

Recommendation of Technical Review Panel to the North Atlantic Landscape Conservation Cooperative Steering Committee for funding project under RFP Topic 2:

Prioritization of Rare Plants

Summary Recommendation

The Technical Review Panel and North Atlantic LCC Staff recommend that the Steering Committee select the proposal titled *Prioritization and Conservation Status of Rare Plants in the North Atlantic* submitted by Anne Frances of NatureServe to receive the full funding amount (\$50,000) requested under the August 2015 North Atlantic LCC Request for Proposals (RFP).

Background

On June 16, 2015, the North Atlantic LCC Steering Committee approved a science need developed by the North Atlantic LCC Technical Committee to identify conservation priorities for plants across the Northeast U.S. and Maritime Canada. North Atlantic LCC staff then worked with members of the Technical Committee and other partners to develop an RFP to solicit projects to address this science need. Eric Sorenson of the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife in particular played an invaluable role in developing the RFP. In preparation for the RFP, LCC staff surveyed state and provincial botanists to better understand the value they saw regarding the topic and their potential availability to contribute. The 13 respondents agreed that that such a project would be worthwhile and useful. On August 12, WMI announced the [RFP](#) widely. Two proposals were submitted in response to the RFP, which closed on September 18, 2015: one from NatureServe and one from the New England Wild Flower Society.

Review Process

Scott Schwenk, North Atlantic LCC Science Coordinator, chaired the Technical Review Panel. The original plans were to include state and provincial natural heritage staff on the review panel. However, because both proposals included funding for natural heritage programs, we decided to exclude natural heritage staff from the review process to avoid any conflicts of interest. The review panel consisted of volunteers from the LCC Technical Committee and other recommended experts, consisting of the following six members:

Reviewers	Organization
Tom LaPointe	USFWS, National Wildlife Refuge System
Liz Matthews	National Park Service
Rose Paul	The Nature Conservancy – Vermont
Diane Pavek	National Park Service
Scott Schwenk	North Atlantic LCC
Stephen Smith	National Park Service

Following an initial screening by WMI, the proposals were reviewed by the full panel. The reviewers scored the proposals according to a set of criteria listed in the RFP and were

encouraged to provide comments that explained their reviews. On October 20, four of the panelists discussed the proposals by teleconference and reached consensus on the recommendation.

Results of the Reviews

Five of the six reviewers rated the proposal by NatureServe most highly, with the other reviewer rating the two proposals as approximately equal. Based on numerical scores, written comments, and the teleconference discussion, the consensus of reviewers was to recommend selection of the NatureServe proposal.

Strengths of the NatureServe proposal were that it comprehensively addressed the RFP components and would apply the well-tested NatureServe and natural heritage methodologies and data to the project. Reviewers appreciated plans to develop habitat cross-walks for rare species and for plans to update the Global rarity rankings as part of the project. Various concerns raised included whether the RFP funding was sufficient to accomplish all of the tasks planned and how the findings and products of the project would be widely disseminated.

Strengths of the New England Wild Flower Society (NEWFS) proposal included their plans, like NatureServe, to engage a broad team of state and provincial plant experts. The NEWFS proposal also generally covered the RFP components. Concerns were raised about what the proposal's lack of explicit engagement of the expertise and data of NatureServe would mean for the ultimate success of the project. Questions were also raised about how maps and other results would be released and a lack of clarity on climate change vulnerability assessments.

If the NatureServe proposal is selected, reviewers recommend that several issues be considered prior to finalizing the project scope of work and during the performance of the project:

- More explanation should be provided for how results will be widely publicized and distributed.
- It is critical that plant species ranked as rare by states (S1 and S2 ranks) be considered in the assessments.
- During the project, NatureServe should consult with North Atlantic LCC staff and other experts on the process and criteria for regional rankings to ensure consistency with other regional species ranking processes.

