

# **DEC's Off-Reserve Conservation Programs**

**Report 10 of 2011**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) has statutory responsibilities for ensuring the survival of Western Australia's plant and animal taxa and of the ecological communities they form.

Conservation of wildlife and ecological communities is primarily achieved through the effective management of DEC-managed land. However, there are also privately-owned lands which have significant conservation value and enthusiastic landowners who want to manage and retain this value. The department has developed a series of off-reserve conservation programs (ORCP) with the purpose of providing incentives to landowners to conserve natural areas of their properties through the provision of technical advice, legal instruments and monetary grants.

These programs are primarily managed by staff within the Nature Conservation Division.

**Overall audit opinion: DEC's off-reserve conservation programs play an important role in encouraging landowners to conserve biodiversity on their properties. In order to improve program accountability and provide a platform for performance evaluation, the following needs to be established for each program:**

- Strategic plans outlining the future direction for each program
- Annual work plans outlining the key deliverables for the year
- Comprehensive standard operating procedures
- Key performance indicators that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound
- Annual reports articulating the key achievements of each program.

## FINDINGS

1. There is no formal policy underpinning DEC's off-reserve conservation programs. ✓
2. Direction in relation to off-reserve conservation programs is provided in the Nature Conservation Service Strategic Plan 2010-2014 and in strategic planning documentation compiled for some programs. ✓
3. Not all off-reserve conservation programs have annual work plans. ✓
4. A number of off-reserve conservation programs lack comprehensive standard operating procedures. ✓
5. DEC provides insufficient stewardship with respect to its off-reserve conservation programs. ✓
6. DEC's off-reserve conservation programs lack SMART key performance indicators. ✓
7. Annual reports are not compiled for all of DEC's off-reserve conservation programs. ✓

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Manager Species and Communities Branch considers developing a formal policy in relation to off-reserve conservation programs.
2. The Manager Species and Communities Branch ensures that each off-reserve conservation program is underpinned by strategic planning documentation which clearly articulates their future direction.
3. The Manager Species and Communities Branch ensures that the coordinators of each off-reserve conservation program compile annual work plans.
4. The Manager Species and Communities Branch ensures that the coordinators of each off-reserve conservation program develop comprehensive standard operating procedures.
5. The Manager Species and Communities Branch ensures that the coordinators of the Land for Wildlife, Nature Conservation Covenant and Healthy Wetland Habitats programs develop stringent stewardship rosters so that all landowners are routinely contacted personally within a set period of time.
6. The Manager Species and Communities Branch develops SMART Key Performance Indicators for each off-reserve conservation program.
7. The Manager Species and Communities Branch ensures that the coordinators of each off-reserve conservation program produce annual reports for their respective programs.

## INTRODUCTION

As stipulated in the Department of Environment and Conservation's Corporate Plan, one of DEC's key responsibilities includes *broad roles in conserving biodiversity and protecting, managing, regulating and assessing many aspects of the use of the State's natural resources*. This is primarily done through effectively managing the 27,465,525 hectares of land under DEC's care. This relates to roughly 10.22 percent of Western Australia's total land area.

Much of the remaining land mass is used for a variety of purposes (residential, agricultural, industrial etc). However there are still significant (albeit fragmented) areas of remnant natural areas that are being preserved outside of DEC's jurisdiction by private landowners. This land can complement DEC's nature conservation strategies by providing refuge for wildlife. Also, the removal/degradation of these areas has the potential to damage DEC-managed lands by altering the water table causing landscape-wide salinity and permanently changing the structure of ecosystems and the species found within. For this reason DEC has developed a range of off-DEC reserve conservation programs (ORCP) to encourage landowners to conserve the non-degraded areas of their properties and the wildlife found within.

Management Audit will be reviewing four of these programs. These programs represent the most prominent off-reserve conservation programs run by DEC and are as follows:

### Land for Wildlife (LFW)

Land for Wildlife is a voluntary, non-binding program that aims to encourage and assist private landowners in Western Australia to provide habitats for wildlife on their property. This is done through private landowners contacting the program and liaising with locally-based staff to determine the environmental value of the site and then if suitable, registering the site with the program. Staff then provide advice on managing the property initially with a written report after a site visit, then when required. This project is funded primarily through the *National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality* with a smaller (30.4% in 2010/11) contribution from DEC.

