

THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS
2005 INNOVATIONS AWARDS PROGRAM

1. **Program Name** Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR)
*Strategic Conservation Agenda 2003-2007:
Measuring Progress Toward Mission*
2. **Administering Agency** Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
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9. Please provide a two-sentence description of the program.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources ‘*Strategic Conservation Agenda*’ program uses new and innovative approaches for defining and measuring progress toward statewide natural resources results. Rather than simply communicating a strategic vision, it makes progress tangible by communicating critical natural resources trends along with 85 specific indicators and targets that measure results in six performance areas: natural lands, fish and wildlife, waters and watersheds, forests, outdoor recreation, and natural resources stewardship education.

10. How long has this program been operational (month and year).

This program has been operational since July 2003 when we conceived and built the framework that led to the initial production of the *DNR’s Conservation Agenda* (March 2004) and first annual update (March 2005).

11. Why was the program created? What problem[s] or issue[s] was it designed to address? Indicate how the program applies to the change driver listed above.

This program was created to meet the needs of many groups: 1) *natural resources managers* needed better tools to document critical natural resources trends and communicate their work with rigorous scientific information; 2) a new *DNR commissioner* mandated better communication of agency direction and measures of progress; 3) the *Governor* directed new standards for accountability to results and required state agencies to set performance measures; 4) *legislators* required budget in the context of natural resources outcomes; and 5) *citizens and stakeholders* expected clear information about DNR priorities and conservation results. To meet these expectations, the DNR's *Conservation Agenda* was created to improve agency learning and decision making, enhance communications, and meet expectations for accountability to results.

This program addresses several problems. First, the *Conservation Agenda* is a tool designed to improve understanding of natural resources trends and the conservation strategies necessary to address them. Natural resources issues are complex and often change quickly based on social trends. For example, forests, waters, agricultural lands, fish, wildlife, and parks and trails, are all physically interconnected across ownerships and ecological boundaries. At the same time, these resources are socially interconnected by current trends, such as urban sprawl, water use demands, recreation and lakeshore development, energy use, and so on. Using sets of integrated natural resources indicators helps us understand and communicate complex natural resources issues in ways that make them more comprehensible and tractable for decision making.

Second, the *Conservation Agenda* provides agency accountability to results by identifying agency-level performance indicators and setting specific conservation targets. (An indicator measures work performed, results achieved, or natural resources trends; a target specifies how much by when). Resource managers, legislators, stakeholders and citizen leaders are often frustrated by the complexity of natural resources issues and lack of useful information to assess progress toward natural resources results. Myriad individual programs collect pieces of information. Yet fundamental questions need answers: are we making progress toward conservation goals? How well are our programs working? Where should we be investing in priorities? A set of integrated indicators helps assess progress and allow for course-corrections. It also makes agency-level progress information transparent and available to all citizens.

Third, the *Conservation Agenda* is designed to promote integrated management approaches and address conflict through improved understanding of trade-offs and consequences of natural resources decisions. Sets of integrated indicators help frame difficult and sometimes contentious natural resources issues in more manageable and tractable ways. Sets of indicators and targets can make trade-offs and expectations more readily visible. It lets people know what we are doing and where they can make a difference with partnership work. It promotes thoughtful discussion and durable agreements among disciplines, agencies, and stakeholders.

This program applies to the change driver 'natural resource management.' Given the urgency of many resource issues (e.g., urban sprawl, habitat disruptions, toxics, water and energy use), it is critical to use creative approaches like the *Conservation Agenda* to understand natural resources conditions and trends, how our strategies affect them, and where to prioritize our actions.

12. Describe the specific activities and operations of the program in chronological order.

Creating a shared need and vision for the program- 2003

- *Discussions among key players*, such as DNR commissioners, managers, other agencies, stakeholders, and the Governor's Office of Performance Management.

Developing the Conservation Agenda – 2003-2004

- *Creating the framework for Conservation Agenda*. This included: identifying six performance areas based on previous strategic goal setting efforts; focusing on outcomes; developing possible indicators and targets; assessing data availability and quality; engaging staff to develop and communicate indicators, trends, context, and results; working with data and converting into easy-to-understand graphics; and conducting ongoing review.
- *Making strategic decisions about actual targets*. This required meetings and negotiations among commissioners, senior managers, operations managers, etc. It also required integrating feedback and processes from previous stakeholder review meetings
- *Sharing information across boundaries*, such as across agencies
- *Completing the first version of DNR's Conservation Agenda*, distributing copies and CDs.
- *Making the Conservation Agenda available to all citizens and interested stakeholders*. The full-color version is available at: <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/conservationagenda/index.html>

Updating the Conservation Agenda–2005

- *Reviewing indicators and actual results* data with operations managers
- *Keeping it dynamic*. We added ten new indicators and highlighted critical trends and context
- *Producing a new, updated version* that includes the latest actual results data and updates

Using the Conservation Agenda and making it operational–2004 and 2005

- *Learning and operations*. DNR managers reviewed new data to learn about trends and assess results. All DNR managers share responsibility for putting the *Conservation Agenda* into action through operational plans and actions.
- *Communications*. In addition to making the *Conservation Agenda* widely available via the website, we also used indicator information to promote discussions at stakeholder meetings, issue press releases, develop legislative presentations, etc. The *Conservation Agenda* helps communicate important trends, trade-offs, and priorities.
- *Biennial budget presentations*. In March 2005, the DNR used its *Conservation Agenda* to organize and present its FY2006-07 budget overview to legislative committees. The DNR consistently uses indicators for planning and reporting purposes and is in a strong position to better link budgeting and natural resource outcome indicators.
- *Accountability*. DNR uses the *Conservation Agenda* to promote accountability to results. We make annual updates to report on progress toward targets. We also report progress toward 25 targets to Minnesota's Office of Performance Management and post progress every six months on the Governor's 'Department Results' Website at <http://www.departmentresults.state.mn.us>. We are part of a broader statewide system for accountability to results.
- *Integrated resource management*. We are starting to use the *Conservation Agenda* to enhance integrated management approaches and assess trade-offs among priorities.
- *Training*. Program staff worked with national partners such as the Organization of Wildlife Planners and the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies to develop and conduct training sessions related to performance measurement and management.

Next steps 2005-2007—operational follow through

- *Keeping it current and useful.* We will conduct updates, reviews, and improvements in 2006 and 2007. This includes being open to management innovations necessary to meet targets.
- *Integrated resource management.* We will use the *Conservation Agenda* as a tool to address more complicated integrated natural resources issues. Where are important natural resources trade-offs? How can we assess interdisciplinary progress? Etc.

13. Why is the program a new and creative approach or method?

The MN DNR's *Conservation Agenda* program was produced for the first time in March 2004. With only 2 full-time staff leading the program, it has used creative approaches to work collaboratively with over 100 DNR staff, build partnerships across divisions and agencies, integrate complex data sets, and apply them in novel ways. The program is new and creative because:

- a. The *Conservation Agenda* actually informs decisions by highlighting critical natural resources trends and setting future targets. This has never been done before in Minnesota.
- b. The *Conservation Agenda* addresses complex natural resources issues and bridges the gap between basic environmental reporting and performance reporting (e.g., 'state of the environment reports' and 'performance reports'). It is more than the sum of these two parts; it gives people information about critical natural resources trends—such as urban development and loss of natural lands—and then also describes what we are doing about these trends, and whether we are making progress toward conservation targets.
- c. It crosses boundaries across disciplines and agencies. For example, it integrates state-level indicators and targets related to forests, waters, natural lands, fish, wildlife, recreation, and education. DNR reports on 25 *Conservation Agenda* indicators and targets on the Governor's 'Department Results' website (www.departmentresults.state.mn.us). These complement other quality of life and environmental indicators from other state agencies such as the MN Pollution Control Agency, Department of Agriculture, Department of Health, etc.
- d. The *Conservation Agenda* has achieved success because it promotes synergy between top-down and bottom-up approaches (e.g., expectations from the Governor's office and Commissioner's office, and from DNR program managers and technical staff).
- e. It is dynamic and readily useful. Managers have been told we can use this, improve it, and be flexible. We are also applying it in new ways. For example, after receiving a legislative request to identify the DNR's 'top ten' natural resources issues, we were able to effectively communicate issues already highlighted in the *Conservation Agenda* such as loss of habitat, invasive species, water use demands, access for recreation, forest products globalization, etc.
- f. It relies on creative, efficient interactions among government employees. With only 2 FTEs fully devoted to this program, it relies on creative interactions among more than 100 DNR staff and interested stakeholders. Sets of teams help develop indicators and progress updates.
- g. It relies on creative, efficient interactions with citizens. We use indicators from successful citizen monitoring programs (e.g., volunteer loon monitoring programs, frog and toad surveys). The *Conservation Agenda* is easily available to all citizens on DNR's website.

14. What were the program's start-up costs? (Provide details about specific purchase for this program, staffing needs and other financial expenditures, as well as existing materials, technology and staff already in place.)

Start-up costs were negligible because the program relied on existing staff and programs.

Staff: 2 FTEs are assigned to this program. In addition, there have been staff time contributions from over 100 DNR staff that help develop the *Conservation Agenda's* 85 indicators and targets. Staff time includes data sharing, graphics production, writing, reviewing, website posting, etc.

Print production: A part-time graphics staff person was assigned for graphics layout, design, and print production of the *Conservation Agenda*. An editor was contracted for ~\$ 3,000. Hard copy and CD production ~ \$5,000.

15. What are the program's annual operational costs?

Staff: 2FTEs and periodic contributions from over 100 DNR staff

Production: - Annual updates with print production and presentation materials ~ \$8,000

16. How is the program funded?

The program is funded through the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, General Fund

17. Did this program require passage of legislation, executive order or regulations? If YES, please indicate citation number.

No

18. What equipment, technology, software are used to operate and administer this program?

This program relies on existing resources within the DNR. For example, to assess progress toward natural resources objectives, many varied programs rely on stakeholder involvement and scientific data collection. This ranges from data collection equipment (e.g., stream gauges) to computer programs and tools for data analysis and display (e.g., GIS to basic excel programs).

19. To the best of your knowledge, did this program originate in your state? If YES, please indicate the innovator's name, present address, telephone number and e-mail address.

Yes. A team of people originated this program in Minnesota. It was led by DNR's Office of Management and Budget Services, DNR Operations Managers, DNR Commissioners, and a team of DNR employees committed to being champions for results.

Innovators' names: Keith Wendt, Manager (MN DNR, OMBS Box 10, 500 Lafayette Rd., St. Paul, MN 55155; 651-297-7879; keith.wendt@dnr.state.mn.us) and Laura Preus, Science Policy Analyst (Same address; 651-296-1816; laura.preus@dnr.state.mn.us).

20. Are you aware of similar programs in other states? If YES, which ones and how does this program differ?

Yes. There are other somewhat similar programs that focus on using environmental information. The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently reviewed environmental indicator sets being used at national, regional, state, and local levels. These were summarized and published in a 2004 report titled “Environmental indicators: better coordination is needed to develop environmental indicator sets that inform decisions” (GAO-05-52). Most of these state-level programs are quite different. For example, they may focus on ‘state of the environment,’ ‘sustainability,’ or ‘quality of life,’ type reports. Some are focused on ‘progress reports.’ Some are no longer being funded or are not being maintained. Of the limited statewide efforts, the MN DNR’s *Strategic Conservation Agenda* was highlighted as a positive case study (along with California).

While the concept of using environmental information and performance measures is not new, states have been challenged to apply this successfully to complex natural resources and environmental problems. Some programs have large web-based performance data and reporting systems, or develop ‘state of the environment reports.’ In contrast, DNR’s *Conservation Agenda* focuses on the integration of easy-to-use trend information and future performance targets – not just current snapshots or past performance. It identifies and reports on actual indicators and targets related to six performance areas: natural lands, forests, waters and watersheds, outdoor recreation, and natural resources stewardship education. It integrates critical context and trends with data about natural resources management results. And it is being used – operationally – over time with the Minnesota legislature, stakeholders, and DNR managers themselves. It continues to garner increased interest and support. As we understand it, few have succeeded in actually building a system that has become operational and regularly informs management decisions and actions and is transparent to citizens.

21. Has the program been fully implemented? If NO, what actions remain to be taken?

No. While a significant part of the program has been successfully completed – by developing, distributing, and using the *Conservation Agenda*—it has not yet been fully implemented.

The DNR’s *Conservation Agenda* focuses on natural resources trends, ongoing progress, and future targets. Thus, the long-term value of the *Conservation Agenda* is its operational use over time. For example, if DNR sets future targets, but does not revisit them to check data and actual progress, then the *Conservation Agenda* will not fully meet its intended purpose. The first annual update—and intentional progress review—was already completed in March 2005. DNR’s budget is committed to reviewing and updating it again at least in 2006 and 2007.

22. Briefly evaluate (pro and con) the program’s effectiveness in addressing the defined problem[s] or issue[s]. Provide tangible examples.

The *Conservation Agenda* was designed to address the following problems: to improve understanding and decision making about complex natural resources issues, to improve communications with citizens and stakeholders, to meet citizen expectations for accountability to results, and to apply integrated management approaches to difficult natural resources issues.

We have been very effective in the output of developing and distributing the *Conservation Agenda*. This included the challenging tasks of integrating data sets from different disciplines into six key performance areas and developing a set of agency-level strategic indicators and targets. It also included an annual progress review and production of an updated version of the *Conservation Agenda* (March 2005).

To evaluate important short-term outcomes related to the impacts of DNR's *Conservation Agenda* on people's awareness, behavior, and satisfaction, we want to pay attention to the following results:

- Do citizens, legislators, managers, and other interested stakeholders have a greater understanding of the interrelationships of Minnesota's critical natural resources issues?
- Are people actually using the *Conservation Agenda* to help make informed natural resources management decisions?
- Are citizens, stakeholders, legislators, and the Governor satisfied with DNR's communications and accountability to results? And are they satisfied with their opportunities to provide feedback and be involved?

And ultimately, for the long-term:

- Do we see improvements in natural resources conditions and overall citizen satisfaction based on how we are using the *Conservation Agenda* for information and decision making?

It is too soon to assess long-term outcomes, but in the short-term we do see evidence that people are gaining understanding, using this information in decision making, and are pleased with this communications effort. Stakeholders and legislators express appreciation at receiving useful information. It also has promoted good discussions around complex issues at stakeholder meetings; for example, related to difficult forest management issues. And DNR managers are developing operational plans in relation to the *Conservation Agenda* targets. We have not conducted an extensive evaluation survey (which would be costly) to assess people's awareness and behavior changes related to the *Conservation Agenda*. We do, however, invite public feedback through an evaluation form on the DNR's website at <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/conservationagenda/feedback.html>. And we conduct internal feedback meetings with managers to assess effectiveness and opportunities for improvements.

From these we have determined that effectiveness can be improved in the following areas:

- Using indicators to enhance understanding about specific resource connections and trade-offs
- Using indicators to better promote integrated management approaches

For our next steps we want to help people better see relationships across the indicators, and how we can use them to assess trade-offs (e.g., looking for solutions to conflicts relate to using shallow lakes for fisheries or for wildlife, addressing motorized vs. non-motorized recreational uses on public lands, or developing plans for extended rotation forests, etc.). This understanding will help make better progress toward using integrated management approaches. Having actual data helps focus discussions and work through conflict. For future iterations we will highlight indicator connections and use case studies to highlight these complexities and trade-offs.

23. How has the program grown and/or changed since its inception?

As a successful program it has garnered credibility and support in Minnesota state government. A key to success is that the program is flexible – we are open to working with a great variety of DNR staff and examining new ideas. We are limited by staff capacity, but we hope the program will continue to grow and change over time.

24. What limitations or obstacles might other states expect to encounter if they attempt to adopt this program?

Obstacles that we can envision are the following: 1) lack of leadership. It would be difficult for this program to succeed without both top-down and bottom-up support for using performance measures and reporting on natural resources results and critical trends. In Minnesota we developed this leadership and support for using performance measures over time. 2) Lack of data. Natural resources outcomes and trends are often difficult or costly to measure. Adequate data are not always available. A key to success is to engage staff that have a scientific background and are good at communications. It is necessary to use what data are available – and use them well by interacting closely with program and technical staff. 3) Vague goals or objectives. It is hard to measure progress without knowing where you are going. Basic planning needs to be in place. 4) Process and relationship building. Developing the *Conservation Agenda* took time and a commitment to build relationships with many people – both within and without the agency.

Overall, however, we contend that this type of program could very realistically be adopted by other states. As long as there are people with natural resources backgrounds who are champions for results and supportive of using performance measures, then progress certainly will occur. In Minnesota the rewards have been well worth the efforts.