

Proposal to establish a committee to draft a Science Policy in support of the Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan (BCCP) and Balcones Canyonlands Preserve (BCP)

Science is a useful process to guide decisions, increase efficiency, and improve management actions in support of Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs). Well after the BCCP was permitted, the USFWS codified the need for adaptive management (using science to learn from our actions) in its addendum to the HCP Handbook (USFWS & NMFS 2000). The use of “best available science” makes decisions resistant to legal challenge.

At this time, the BCCP has no consistent means to ensure that choices made to allocate resources and take management actions use science as a guiding process. Creating a Science Policy document for potential adoption by the BCP Coordinating Committee would provide substantial future benefits to BCCP implementation.

The BCCP specifies “management practices should be prescribed and monitored with an appropriate multi-species emphasis and overall ecosystem approach” (pg. 2-34). This statement could be used to provide the framework for the Science Policy. The Science Policy could include the means to review, improve, and disseminate BCP research. It could devise the means to prioritize research efforts, and guide adaptive management. Ideally, a Science Policy would require some adjustments of the workflow of BCP staff, but little additional burden on our limited resources.

We request the SAC chair with the BCCP secretary to solicit nominations to a committee who will work with BCP staff to draft a Science Policy. Such a committee could include current members of the Scientific Advisory Committee, BCP staff and scientists, and scientists from outside the BCP. A Science Policy in support of the BCCP could also benefit other regional Conservation Planning efforts and we would welcome their participation in the drafting of the document, as well as the participation of staff from the natural resource regulatory agencies.

U.S Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service. 2000. Availability of a final addendum to the handbook for habitat conservation planning and incidental take permitting process. Federal Register 65:35241-35257.