### Nature Conservation Covenant Program (NCCP)

This is a voluntary program that aims to protect private land of significant environmental value by encouraging landowners to enter into a binding covenant that is placed on the title of that property. The covenant largely consists of prohibiting activities that may degrade the ecological health of the remnant area. In 2010/11 this program was primarily funded through the Australian Government's *Caring for our Country* program with an additional contribution from DEC. This program does not receive an official budgetary allocation.

### Roadside Conservation Committee (RCC)

The Roadside Conservation Committee was formed to coordinate and promote the conservation and effective management of rail and roadside vegetation for the benefit of the environment and people of Western Australia. This is primarily done through mapping roads to gain environmental data and training staff that work on/near rail and roadsides (Main Roads, local government etc) to conserve vegetation on these sites. The committee comprises of personnel from a range of backgrounds and business areas. However, the Committee's operational duties are

performed by DEC. The resource base of the RCC is currently sourced predominantly from DEC, with Main Roads WA contributing 50% of the salary expenses of the Committee's Executive Officer.

#### Healthy Wetland Habitats (HWH)

Healthy Wetland Habitats is a voluntary program that provides technical and financial assistance (up to \$10,000) to private land managers of wetlands that are of high conservation value on the Swan Coastal Plain. This is achieved through an assessment of the ecological value of the area before entering into a Voluntary Management Agreement (VMA) with the landowner. Funds can be allocated which will aid the landowner in achieving the goals listed (area fenced, weeds controlled etc) in the VMA. This program is managed by DEC's Wetlands Section and is currently funded through the Main Roads WA offset package.

#### **Non-DEC off-reserve conservation programs**

The World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) has run projects such as the Healthy Woodlands and Wetland Watch. These projects, (which have now both ceased) have had very similar objectives to the DEC-run LFW and HWH programs.

The National Trust of Australia (WA) works to conserve and interpret heritage values for the long-term social, economic and environmental benefit of the community through the provision of nature conservation covenants and land management support. This program is very similar to DEC's NCCP. However, it does not have the same level of resources as DEC in terms of both direct staffing and access to expert advice in wildlife conservation.

#### **Review objective**

The aim of the review was to assess the effectiveness of a selection of DEC's off-reserve conservation programs.

#### **Review approach**

The review's findings are based on the outcomes of:

- Interviews with key personnel within the Nature Conservation Division; and
- Document examination (i.e. assessing DEC policies, plans etc).

## PURPOSE AND DIRECTION

**Finding 1: There is no formal policy underpinning DEC's off-reserve conservation programs,**

There is no formal policy governing DEC's off-reserve conservation programs. A policy underpinning DEC's commitment to encouraging private landowners to conserve biodiversity on their properties would be beneficial.

***Recommendation 1: The Manager Species and Communities Branch considers developing a formal policy in relation to off-reserve conservation programs.***

**Finding 2: Direction in relation to off-reserve conservation programs is provided in the Nature Conservation Service Strategic Plan 2010-2014 and in strategic planning documentation compiled for some programs.**

The Nature Conservation Service Strategic Plan 2010-2014 refers to Land for Wildlife and the Nature Conservation Covenant Program (NCCP) under the 'Contributing Strategic Direction 3: Engage and encourage people in biodiversity conservation and enjoyment of biodiversity' as follows:

*CS3.1.1 Continue to support and expand biodiversity management advisory programs such as Land for Wildlife and Urban Nature.*

*CS3.1.2 Continue to support the development and application of new incentives and market-based instruments, such as direct financial incentives, tender based schemes, nature conservation covenants, rate rebates and tax relief, to actively engage land holders and facilitate adoption of biodiversity conservation on private and leasehold lands.*

The NCCP has a draft *Business Plan 2010-2015* that outlines the Program's objectives and includes a SWOT analysis. The Roadside Conservation Committee has compiled *The Road Ahead – A strategic direction for the Roadside Conservation Committee 2010-2015* that clearly outlines the objectives of the Committee and its key strategies in relation to capability, promotion, information and tools, and conservation programs. The Healthy Wetland Habitats program has likewise compiled a Healthy Wetland Habitats Implementation Guide dated April 2011 which outlines program objectives and outputs over the next 12 months. While the key objectives of the Land for Wildlife program have been articulated in various brochures and pamphlets, it does not have a strategic plan.

***Recommendation 2: The Manager Species and Communities Branch ensures that each off-reserve conservation program is underpinned by strategic planning documentation which clearly articulates their future direction.***

## PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

### **Finding 3: Not all off-reserve conservation programs have annual work plans.**

It is better practice for every business unit to develop an annual work plan. The work plan should identify:

- the outputs/tangible deliverables for the year
- the key milestones for each output
- who is responsible for achieving each milestone and delivering each output
- target timelines for each milestone and output
- quality assurance processes to ensure that outputs are of a satisfactory standard.

The Healthy Wetland Habitats Implementation Guide outlines the outputs for the year but does not identify who is responsible for delivering these outputs. The NCCP uses project management software to coordinate their work for the year but has not compiled an annual work plan per se. While there is a plan of sorts in the RCC Strategic Direction document, there is little adherence to the plan. Planning for LFW staff members is done at each employee's Employee Performance and Development Plan meeting with the LFW Coordinator. In this meeting targets for each output (site assessments, media etc) are set.

***Recommendation 3: The Manager Species and Communities Branch ensures that the managers of each off-reserve conservation program compile annual work plans.***

### **Finding 4: A number of off-reserve conservation programs lack comprehensive standard operating procedures.**

The development and use of standard operating procedures (SOPs) are an integral part of a successful system as it provides individuals with the information to perform a job properly and facilitates consistency in the quality and integrity of the end-result. The development of SOPs is particularly important in smaller business units. Should long term staff leave their current positions in the absence of SOPs it will be very difficult for staff coming into the position to fulfil their role without there being a steep learning curve as there will be few staff members who will know what the daily requirements of that role are. Some staff have expressed concern regarding this very situation as they have been expected to perform their new role with their only guidance being uninformative handover notes.

The NCCP has developed a comprehensive manual for the development of conservation covenants. The Land for Wildlife program has a detailed Property Assessment Template which provides guidance on how properties are to be assessed. The LFW Assessor's Kit also provides a comprehensive guide to undertake duties under this program. The Roadside Conservation Committee has SOPs for roadside surveys and mapping but not for the role of the Executive Officer. The Healthy Wetland Habitats program lacks detailed SOPs.

***Recommendation 4: The Manager Species and Communities Branch ensures that the managers of each off-reserve conservation program develop comprehensive standard operating procedures.***



## MONITORING AND REVIEW

### **Finding 5: DEC provides insufficient stewardship with respect to its off-reserve conservation programs.**

Once landowners enter into off-reserve conservation programs, it is expected that there will be periodical stewardship to ensure that resources allocated to these properties are being used correctly and ongoing advice/reassurance can be delivered to landowners on a regular basis.

Goals are set with each LFW staff member regarding targets for providing on-site stewardship. However they are generally not meeting these goals in terms of initial meetings and ongoing stewardship due to the isolation of some of these properties and that regional LFW staff are employed on a part-time basis. This is somewhat offset by the production of the quarterly newsletter *Western Wildlife*. This production allows landowners to see how other LFW members are conserving their property and encourages them to contact their representative when required. It should be stated that while this newsletter is of great value, it cannot replace the benefit of personal stewardship.

The NCCP program has a similar issue with routine stewardship but does not produce a regular publication.

The RCC does not offer formal stewardship as the program does not involve individual property owners but rather liaises regularly with local government authorities and government agencies such as Main Roads WA. The RCC re-maps shires and re-trains WALGA staff when required.

At present stewardship is not included in the HWH program but rather participants in the program are required to report annually on the improvements made to their wetland as stipulated in their Voluntary Management Agreement (VMA). Landowners are then encouraged to enter into a program such as LFW where there is regular personal contact with program staff. At present no one landowner is completely compliant with their VMA. This may improve if there was more direct communication with the landowners.

It is recommended that the LFW, NCCP and HWH programs develop a stewardship roster whereby a set section of their works program is dedicated to stewardship, a predetermined number of landowners are visited per year and each landowner is visited within a set period of time. This will hopefully ensure landowners are more compliant with the requirements of their contracts and are more likely to continue with the program knowing that DEC are committed to ongoing, personal communication with the landowner.

