NATIONAL FISH HABITAT PARTNERSHIPS

Proposal to partner with federal natural resource agencies to advance federal goals and the National Fish Habitat Action Plan

BACKGROUND

NFHP

Since 2011, the mission of the National Fish Habitat Action Plan has been to protect, restore and enhance the nation's fish and aquatic communities through partnerships that foster fish habitat conservation and improve the quality of life for the American people.

This mission is achieved by:

- Supporting the 18 existing fish habitat partnerships and fostering new efforts;
- Mobilizing and focusing national and local support for achieving fish habitat conservation goals;
- Setting national and regional fish habitat conservation goals;
- Measuring and communicating the status and needs of fish habitats; and
- Providing national leadership and coordination to conserve fish habitats.

The NFHP Action Plan, first produced in 2006 and updated in 2012, describes goals to:

- Protect and maintain intact and healthy aquatic systems;
- Prevent further degradation of fish habitats that have been adversely affected;
- Reverse declines in the quality and quantity of aquatic habitats to improve the overall health of fish and other aquatic organisms; and
- Increase the quality and quantity of fish habitats that support a broad natural diversity of fish and other aquatic species.

A total of 18 fish habitat partnerships located throughout the United States work to achieve the goals and objectives of the NFHP Action Plan. Each of these goals aligns with fish habitat-specific goals and objectives and grant programs of many federal natural resource agencies. In addition, for many of these federal grant programs, fish habitat partnership steering committee members and/or the partnerships themselves play a critical role in providing scientific review

and evaluations of proposals submitted for funding to federal agencies.

The following are examples of three federal agency grant programs in which there is a clear nexus with fish habitat partnership activities:

NOAA

In 2012, NOAA announced its *Habitat Blueprint*, describing a vision for creating healthy habitats that sustain resilient and thriving marine and coastal resources, communities, and economics. Its purpose is to encourage strategic thinking and acting with partner organizations to address coastal and marine habitat loss and degradation. The Russian River in California is the first selected *Habitat Focus Area* of the *Habitat Blueprint*. NOAA seeks to rebuild endangered coho and threatened steelhead stocks, improve precipitation forecasts in the watershed, and increase resilience to flood damage throughout the year. In the case of the Russian River watershed, fish habitat partnerships, such as the California Fish Passage Forum, have been working with partners to address streamflow and fish habitat issues within this watershed since 2008, e.g. Grape Creek, a NFHP *10 Waters to Watch* project in 2013.

In October of 2013, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) announced it is awarding $36 million for more than 40 coastal habitat restoration projects across the United States, noting these funds would benefit fish species. Examples included removing fish barriers for river herring in the Northeast Region, reconnecting wetlands and stream channels to tidal flow in the Northwest Region, and removing barriers to fish passage and improving in-stream conditions to restore habitat for salmon and steelhead in the Southwest Region. In many cases, NOAA-funded projects, such as Mill Creek and the Lower Klamath River in the Southwest Region, involve locations and partners that fish habitat partnerships have been working with to address fish habitat issues for years. In addition, groups of fish habitat partnerships, such as the coastal fish habitat partnerships, are working together nationally to highlight coastal and marine issues affecting anadromous and other coastal fish stocks throughout the United States.

NRCS

The Natural Resources Conservation Service has a program titled, Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), which seeks to address restoration of declining or important native fish and wildlife habitats; protect, restore, develop or enhance fish and wildlife habitat to benefit at-risk species; reduce the impacts of invasive species on fish and wildlife habitats; and protect, restore,

develop or enhance declining or important aquatic wildlife species' habitats. In Fiscal Years 2011 and 2012, NRCS awarded a total of $83.87 million and $47.36 million, respectively, for WHIP program activities. The geographic scope of fish habitat partnerships intersect with most, if not all, of the projects funded through the WHIP program.

USFWS

The USFWS has numerous programs dedicated to restoring coastal and marine environments, including the National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program, which will fund $17 million in grants to coastal states in FY2015. One of the projects funded in the past included purchasing land and a conservation easement in Willapa Bay, a location where the Pacific Marine and Estuarine Fish Habitat Partnership (PMEP) provided funding in 2013, and adjacent to the Bear River Estuary, one of NFHPs *10 Waters to Watch* in 2013. There are numerous other examples of USFWS-funded programs that align with NFHP Action Plan goals and objectives and the strategic plans and frameworks of the 18 national fish habitat partnerships.

