

Recommendation for Establishing a Natural Heritage Program Coordinating Committee

Enabling legislation for the Natural Resource Information System (MCA 90-15-201) established an Advisory Committee. Membership was defined as including “an employee of the legislative services division, of the department of administration, of the state library, and of each principle data source agency, appointed by the head of the respective state agency, and by the board of regents of higher education for the Montana university system.” (MCA 2-15-1514, 2001) “Principle data source agencies” are further defined as “any of the following state agencies: the department of natural resources and conservation; the department of fish, wildlife and parks; the department of environmental quality; the department of agriculture; the department of transportation; the state historical society; and the Montana university system.” (MCA 90-15-102)

The Committee was expanded informally over the years to include a representative of the Department of Commerce, the private consulting sector, and others as interest or issues arose. The most recent such expansion of the Committee was the invitation of representatives from several federal agencies and private sector entities to provide input on future administration of the Natural Heritage Program (NHP) in March 2005.

Discussions of NHP administration have raised two important issues: 1) the NHP is much larger than the portion of the program supported by the state core contract, and 2) core contract funds are not sufficient to support the staffing needed to deliver the “core services” that state agencies desire and expect – data compilation, validation, integration, updating, management and dissemination. Other entities – especially federal agencies – provide substantial additional funding for core functions, as well as for important data collection and other projects. This is the major reason that a broader group of “partners” was consulted in contemplating future alternatives for NHP administration.

During the alternatives assessment process, at least one partner agency indicated a concern about NHP focus and priorities, and a desire for stronger agency input into work plans and priorities. This highlighted the fact that different funding agencies can have different needs and expectations, potentially placing NHP staff in a difficult position, in light of limited capacity to meet all needs. It also suggested the value of a forum for priorities and concerns to be discussed and better addressed among all partners and major user groups. The following proposal is intended as a constructive response to this challenge.

Need for an NHP coordinating committee distinct from the NAC:

- The NHP’s activities and services go well beyond what is supported by the state core funding, which currently comprises only about 1/3 of the program’s overall funding and ¾ of the current funding supporting essential “core” services.
- NAC membership is defined by statute, and is limited, at least formally, to representatives of selected state agencies, the Legislative Services Division, and the University System. A few others have been invited in the past, but do not have “voting rights.” This poses problems for including other partner agencies and organizations that support and rely on NHP services – including some that may provide more funding to the program than state agencies.
- In order for the NHP to effectively serve the many agencies that rely on and fund the program, their input is essential. The institution that operates the “larger NHP” (including the components that are funded beyond the state’s contract) needs to have a mechanism for engaging partners, getting their input, cultivating their support, and identifying and responding to their collective needs. A single coordinating committee is the best and most efficient way to accomplish this.
- Funding from the agencies and institutions that rely on the NHP is essential for the program’s operation and delivery of valued services. It is important that partners who make an ongoing

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investment in the program have a forum for discussing priorities and direction of the program, both with NHP managers and with the other partners.

- Although an NHP advisory body could be established independently by the NHP contracting institution, separate from the NAC, there are efficiencies and obvious collaborative benefits of creating an NHP Coordinating Committee with the support of NAC and with appropriately overlapping membership.
- Establishing an NHP Coordinating Committee outside the confines of statute, provides more flexibility as well as clarity (by avoiding confusion vis-à-vis the limited membership and role set forth in statute for NAC).

Proposal:

That NAC members support the establishment of a separate NHP Coordinating Committee specifically focused on the Montana Natural Heritage Program, and comprising interested NAC members as well as representatives of agencies, organizations and other user groups that provide funding for and/or rely on NHP services.