

Strategic Program Priorities 2022- 2023 (FINAL DRAFT)

Members of the WGF Science Council helped to shape and update WGF's program priorities for the coming year in our discussions and work sessions held in Wausau on June 6, 2022. The program priorities described here reflect the results of those working sessions. They are categorized by theme areas, articulate why WGF is well-suited to take on these priorities, and detail specific focus areas for WGF. The WGF Board will provide final approval.

Together with our Strategic Plan, WGF Program Priorities will inform the following activities:

- Our communications with our members - supporters, and our program funders
- Our coordination, communications, and outreach with conservation partners
- Our future selection of program and project opportunities

Program priorities will be an important framework for guiding our day to day, and week to week efforts.

Wisconsin's Green Fire will emphasize these themes in our policy advocacy work in order to inform a proactive legislative and policy agenda, and to inform our responses to proposed legislation.

We will be updating guidance for our WGF work groups and the Science Council to create a clear process for developing projects in light of these priorities, and to ensure that new projects fall under one (or more) themes, have the necessary work group and staff support, financial resources, and advance the overall mission of WGF.

I. **Program Theme: Climate Science, Climate Resilience, and Climate Solutions**

Wisconsin's Green Fire addresses the critical issue of climate change by contributing to science-informed and equitable solutions that especially address community climate resilience and greenhouse gas mitigation through renewable energy. WGF has led efforts in community climate resiliency in Monroe County and continues to build on this expertise in other areas. It will be important for WGF to establish and strengthen relationships with other Wisconsin organizations working to advance climate solutions and climate equity throughout the state.

WGF Focus Areas Include:

- Conducting community-based climate risk assessments and climate adaptation planning
- Watershed-based assessment of climate risks
- Increasing climate resilience through Natural Climate Solutions
- Understanding opportunities for renewable energy development with emphasis on compatible conservation outcomes and equitable distribution of benefits

Specific Project Ideas/Initiatives:

- Provide related to findings in WICCI reports and helps communities make sense of where the policy opportunities exist to act on these findings
- Develop an Opportunities Now publication with recommendations to promote Natural Climate Solutions in agriculture, forests, and conservation lands.
- Participation on the Wisconsin Climate Table
- Further our understanding on the impacts of large scale renewable energy developments to wildlife movement/critical habitat
- Launch and coordinate a campaign related to Focus on Energy with statewide champions of the program

II. Program Theme: Sustainable Agricultural Systems

Transforming our agricultural and working lands to more regenerative and more resilient land uses will help address widespread water contamination, help manage climate change impacts, prevent soil loss, improve water quality, reduce the loss of wildlife and biodiversity, and help family farms remain prosperous.

WGF members have extensive experience in farm conservation policy and environmental issues in agriculture. WGF promotes research and policy changes to move toward sustainable agricultural systems and resilient land uses.

WGF Focus Areas Include:

- Conduct policy analysis and design model farm conservation programs and practices that can help transform agriculture to address climate change and protect clean water.
- Science-based analysis and advocacy around farm environmental standards

Specific Project Ideas/Initiatives:

- Develop and promote the adoption of a Pay for Performance Program in Wisconsin with DNR and DATCP. WGF can be involved with developing tools that help with farmer accountability and lead some pilot programs help advance Pay for Performance with cooperation from large operators (such as McCain Foods).
- Influence the market forces that drive agriculture through cooperation with other organizations targeted toward development of marker bills that form the basis of the US Farm Bill
- Build on our role as an advocate for agricultural performance measures that capture externalities
- Meet with grazing operations with a goal of exploring ways to scale operations to meet market needs.

III. Program Theme: Conservation of Biodiversity

Loss of biodiversity and degradation of ecosystems is a worldwide threat to people and our planet. In Wisconsin and the Midwest, songbirds, pollinating insects, small mammals, and aquatic organisms are just some examples of biota facing increasing threats and loss of populations. Protecting biodiversity is essential to supporting the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and supporting our cultural values.

WGF has a large number of members with expertise in fish and wildlife management, and the conservation of forests, wetlands, grasslands, lakes, and rivers. WGF members work across disciplines to address needs for more effective protection and management of critical habitats and to encourage management models reflective of broader cultural traditions, including indigenous perspectives.

WGF Focus Areas Include:

- Policy analysis of conservation, public lands, waterways and wetlands, fish, forests, wildlife, and natural heritage protection programs
- Species level conservation assessments including trends, analysis, and recommendations for conservation actions
- Regional or landscape scale assessments of biodiversity status and threats
- Develop regional plans that can be implemented and include solutions for enhancing biodiversity

Specific Project Ideas/Initiatives:

- Advocate for Wisconsin's use of RAWA dollars in ways that enhance and promote biodiversity
- Advance some recommendations specific to regions that advocate for specific methodologies, policies, and practices for enhancing biodiversity on the landscape
- Provide and promote publication of Ecological Landscapes of Wisconsin

IV. Program Theme - Contaminants of Emerging Concern (CEC)

Contaminants of emerging concern (CECs), including PFAS and other environmentally persistent chemicals are increasingly being detected at low levels in surface water, ground water, and drinking water, and represent known environmental and health risks to humans. Members of our WGF's Contaminants of Emerging Concern Work Group have extensive expertise in PFAS policy and management. Specific focus for the CEC theme will remain on PFAS for now.

WGF Focus Areas Include:

- Advance policy to address PFAS and other emerging contaminants
- Serve on advisory bodies to support state and federal agency efforts
- Provide outreach and support services to local communities affected by PFAS contamination

Specific Project Ideas/Initiatives:

- Work with DNR to develop and launch a Green Tier approach for PFAS
- Cultivate local legislators that can champion action on PFAS contamination by convening meetings with these elected officials and their staffers
- Continue to pursue funding to support the creation of a PFAS Response Team that would connect directly with affected communities to provide guidance on resources and solutions

V. Supporting New Generations of Conservationists

Wisconsin's Green Fire seeks to engage and support young people and people from all backgrounds and abilities in conservation and environmental careers and to help tackle tomorrow's conservation challenges.

WGF's Aspiring Conservation Professionals (ACP) group continues to expand across the state and reach diverse groups of students and young professionals just starting out in their conservation careers. WGF's Conservation Pathways Program, currently in a pilot phase, will build a support network throughout Wisconsin to uplift and empower students from diverse backgrounds to see themselves in the field and find opportunities to excel in their studies and careers.

WGF is uniquely positioned to lead this effort with our ability to connect students and young professionals with members (with far-ranging backgrounds and expertise in conservation and environmental fields) who can serve as mentors and guides and help foster connections and build community.

WGF Focus Areas Include:

- Support the continued development of the ACP group and grow the network throughout Wisconsin
- Expand the Conservation Pathways Program to additional areas of the state with new cohorts coming on each year
- Promoting voices of young people across Wisconsin's underrepresented and underserved communities.

Specific Project Ideas/Initiatives:

- Facilitate more interaction between WGF work group leaders and members with ACP members to encourage collaborative projects
- Continue to build and expand mentoring opportunities for ACP members by connecting with experienced/retired WGF members who have spent their careers in conservation/environmental fields. There is also an opportunity to collaborate with other Wisconsin organizations to increase reach.
- Hire ACP members as interns to help coordinate the efforts of WGF work groups in order to gain experience in facilitation and leadership skills helping advance science, policy, and stewardship activities