***Recommendation 5: The Manager Species and Communities Branch ensures that the managers of the Land for Wildlife, Nature Conservation Covenant and Healthy Wetland Habitats programs develop stringent stewardship rosters so that all landowners are routinely contacted personally within a set period of time.***

**Finding 6: DEC's off-reserve conservation programs lack SMART key performance indicators.**

KPIs are established to provide information (either qualitative or quantitative) on the effectiveness of programs in achieving objectives in support of agreed outcomes.

The Nature Conservation Service Strategic Plan 2010-14 has identified the following key performance indicator for off-reserve conservation programs such as Land for Wildlife:

*Trends in level of people registered as volunteers with DEC and under Land for Wildlife, Nearer to Nature, Urban Nature DEC's Bush Rangers, as well as other identified programs.*

In the interests of accountability, KPIs should be developed for each off-reserve conservation program. These KPIs should be:

- Specific - focussing on those results that can be attributed to the particular intervention/program;
- Measurable – introducing units or targets that can be readily compared over time.
- Achievable – realistic when compared with baseline performance and the resources to be made available
- Relevant – the KPIs are reflective of the desired outcomes of the business area
- Time bound – the time taken to achieve the KPIs are finite with regular milestones.

Output measures for Land for Wildlife could include the number of registrations and the total number of hectares protected.

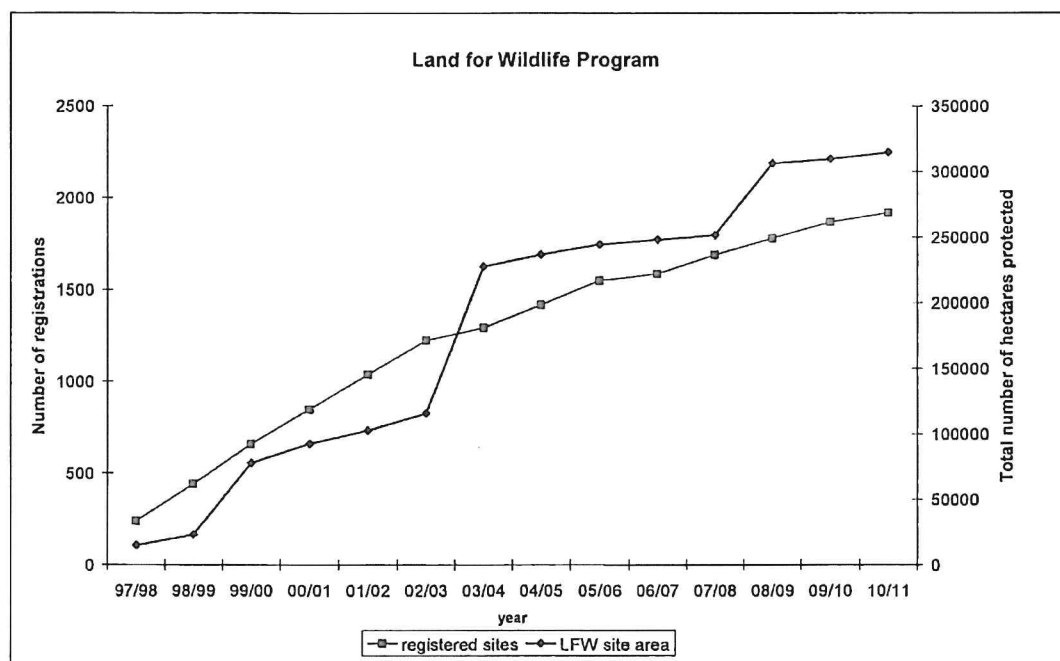


Figure 1: Land for Wildlife outputs over time

Output measures for the Nature Conservation Covenant Program could include the number of covenants and the total area of land under covenants.

