gov/UserDocs/nav/FindingsReport_SouthDakotaWAP.pdf

Relevancy survey

Methodology

SDGFP administered a social science survey in 2024 to 543 contacts from SDGFP, other state government agencies, tribal agencies, federal government agencies, colleges and universities, quasi-governmental entities, NGOs, and others (Buckley, 2024). A mixed-mode study using email and mailing

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addresses was conducted. After correcting for undeliverable addresses, the adjusted sample size was 523. The adjusted response rate was 63% (n = 328/523).

Results

- Over half of the sample was comprised of SDGFP employees (57.1%).
- Nearly two thirds of the sample was aware of the 2014 SDWAP (62.7%).
- Most of those sampled were not involved in drafting or reviewing the 2014 SDWAP (90.5%).
- Approximately one third of the sample uses the 2014 SDWAP (31%).
- When asked how respondents used the 2014 SDWAP, the most frequently selected item was “Reference document to look up which species are in greatest conservation need.”
- When asked how frequently respondents used the 2014 SDWAP for various actions, the items with the highest means were “Other” (M = 3.00), “Obtaining information on Species of Greatest Conservation Need” (M = 2.84), and “Obtaining information on key habitat types in the state” (M = 2.65). These averages indicated respondents used the plan for these actions “sometimes.”
- The highest percentage of respondents used the 2014 SDWAP more than a year ago (28.7%).
- For those who never used the SDWAP, nearly two thirds of the sample indicated they had not heard of the plan or forgot about it (32.1%) or were not familiar with the information in the plan (31.1%).
- Respondents were asked to report how useful the 2014 SDWAP was in their conservation activity planning process. The average respondent indicated it was “somewhat useful” (M = 2.30).
- Respondents were asked to identify the top three areas of the 2014 SDWAP that were most useful to them. The three most frequently selected items were “Species of greatest conservation need list and criteria for list development” (24.4%), “Species of greatest conservation need species profiles, including background information, conservation challenges and proposed actions, and priorities for future research and monitoring” (29.3%), and “Background information on the status of programs already in place to address rare species needs in South Dakota, including species and habitat monitoring programs, completed State Wildlife Grant projects in South Dakota, and existing conservation initiatives in the state” (14.6%).
- The two sections of Appendix C respondents reported using most often were “Birds” (32.6%) and “Mammals” (32.3%).
- The most frequently selected additional topic that would make the 2014 SDWAP more relevant to respondents was the “addition of plant species as a species of greatest conservation need” (29.0%).
- **Final report:** Appendix T; https://gfp.sd.gov/UserDocs/nav/WAP_Relevancy_Survey_Final.pdf

Survey References

Buckley, S. 2024. South Dakota Wildlife Action Plan Revision: Relevancy Survey. Report ID: 2024-11. South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Pierre, South Dakota.
ETC Institute 2024. 2024 South Dakota Wildlife Action Plan Public Opinion Survey Findings Report. Report prepared for South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks.