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# Western Governors' Wildlife Council Crucial Habitat Assessment Tool (CHAT)

## Common Ground

Wildlife and their habitat have always been essential to the Western way of life in many different ways. Hunters, fishermen, backpackers, birders and other enthusiasts spend their leisure time and resources viewing and engaging wildlife. Rural communities often rely on such activities to support their local economies, and they view abundant, diverse fish and wildlife as part of their Western heritage. At the same time, economic progress across the West also depends on the successful completion of energy, transportation, land use and other large-scale development projects that must incorporate potential wildlife impacts into their planning.

A collaborative effort among 17 states, the Western Wildlife Crucial Habitat Assessment Tool (CHAT) aims to bring greater certainty and predictability to planning efforts by establishing a common starting point for discussing the intersection of development and wildlife. In its simplest form, CHAT will be an easily accessible online system of maps displaying crucial wildlife habitat and corridors across the West. While not intended for project-level approval, CHAT is designed to reduce conflicts and surprises while ensuring wildlife values are better incorporated into land use decision-making, as well as large-scale conservation projects.

## A Bird's Eye View

The Western Governors' Wildlife Council has agreed to common definitions of crucial wildlife habitat and corridors and issued guidelines to help each state prioritize habitat within its boundaries to meet its specific conservation objectives. The West-wide definitions will also help achieve compatibility and consistency across state boundaries and address certain discrepancies that may exist in identifying habitat and natural features along state borders.

In addition to helping states establish their individual CHATs, the Wildlife Council is creating a "regional CHAT" to provide an informed and continually updated picture of crucial wildlife habitat across the West. The state and regional CHATs will be non-regulatory but will give project planners and the general public access to credible scientific data at the broad scale for use in project assessment, siting and planning. This includes large-scale development projects spanning multiple jurisdictions.

## Timeline

In June 2010, Governors across the West committed to having their states complete regionally compatible CHATs and make them public within three years. From now through October 2012, the Western Governors' Wildlife Council will develop options for constructing and maintaining the regional CHAT, while their state agencies will continue working together to compile important data sets, apply crucial habitat definitions and build and improve upon their individual state

“Large intact and functioning ecosystems, healthy fish and wildlife populations, and abundant public access to natural landscapes are a significant contributing factor to the West’s economic well being as well as quality of life.”

—Western Governors’  
Association Policy Resolution  
10-10

“Once...wildlife data is made compatible across the region, the public and governments will have a powerful new tool to do the necessary planning for projects, such as transmission lines, natural gas extraction, renewable energy projects, transportation projects and conservation initiatives.”

—WGA letter to Interior  
Secretary Salazar (Sept. 1,  
2010)

“...Federal and state lands play a critical role in the economies of local communities through their mixed use mandates that include recreation, wildlife management and energy development...Timely access to quality data on wildlife would benefit wildlife managers, state and federal land managers, local governments, industry and private property owners.”

—State-Federal MOU on  
Wildlife Corridors (June 15,  
2009)

## History

Established in 1984, the Western Governors' Association (WGA) is an independent, non-partisan organization of governors from 19 Western states, two Pacific-flag territories and one commonwealth. Through WGA, member Governors identify and address key policy and governance issues in natural resources, the environment, human services, economic development, international relations, transportation and public management.

To help ensure both wildlife and local economies remain viable, WGA began examining how state wildlife agencies could be more collaborative and innovative in providing wildlife species and habitat information to their various “customers,” including federal agencies, other state agencies, local and tribal governments, conservation advocates, business and industry groups, private landowners, outdoors enthusiasts and even foreign countries.

With the adoption of its *Wildlife Corridors Initiative Report* in June 2008, the Western Governors created the Western Governors' Wildlife Council - consisting of designees from 17 WGA member states – and tasked its members with developing policies and tools to identify and conserve crucial wildlife habitat and corridors across the region. Now guided by WGA policy resolution 10-10, and focused on implementing the CHAT model, the Wildlife Council is working to make information on important fish and wildlife habitat compatible across the West and available to the public in 2013 for use in informing land use decisions.