

First step of vegetation mapping project completed

By **Becky Tillson**, *Alliance Outreach/Community Planning Associate*

To protect the wildlife species that make Jackson Hole so unique, it's crucial to protect the habitat – and habitat connectivity – they depend on. The more information we have to help identify that habitat, the more successful our efforts for wildlife protection will be.

Vegetation mapping is a great way to see how much and what type of wildlife habitat exists here, and to monitor the changes in availability of the habitat over time.

Thanks to a generous grant from 1% for the Tetons, the Conservation Alliance and Craighead Beringia South were recently able to contract with Ecosystem Research Group (ERG), a Missoula, Mont., research institute, to carry out a vegetation mapping project covering Teton County, Wyo., and Teton County, Idaho. The product, a Geographic Information System (GIS) map that is consistent and uniform across both counties, shows broadly what types of vegetation cover we have.

Although many excellent datasets already exist for various areas of the two counties, their utility for this project was limited by inconsistencies in their various scales, and in the types and classes of vegetation measured. ERG used a national dataset called LandFire, which has been collected for all of the land across the United States, along with information about wetlands, slope and aspect, and soils. This project was a first step – a baseline – for collecting vegetation data about the two counties in their entirety.

Moving forward, the Alliance is pursuing additional grants and other funding to build upon this initial project. The long-range goal is for our community to have updatable maps that show:

- Where, how much and what kind of vegetation exists locally;
- What quality of habitat for which species this vegetation represents;
- Whether these habitats are connected (in other words, can wildlife get to them); and where the bottlenecks are.

Another eventual goal is to estimate historic ranges, use current vegetation data to determine how much habitat has been lost since then,

This map shows the percentage of canopy cover in Teton County, Wyo., and Teton County, Idaho. It's one of the many layers in a new GIS map that provides a baseline for future vegetation mapping efforts.



and set targets for what we don't want to risk losing in the future.

Decision makers could use all of this information to set priorities for conservation. For example, land with habitats that serve multiple species, or habitats that serve species most at risk, might be identified as places needing extra protection. The data might also help conservation buyers locate those parcels most critical for wildlife.

The GIS map, with all of its accordant layers, was given to the Natural Resources Technical Advisory Board to be considered in their ongoing vegetation mapping work (see below). We'll be posting the report and a sampling of the maps on our website later this summer. ■

Teton County, Town of Jackson partner to launch Natural Resources Technical Advisory Board

In Jackson Hole, with its unique array of natural resources and our daily interactions with them as a community, it's especially important for public policy decisions to be informed by the best available science.

That's why the Alliance has worked for years for the creation of an Environment Commission to fill that role. This was also a priority identified by the Sustaining Jackson Hole Environment Group in 2008, plus it was made a priority in the draft of the Comp Plan that the planning commissioners reviewed and sent to elected officials. The commissioners recommended that an advisory environmental board be formed prior to the completion of the Comp Plan review, and the idea was presented to the joint elected officials in November of 2009.

After much debate and some changes,

including a name change to "Natural Resources Technical Advisory Board," the town and county electeds passed a resolution enabling the board last June. Five members were appointed to the inaugural board: Tom Segerstrom, Steve Kilpatrick, Mike Brennan, Doug Wachob and Dave Adams. They began work on organizational structure and bylaws this past fall, and started working on their first assignment from the elected officials in March.

The NRTAB's purpose is to help inform public policy decision-making with the best available science, based on directives from the elected officials. The advisory board is not going to weigh in on individual development applications. Its first specific directive is to inventory existing vegetation information and identify the data gaps, and figure out how to fill those gaps

and how much it will cost. So far, this has taken the form of work on the Natural Resources Overlay and identification of priority vegetation and habitat types, all within the context of the Comp Plan rewrite and the subsequent character district mapping exercise. (See Page 8 for more about the Comp Plan.) The board has also been asked to identify how vegetation data is currently used in the town and county, how it could best be used in the future, and how new data can be incorporated into the conversation.

This group is comprised of extremely committed and experienced volunteer community members and has a very important mandate – to help inform our public policy decisions with science. We congratulate and thank the members of the board and the elected officials who appointed them! – *Becky Tillson*

In addition to the items discussed on previous pages, the Alliance keeps track of many other community planning matters affecting the valley. Here are some of them; please check our monthly Alliance Action e-newsletters, available via www.jhalliance.org/library.htm, for more.

Year-round trailers on private campgrounds proposed

Two different applications for conditional use permits to allow year-round recreational park trailers (RPTs) in existing private campgrounds have recently been filed. (Although they look and function like cabins, RPTs are built on a single chassis and can be towed by a light-duty truck.) One application proposes putting 71 of the 400-square-foot trailers at the approximately 9-acre Jackson Hole Campground on the Moose-Wilson Road. The other seeks approval for up to 140 RPTs at the 20-acre Buffalo Valley RV Resort near Moran.