OTHER EXAMPLES OF RELEVANT FEDERAL GRANT PROGRAMS

Environmental Protection Agency—National Estuary Program ($27 million - 2013); Chesapeake Bay Program ($50 million - 2013); Gulf of Mexico Program ($1.85 million – 2014); Wetlands Program Development Grants ($14.64 million – 2014); Nonpoint Source Implementation Grants (319 Program) ($164.5 million – 2014); Chesapeake Bay Program Grants ($52.3 million – 2014)

US Fish and Wildlife Service—Coastal Program ($6 million – 2014)

US Army Corps of Engineers—Aquatic Ecosystem Restoration Grants ($19.7 million – 2013)

Natural Resources Conservation Service—Conservation Innovation Grants ($25 million – 2013)

National Fish and Wildlife Foundation—Hurricane Sandy Coastal Resiliency Competitive Grant Program ($100 million – 2013); Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund ($2.5 billion over 5 years)

THE ISSUE

Desired outcomes of many of federal natural resource agency programs directly align with the desired outcomes of the National Fish Habitat Action Plan. Yet there are numerous and overlapping federal family grant programs, and a paucity of funding available to the 18 national fish habitat partnerships, despite the fact that these partnerships play an integral role in the protection, enhancement, and restoration of fish habitats throughout the United States. In addition, because of the overlapping matrix of federal family grant programs that focus on similar habitat issues, conservation leaders that implement restoration projects are required to complete progress and annual reports to numerous agencies and entities, on different timelines, and using different reporting forms, which creates significant inefficiencies and wastes precious and scarce resources.

OUR PROPOSAL

We propose initially that one or two federal agencies, specifically NOAA and the USFWS, conduct a review of their fish and fish-habitat related grant programs, and, beginning in 2015, and dedicate or align a percentage of those grant funds for disbursement through the 18 fish habitat partnerships through NFHP to achieve mutually agreed upon objectives related to the federal agencies and the NFHP Action Plan. The recently announced competitive grant process that the USFWS and NFHP implemented for 2014 could serve as the cornerstone for focal species and habitats and reporting requirements; this process could easily be expanded to include NOAA trust species and habitats. An initial crosswalk of the goals of fish habitat partnership strategic frameworks, NOAA Habitat Focus Areas, and the USFWS Coastal Program, e.g., could identify possible opportunities to efficiently direct funding through fish habitat partnerships to achieve goals for all three programs.

We propose these funds could be disbursed to NFHP annually as a pilot project for five years, and that at the conclusion of five years of funding, a thorough analysis of specific and measurable deliverables, challenges, and other key aspects be examined to determine the merits of the program and efficiencies gained, and to allow for course corrections to maximize mutual benefits.

EXPECTED RESULTS

Our proposal would provide the following results:

- Financial benefits—There would be more efficient use of limited financial resources for conservation entities to work together to achieve specific and measurable conservation outcomes for target focal species and habitats. This proposal would not require "new" funding.
- Resource benefits—The national fish habitat partnerships play an important, time-saving, efficient convening role for the federal agencies. As an example, in 2012, the Pacific Marine and Estuarine Fish Habitat Partnership submitted one grant to NOAA for its 2013 Coastal Habitat Restoration Program Grant. The grant was a request for $4,481,241 on behalf of 11 projects in Oregon, Washington, and California that dealt with specific coastal habitat outcomes NOAA sought to achieve. If this particular partnership had not played this convening role, NOAA would have received 23 individual projects for funding consideration (PMEP rigorously evaluated all 23 submissions and deemed 11 had the level of scientific rigor, monitoring and evaluation, fund leveraging and other components to support).
- Technical benefits—The national fish habitat partnerships would be recognized for the scientific expertise they provide and the rigorous review of projects that inform federal grant program disbursements. Adequately supporting the national fish habitat partnerships will ensure this expertise is available long-term.

CONCLUSION

NFHP appreciates the opportunity to engage with its long-standing federal partners in a discussion about the potential to implement this proposal to achieve financial, technical, and resource benefits mutually desired by NFHP and the federal agencies.

Our track record demonstrates our confidence and ability to work with NOAA and the USFWS to design a long-term sustainable program that accelerates conservation outcomes for critical fish habitat in the United States.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.