Supplemental Information:

Proposal Review Criteria

1. Degree to which the project addresses the priority themes and products described in the Request for Proposals. In summary, this is to apply consistent assessment of river corridors and floodplains throughout the region to prioritize conservation action
2. Scientific and technical merit
3. Programmatic capability and feasibility. Are project objectives/goals clearly defined, measurable, and connected to specific milestones/deliverables and timelines? Will/can proposed methods accomplish/produce the project's objectives/goals, deliverables, and timelines?
4. Engagement of partners - demonstrating commitment to participation and buy-in by partners across region.
5. Demonstration that products will be accessible and useful in conservation and resource management decision-making.
6. Degree to which project builds upon, rather than duplicates, existing efforts.
7. Geographic scope. Priority will be given to projects that encompass the full North Atlantic LCC region. Projects confined to a small portion of the LCC region (e.g., single state or watershed) will not be considered eligible.
8. Leveraging of other resources (not required but encouraged).

Deliverables requested in the RFP

1. Assemble a team of botanists from the 13 state Natural Heritage Programs, the three Maritime Provinces, and other organizations across the North Atlantic region.
2. Use plant data including from NatureServe/Natural Heritage programs and other sources as available to assess questions including: What is the regional or global distribution of the species? How rare is the species across its range? What is the level of inventory for this species across its range? Is the species declining across its range? Is the species associated with a rare habitat or natural community? Does the species require specific management in order to maintain its populations? Is the species at the edge of its climatic range? Is the species especially vulnerable to climate change? Is the species likely to expand or contract its distribution in the region? To what degree have plants been included in State Wildlife Action Plans within the region?
3. Develop (or adapt from existing approaches) a replicable, rigorous method for regional prioritization using available information on life history, distribution, published vulnerability assessments available from the region, and other information (including

information related to the questions under deliverable 2).

4. A prioritized assessment of species for conservation action in the Northeast, for incorporation into conservation design efforts, and key gaps in understanding the distribution and vulnerability of these species.

Abstracts from each proposal

Anne Frances, NatureServe

Prioritization and Conservation Status of Rare Plants in the North Atlantic

The North Atlantic Region of the United States and Canada boasts diverse habitats, from coasts to mountains, that support endemic and rare plant species. However, recent conservation actions and prioritization efforts in this region have neglected to include plants. We propose to conduct a conservation assessment for vascular plants that occur in the North Atlantic Landscape Conservation Cooperative. Using the best scientific data, we will develop a list of vascular plant species of concern for the region. We will refine the list with the input of Natural Heritage and other regional botanists and experts. For each species, we will determine regional conservation responsibility, develop regional ranks, update global ranks, provide a comprehensive review of climate change analyses, document known threats, and identify gaps in conservation efforts. This project heavily relies on the knowledge and expertise of the Natural Heritage botanists in the region and the existing element occurrence data, conservation status assessments, and methodology of NatureServe and the Natural Heritage Network. The primary outcome will be a prioritized list of rare plant species for conservation actions, with a comprehensive analysis of rarity, threats, trends, legal protection, inclusion in State Wildlife Action Plan revisions, conservation status, habitat, and climate change. The project will begin in January 2016 and end in March 2017.

William Brumback, New England Wild Flower Society

Regional Prioritization of Rare Plants in the Northeast Region of North America

We propose to apply the established regional prioritization methodology, Flora Conservanda, to taxa within the Northeast U.S., an area comprised of 13 eastern U.S. states and (wholly or partly) 4 Canadian provinces, resulting in the production of a prioritized assessment of the rare plants species for this region. Using data from Natural Heritage programs and other sources, including recommendations from botanical experts, we will be able to produce lists of plant species and their occurrences for priority conservation within the Northeast. In addition, using in-house GIS, we will produce maps of the occurrences in order to show the areas of concentrations of taxa, as well as more isolated occurrences recommended for conservation.

We will consult with botanical experts from within the region by conference call and in-person meetings to set criteria for regional prioritization for the project, evaluate the data based on these criteria, and

produce a final report including maps listing priority rare plant taxa and their occurrences for the Northeast region, by region and by state/province, as well as plants considered edge of range within the region, habitats considered most vulnerable to climate change, management priorities as known, and degree of inclusion under State Wildlife Action Plans. We propose to have a preliminary list ready within one year, with the final report finished within two years.