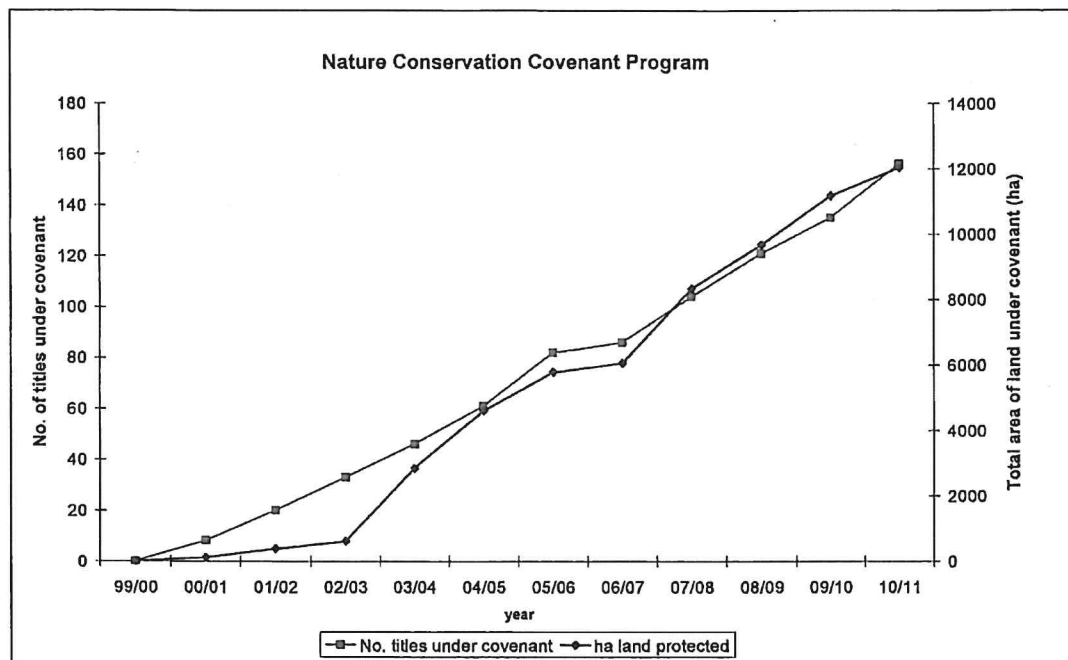


Figure 2: Nature Conservation Covenant outputs over time

Output measures for the Roadside Conservation Committee could include the number of people trained and the length of roads surveyed each year. Cumulative figures were not used as individuals may receive more than one lot of training and roads surveyed previously may be resurveyed in future years.

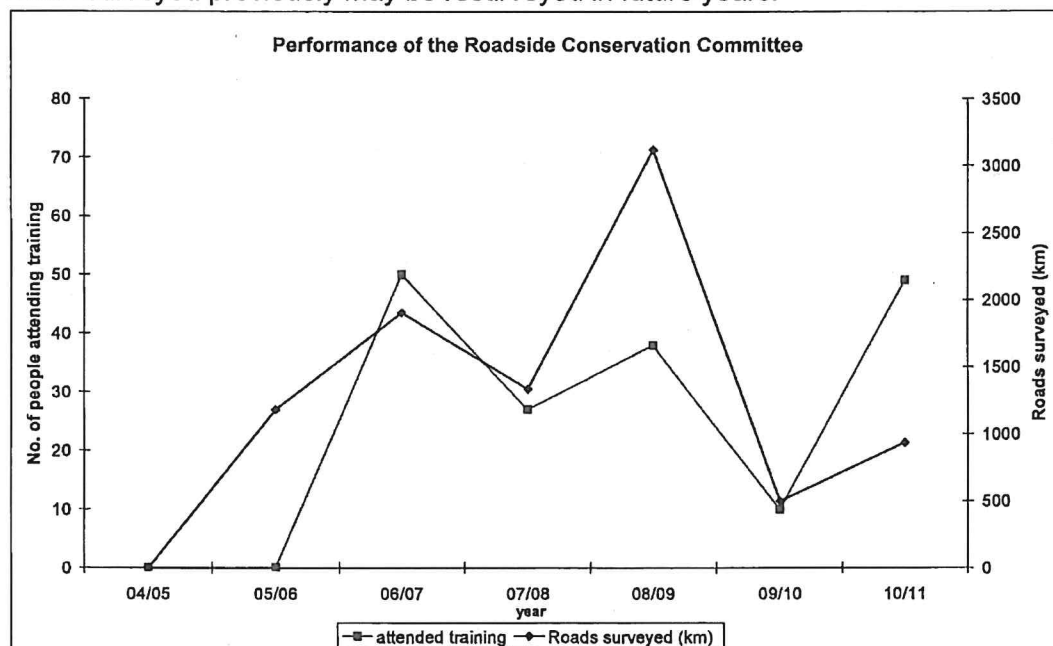


Figure 3: Roadside Conservation Commission outputs

Output measures for the Healthy Wetland Habitats could include the number of voluntary management agreements entered into and the total area of land protected under VMAs.

