

Nomination Received by Council on Environmental Quality, Executive Office of the President
For the CEQ NEPA Pilot Project Program
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/ceq/initiatives/nepa/nepa-pilot-project-nominations>

PART I. NOMINATOR

First Name:	Michael
Last Name:	Horton
Organization:	US Fish and Wildlife Service
Project Title:	[None Submitted]
Submitted by:	Federal Agency
Date Received:	06/14/2011

PART II. SHORT ANSWERS

I. What Federal agency or agencies will be involved in this pilot project?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) are committed to this pilot. In addition, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Great Plains Landscape Conservation Cooperative (LCC) are currently evaluating the appropriate level of involvement. Though not an official partner to the pilot project, as part of this effort the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Regional In-lieu fee and Banking Information Tracking System (RIBITS), which is used to store, organize, and deliver information on approved wetland mitigation banks will be integrated with the ECOS-IPaC system, an online, GIS-centric platform providing environmental conservation data and species- and activity-specific conservation practices. The Corps has agreed to use RIBITS to manage the USFWS's approved conservation banks used to mitigate impacts to listed species.

II. What is the Federal action to which this NEPA pilot project applies?

The proposed pilot project will address the Federal planning and approval of renewable energy, traditional oil and gas development, and highway development and maintenance projects. The proposed project will also support the NEPA for issuance of USFWS permits for take of eagles under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (BGEPA) and for issuance of Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) permits under section 10(a)(1)(B) of the Endangered Species Act, as well as NEPA for other Federal processes related to energy and highway projects.

III. How will this pilot project reduce the costs and time needed to complete the NEPA process?

This project involves, through implementation of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Information, Planning, and Conservation (ECOS-IPaC) program, integrating the NEPA and Endangered Species Act review and approval processes, along with several other environmental review and approval processes including the conservation needs of species listed under the Endangered Species Act, the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (BGEPA), and the Migratory bird Treaty Act, as well as wetland resources, which will be identified upfront along with conservation measures that can be incorporated into Sikes Act natural resource management plans and project designs to address potential impacts to these resources. The project will also reduce the redundancy of NEPA efforts and facilitate the ability of the USFWS to adopt other Federal agency NEPA documents for BGEPA and

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HCP permits.

Collaborative development of conservation measures with the development communities that will be implementing the projects will ensure that the measures are acceptable and doable, and will improve NEPA coordination between cooperating agencies. This information will be accessible to project proponents through an online system that allows them to identify potential project areas, identify the natural resources of concern in the area, and find out what conservation measures are available early in the project design phase when there is the maximum design flexibility available. In addition, the system will use a “Turbo-tax” like interface to lead project proponents through the process of making design decisions. Information provided during this process will be used to construct many of the environmental review and approval documents, including those portions of the NEPA documents pertaining to the addressed natural resources, including cumulative impacts and mitigation. Once actions are implemented, project proponents will then come back onto the ECOS-IPaC decision support system to report their results and to help meet permit reporting requirements. This information will be used to update environmental baselines, implement adaptive management strategies, and track the implementation and effectiveness of monitoring and mitigation required by NEPA decision documents.

IV. How will this pilot project ensure rigorous environmental protection?

The IPaC program process identifies and provides for management of effects pathways that result from implementation of different actions on the landscape. This process “deconstructs” proposed actions into component parts, and identifies the environmental stressors resulting from each component. At the same time the Service “deconstructs” the biology of the species of concern and identifies the natural resources needed to meet the species’ conservation needs. Each step of “deconstruction” is supported within the ECOS-IPaC system by use and documentation of the best available science. This process insures that all aspects of proposed actions and species’ conservation can be identified, documented, and addressed. In addition, the reporting module provides the means through which to track implementation and efficacy of conservation measures that may have been included as mitigation. This information will be used to implement an adaptive management program to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and “usability” of recommended conservation measures. Finally, implementation of this program involves working with partners to develop common geospatial data layers and encourage the use of common data-sets.

V. How will this pilot project improve the quality and transparency of agency decisionmaking?

When completed, the ECOS-IPaC program will provide objective analysis that clearly states assumptions and makes our logic transparent. It will provide users with information regarding the resources needed by species, the environmental stressors produced by their actions, how these stressors impact the needed resources, and how the recommended conservation measures affect these impacts (e.g., avoid, minimize, or mitigate the impacts). In addition, it will provide information regarding alternative conservation measures and the ability to do simple cost benefit analyses to assist in making design decisions. It will

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provide the USFWS and other Federal agencies with shared information for consistent conservation measures, while making the information and science upon which analyses and decisions are based available to the public. Finally, by reducing time required to identify affected species and habitat impacts, this pilot project will facilitate adherence to project planning schedules and preparation of higher quality environmental documents better able to withstand legal scrutiny.

VI. Will this pilot project develop best practices that can be replicated by other agencies or applied to other Federal actions or programs? Please describe?

One of the primary benefits of implementing this ECOS-IPaC program process is the development of conservation measures (best practices) that can be paired up in different combinations with anticipated impacts. These conservation measures are managed and presented in an on-line system designed to assist others in other areas who may produce the same or similar environmental stressors in determining which measures are appropriate for them. In addition, linking to the Army Corp's RIBITS is an example of collaboration that furthers the "umbrella" nature of NEPA, and can be repeated with other agencies' web-based tools to improve coordination and enhance the power of NEPA analyses for the entire Federal family.

PART III. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

(See attachment on following page.)

Project Description: The proposed pilot project takes a multi-agency landscape-level approach to environmental review and conservation planning that will address the planning and approval of renewable energy, oil and gas, and highway development and maintenance projects. Though not finalized, the current proposed pilot includes a multi-state area centered on Wyoming. A goal of this pilot is to better integrate the NEPA, Endangered Species Act, Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, and Migratory Bird Treaty Act review and approval processes and to enhance the effectiveness of conservation while increasing efficiency and decreasing costs associated with project planning, review, and approval. This will be accomplished by employing a geospatially-referenced web interface to provide timely species and habitat information from the earliest planning stages through implementation and follow-up monitoring and reporting. We are also attempting to integrate the ECOS-IPaC system with spatial decision support systems such as NatureServes' Vista program and several Federal and non-Federal habitat and species use modeling efforts. While the schedule allows 18 months for full completion, we anticipate results showing benefits within the first six months. For example, within the first six months we anticipate the ability to identify listed species, critical habitat areas, and national wildlife refuges that may be impacted by proposed actions. In the second six months we foresee the ability to anticipate potential impacts to eagle species, and for project proponents to obtain design recommendations, i.e., "best practices," online, as well as the ability to identify appropriate mitigation sites through the Army Corps' RIBTS. By the end of the pilot we anticipate the ability for project proponents to access an expert system to lead them through their project design process, draft their environmental review documents, and apply for needed approvals. We currently estimate that approximately \$1.8 million will be needed to complete this pilot project and are attempting to assemble the funding through a combination of USFWS, USGS, BLM, FHWA, and LCC funds. Completion of this pilot project will further the Administration's priority to facilitate alternative energy development and provide for a more efficient and transparent government. Upon completion of this pilot project, the USFWS will have an internet-based system that will be ready to facilitate environmental review and approval processes throughout the nation.