Because of the potential impacts of allowing such changes from what has primarily been seasonal campground use, the Alliance is monitoring both proposals closely. Our comments on this issue are available via www.jhalliance.org/library.htm. Encouragingly, two citizens – Gail Jensen and Dave Coon – have appealed a county planning staff decision that is being used as the basis for the scope of these two proposals. The county commissioners’ May 17 decision to hear part of this appeal has delayed the first application, but not the one for the Buffalo Valley campground, which is set for June 7. We’ll keep you posted at www.jhalliance.org as this progresses. ■

Major Town of Jackson zoning changes on horizon

In May, the Jackson Town Council decided to move ahead with new rules that would essentially allow the subdivision of several hundred residential lots in three zoning districts near downtown – the auto-urban residential, business conservation, and auto-urban commercial within the lodging overlay zones. Currently, property owners within this large area are allowed to build one primary, single-family unit and two accessory residential units per lot. Current rules allow for only one owner of all the units on each lot; the new proposed “Cottage House” rules would allow property owners to sell one of the units to a separate owner.

Some seven years in the making, the new rules stemmed from efforts to attract investment to the area and encourage more owner-occupied homes in town. However, the Alliance is concerned that without deed restrictions, the zoning changes being proposed could inflate land values and housing prices, and displace workers who now rely on the units as affordable rentals. We also think zoning changes of this magnitude should take place as part of our community’s Comp Plan discussions, or wait until after the new plan is finalized.

Also in May, the Jackson Planning Commission discussed a controversial development tool that allows property owners with at least three contiguous lots to build higher-density projects. They voted to recommend to the Town Council that the Planned-Unit Development tool be kept intact, but with an extra layer of review added to help ensure that PUDs are compatible with existing neighborhoods.

On a brighter note, this past winter, the Jackson Town Council unanimously decided to extend a moratorium on large planned mixed-use developments for a year beyond the original April 2011 end date. For years, the Alliance and others have supported abolishing the PMD because it typically allows too much development potential in return for too little community benefit. Fortunately, although the councilors didn’t decide to eliminate the tool, they did agree that extending the moratorium on it should allow themselves enough time to finish reviewing the draft Comp Plan before tackling the PMD again. ■



Alliance project to help get safe wildlife crossings

The Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance has recently contracted for studies to determine which measures to reduce road kills would work best for three local highways slated for reconstruction.

Using data from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Jackson Hole Wildlife Foundation, Teton Science Schools and Bridger-Teton National Forest, researchers from Montana State University’s Western Transportation Institute will identify “high wildlife-vehicle collision zones” and make recommendations for safe wildlife crossings on Jackson South Hwy. 89, Hwy. 22 from Jackson to Wilson, and Hwy. 390 to Teton Village. The Wyoming Department of Transportation plans to widen all these roads in coming years, and we hope the results from this study (due out by this Fall) will help WYDOT incorporate solutions that uphold our community’s priorities, such as protecting our wildlife and rural character, while ensuring driver safety.

Grants from 1% for the Tetons, Teton County, the Community Foundation of Jackson Hole and the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, plus donations from supporters have all provided money toward the study, but we still need additional funds. If you can help, please contact Alliance Public Lands Director Louise Lasley at Louise@jhalliance.org or (307) 733-9417. The community group Safe Wildlife Crossings for Jackson Hole, founded by recent Alliance “Hats Off Award” winner Vance Carruth, has also been instrumental in pulling people together for this long-range critical effort to protect both drivers and wildlife. If you’d like to get involved, please check out their website at <http://wildlifecrossingsjh.org>.

Meanwhile, since Jackson Hole doesn’t have safe wildlife crossings yet, drivers need to remain alert. For your safety and theirs, please slow down and keep a sharp eye out for wildlife, especially if you’re traveling two of the worst stretches: Broadway along Karns Meadow and Saddle Butte, and Jackson South Hwy. 89 from High School Road to Game Creek.

Lastly, speaking of South Hwy. 89, WYDOT’s record of decision regarding the widening of a seven-mile segment of the road was expected in April, but it’s been delayed. However, WYDOT district engineer John Eddins recently confirmed that the record – which is the final step in approving the project – will just restate the transportation department’s intention to expand six miles of the segment from two to five lanes, despite community opposition. We’ll keep you posted as this plays out; a flier that details the Alliance’s concerns regarding the proposed reconstruction is available at www.jhalliance.org/Library/Alerts/2010/JaxSouthHwyFEISAlert.9-10.pdf. ■