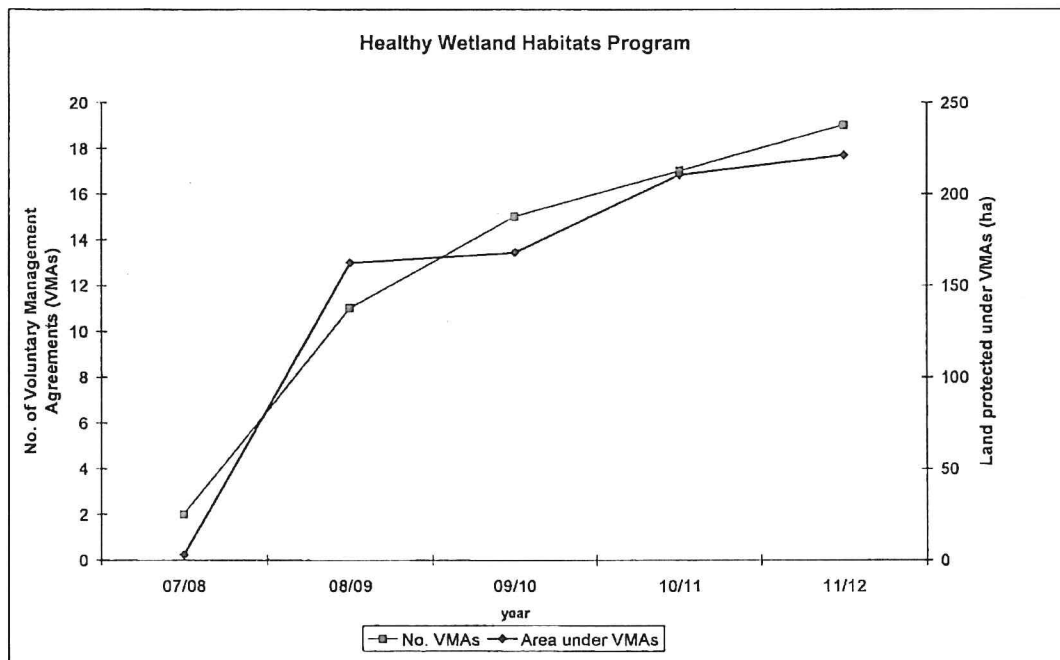


Figure 4: Health Wetland Habitats outputs over time

**Recommendation 6:** *The Manager Species and Communities Branch develops SMART Key Performance Indicators for each off-reserve conservation program.*

**Finding 7:** Annual reports are not compiled for all of DEC's off-reserve conservation programs.

Annual reports are essential in highlighting major achievements to date and progress against targets identified in annual plans.

Land for Wildlife is by the far the best of the off-reserve conservation programs in terms of reporting. *With Wildlife in Mind* summarises the achievements of the program over a ten year period and includes the results of a survey of LFW participants. The LFW program also produces annual reports and quarterly *Western Wildlife* newsletters.

While the Roadside Conservation Committee produces an annual report, neither the National Conservation Covenant nor the Health Wetland Habitats programs do likewise though the latter does verbally report to the Wetland Coordinating Committee on an annual basis.

Management Audit recommends that each business area produce an annual report which is to be endorsed by the Manager, Species and Communities Branch.

**Recommendation 7:** *The Manager Species and Communities Branch ensures that the managers of each off-reserve conservation program produce annual reports for their respective programs.*

## CONCLUSION

It is important to note two things when discussing DEC's off-reserve conservation programs:

1. People are conserving their land for biodiversity (one of DEC's primary objectives) which helps DEC achieve its objectives; and
2. Much of the funding being allocated to these programs is external to the department.

From a cost-benefit point of view, it is Management Audit's opinion that each of these programs is invaluable in aiding landowners and land managers conserve biodiversity on their properties.

In order to improve program accountability, however, the following needs to be established for each program:

- Strategic plans outlining the future direction for each program
- Annual work plans outlining the key deliverables for the year
- Comprehensive standard operating procedures
- Key performance indicators that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound
- Annual reports articulating the key achievements of each program.

The major hurdle in developing the above planning and reporting tools is the notion that because the funding for each of these projects is finite, developing long term success measures is futile. Nothing could be further from the truth. Developing a sound planning and reporting process should be helpful in attracting future funding as it highlights not only achievements to date but also how the program plans to achieve success in the future.