

Guiding Principles for Future Administration of the Montana Natural Heritage Program

1. Maintain the Natural Heritage Program identity, mission & key functions.

The statutory function and longstanding role of the Natural Heritage Program (NHP) – as the State’s primary source for information on animals, plants and natural communities, emphasizing those of conservation concern – should be maintained, regardless of institutional affiliation. This includes its focus on information collection, integration, management and dissemination, its compatibility with the Natural Heritage Network (specified in the enabling legislation) and its well-established identity, including all major functional components (zoology, botany, ecology, information management).

2. Maintain or strengthen the Program’s financial and political security.

Any change in management arrangements for the NHP should, ideally, result in greater financial and political security, and should, at a minimum, not weaken the program by reducing its funding, capacity, effectiveness or by exposing it to greater political risk. Financial security is linked to the diversity of funding sources (including state agency core funding) and overall funding level, both of which have been trending upward. This funding diversity not only helps reduce the impact of cuts from any single funding source, but also produces high financial leverage for the contributing partners and benefits all partners with better data and services.

Political security is strongly linked to the program being insulated from the sometimes very negative politics associated with sensitive species – this has been achieved to date by the program’s location within a politically neutral agency (the State Library, which has a focus on information and no regulatory mandates or controversial activities) and by ensuring a strict “arm’s-length” relationship from The Nature Conservancy’s conservation activities. Also key to this perceived neutrality has been the program’s relative autonomy from political influences and politically influenced agencies and organizations.

3. Maintain the program’s effectiveness.

The current effectiveness of the NHP derives from its focus on service to a broad range of users, its commitment to diverse partners, the credibility of data, the practical utility of its products, the quality and expertise of its staff, and the trust of information users in the objectivity of its services. This effectiveness translates to efficiency and cost-savings in the public and private sectors, as well as a broad positive impact on the conservation and sustainable management of Montana’s biological resources. Ensuring maintenance of this effectiveness will require retaining the staff talent that has been carefully built over the past several years, the range and quality of services to Montana agencies (state and

federal), organizations, businesses and citizens. This includes information products and services as well as expertise and the capacity to provide field services such as inventory and research.

4. Ensure strong institutional support from the managing agency or organization.

The mission and services of the Natural Heritage Program should be important to the mission of the housing institution and its functions viewed as integral to that institution's mission and its success. The housing institution must be strongly committed to maintaining effective funding levels for the program, even in times of fiscal constraint, and for advocating effectively on behalf of the program. This will require a personal commitment from executive managers as well as a clear perception of the program's value to the managing institution. (Note: There is currently no state agency or institution with a legislative mandate that encompasses for what NHP does, other than the State Library, which has the statutory authority for the program. MFWP has a wildlife management mandate that could incorporate NHP responsibilities for vertebrate animals and potentially habitat (though not currently for plants or invertebrates), however MWFP had not been actively focused on non-game wildlife or habitats until very recently.)

5. Build on the past success and current strengths of the Natural Heritage Program.

The Montana Natural Heritage Program has an excellent reputation and track record of success. Maintain the program's excellent reputation, track record of success and high level of trust in the reliability and objectivity of information and services; these are built on staff expertise and experience, as well as the program's relative autonomy, scientific credibility, political neutrality, service orientation, diversity of partnerships/users, and responsiveness to partner/user needs. Also important is the affiliation with NRIS, with its emphasis on broad access to information services, and its outstanding IT infrastructure that benefits the NHP and is in turn strengthened by the substantial contributions of the NHP.

