

# **Wildlife Habitat Management Plan Guidelines**

## **Introduction**

Some Restrictions held by EEA Agencies provide an opportunity for landowners to manage their Restricted land for wildlife habitat. Many Restricted lands support rare or specialized species that are dependent on active management to thrive or are vulnerable to changes in their existing habitat. Other more common species can also benefit from habitat management. The goal of a Wildlife Habitat Management Plan (Plan) is to establish (or re-establish) ecological processes so that they are more resilient to current and future stressors like climate change. If managing your land for wildlife habitat is a primary goal, we encourage you to consider creating a Plan even if it is not required by the Restriction.

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide a framework for developing a Plan, as well as providing guidance for requesting permission for an individual improvement when approval, but not a full Plan, is required by your Restriction. The Plan describes what habitat management goals and objectives the landowner wants to accomplish on their property and how these goals and objectives will be reached, consistent with the purposes and terms of the Restriction. It includes the long-term wildlife habitat vision for the property and specific actions needed to achieve that vision for the time horizon of the Plan. This will help to guide future wildlife management activities in a way that ensures the continued protection of the conservation values of a particular property. While the Plan should meet the Restriction requirements for approving any proposed wildlife habitat improvement projects, it should also be viewed as a useful tool for stewarding the property.

Some key objectives for landowners to consider when developing a Wildlife Habitat Management Plan are to:

- Determine long and short-term goals to maintain and/or improve the wildlife habitat use of the property.
- Describe and assess current wildlife habitats and their conditions particularly as they relate to the conservation and recreational values of the Restriction.
- Identify a landowner's current management practices and capabilities.
- Consider how the site would function under optimal conditions and how natural communities and species assemblages would likely be expressed
- Develop specific, implementable recommendations to address the highest priority needs while reducing redundancies and impacts to the conservation values of the Restriction.

It is important to note that the landowner is not obligated to complete/implement the actions proposed in the Plan. Once the Plan is approved, the landowner may carry out the proposed actions but is not required to do so. Rather, the development and approval of a Wildlife Habitat Management Plan ensures that when a landowner is ready/able to move forward with their vision for the property, there is a clear path available to achieve that vision, consistent with the purposes and terms of the Restriction.

## **Wildlife Habitat Management Plan Contents**

While each Plan is tailored to a specific property and Restriction, typically they include the following sections:

1. Introduction:

General description of property, ownership, conservation stakeholders, location, current & historical land use. This section should be brief but highlight what makes this property unique.

2. Primary Objectives:

A concise statement explaining the big-picture goal(s) or vision and rationale for wildlife habitat management of the property and/or the Plan within the context of the larger landscape. For example: create young forest habitat, establish grasslands, or foster development of mature forest ecosystems. This section should also include a statement of how often the objectives and/or Plan should be reviewed and updated. This section should also include a description of desired future conditions and details of how management will affect the site and influence the greater landscape.

3. Wildlife Habitat Management Inventory & Assessment:

The physical resources present at your site are the prime factors for determining which habitats should be managed for. All natural resources should be identified here including topography, soils, hydrology, natural communities, and wildlife). Conditions of the built environment should also be identified and described here. Include a description of any limitations or challenges such as human land use, non-native invasive species, landscape connectivity, climate threats, or shifts in water regime. Locations of these features should be marked on an attached site plan. Landowners should also note that if regulated species are found within a site, the Plan requires review by MassWildlife's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program (NHESP). Staff there are available to discuss your project during the development phase and offer advice to benefit legally protected species while still achieving overall management goals.

Note that this section can reference other publications or works in which resource inventories or assessments have been completed.

4. Land Management Goals and Objectives:

This section consists of a description of specific wildlife-based management goals and objectives for the property that will ultimately help achieve the overall vision for the property. This may include the delineation of separate, discrete management units within a site that receive different treatments or are treated at different times. The size and number of management units differs with each landscape depending on natural resources and management actions planned.

5. Management Activity Implementation and Timing:

This is a description of ongoing and planned land management needed to meet goals and objectives. It includes the organization(s) or individuals involved in addition to a timetable and sequence of management actions to be performed. In order for the Plan to be adaptive and provide land managers with flexibility, the Plan should include contingencies and triggers for altering the planned action or sequence of actions if needed based on shifting priorities, unexpected outcomes or unforeseen circumstances.

**Always check your Restriction language to determine whether proposed activities are permitted before developing plans.**

Factors to consider when conducting *ongoing* management activities:

- Scale: work plan doesn't get ahead of capacity;
- Refugia: viable habitat is available to offset temporary disruptions;
- Sequence: actions are proposed in a logical order;
- Resources and Budget: actions are planned to parallel funding and labor;
- Incremental Gains: sequence plans for a positive conservation outcome even if a project is discontinued before final completion;
- Landscape Context: relate the management to nearby lands and habitat-expand existing habitat or introduce new habitat if appropriate;
- Buffers: protect ecologically sensitive areas or hydrologic features;

- Enhancements: develop improvements in areas already influenced by human activity;
- Minimize Disturbance: describe how negative impacts to regulated species and resources will be minimized;
- Articulate Success: make sure Plans describe what a successful action will look like so it can be properly assessed;
- Adaptive Management: provide triggers and contingencies for adjusting management actions or timing of management if monitoring indicates that desired outcomes are not being met

Be as detailed as possible when describing wildlife habitat management. Include why a particular outcome is necessary (i.e. increasing habitat for species in decline), and any permits that must be obtained prior to beginning the project. Examples of details that should be provided for different types of improvements are included here as guidance but note that this is not necessarily an exhaustive list and details should always be tailored to the specific improvement and Restriction.

6. Post-management Monitoring: compare conditions identified in the initial site assessment with post-treatment conditions. Monitoring is required to assess the response of the site or landscape to the management actions, and to determine if stated goals and objectives have been met. Monitoring also informs the possible need to adapt management actions as described in contingency plans.

#### 7. Planning Considerations and Resources

Before beginning the planning process, landowners should familiarize themselves with the natural communities and habitats found in Massachusetts and may want to seek advice from natural resource professionals such as consulting foresters, conservation commissions, or wildlife biologists if needed, to understand which are prioritized for restoration and management. The following resources provide helpful information:

- Biomap Habitat Restoration Resource Center  
<https://biomap-mass-eoeea.hub.arcgis.com/pages/habitat-restoration-resource-center>
- 36 broad habitat types found in Massachusetts  
<https://biomap-mass-eoeea.hub.arcgis.com/pages/habitats-management-recommendations>
- State Wildlife Action Plan  
<https://www.mass.gov/service-details/state-wildlife-action-plan-swap>
- Species of Greatest Conservation Need  
<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/massachusetts-species-of-greatest-conservation-need-sgcnc>
- Massachusetts Endangered Species Act listed species  
<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/list-of-endangered-threatened-and-special-concern-species>
- Technical assistance and funding for restoring and managing habitat | Mass.gov  
<https://www.mass.gov/guides/masswildlife-habitat-management-grant-program>