

## **THE WESTERN NATIVE TROUT INITIATIVE PLAN FOR STRATEGIC ACTIONS November 2016**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In January 2008, after an intensive scoping and development process, the Western Native Trout Initiative (WNTI) achieved WAFWA Directors' approval of its Plan for Strategic Actions and in February 2008 was approved as a National Fish Habitat Partnership. In 2010, the Plan for Strategic Actions was modified to address the inclusion of core conservation populations of six additional native salmonids within their historic ranges (Arctic Char, Arctic Grayling, Dolly Varden, freshwater Rainbow trout sub-species, freshwater Kokanee and Lake Trout). The WNTI Steering Committee reviewed the Plan for Strategic Actions at its July 2015 meeting, and subsequently updated the plan to document progress made since 2008 and to set goals for the next 5-10 years.

*Note: "Support" in the context of this strategic plan means to support an activity philosophically, administratively, and by seeking funding.*

### **GOALS, OBJECTIVES, and KEY STRATEGIC ACTIONS**

One key feature of WNTI's approach is the reliance on existing and ongoing native trout efforts across the West and national partnership through the National Fish Habitat Action Plan. WNTI's strategic goals, objectives and actions demonstrate the strength of the approach – increased coordination, action, and accountability. These strategies represent what will be done to conserve, protect and enhance western native trout.

#### **Goal 1 – Protect, restore and enhance western native trout populations and measure success in improving the status of western native trout**

##### **Objectives:**

##### **A. Continue to identify and characterize conservation populations through 2020 and monitor populations already assessed. Revisit on a five year basis.**

1. Develop common characterization of populations and habitats by completing comprehensive, standardized species assessments utilizing GIS-based protocols, such as the Inland Cutthroat Trout Protocol (ICP) (May, et al. 2005) or other similar methodologies. Update these no less than every five years. Encourage sub-species conservation teams that have not adopted IMP to adopt it or to use other developed protocols that can be adapted to a common database.
2. Annually gather information, establish baselines, and complete overall monitoring of species status.

3. Utilize the species conservation teams as needed to periodically update WNTI priorities, to serve as a forum to focus on particular species problems or needs, and/or recommend actions to the WNTI Steering Committee for consideration and funding.

**B. Support assessment and monitoring data to protect, restore or enhance important native trout populations through focused actions. Tie this work to ongoing federal status review processes where possible.**

1. Use standard population manipulations to protect, restore or enhance native trout. Maintain and expand genetically pure populations, as well as pure populations with distinct migratory life-history requirements.
2. Protect the best core conservation areas and maintain genetic integrity of populations from degradation.
3. Utilize the species conservation teams to recommend and assist in prioritization of projects for WNTI directed funding.
4. Annually conduct research on habitats, population distribution, genetics, and species ecology to increase knowledge of native trout life stage requirements and to evaluate the success of conservation actions.
5. Work with neighboring NFHP partnerships to coordinate data collection resources and share fish population information to help identify key watersheds that may be beneficial to multiple partnerships.

**C. Integrate the use of non-native salmonids with conservation needs of western native trout species in a manner that recognizes the biological, cultural and economic importance of each.**

1. Support, encourage and facilitate definition and maintenance of core conservation areas for native trout to avoid conflicts between native trout conservation and non-native trout species management and implementation of non-native salmonid removal from habitats within core conservation areas.
2. Facilitate and promote the establishment and use of native trout populations for recreational purposes in conjunction with or as a replacement for non-native salmonid fisheries.

**D. Support development of a western native trout database with common data fields and data descriptions.**

1. In cooperation with the National Fish Habitat Action Plan, use scientifically rigorous and standardized methodology to monitor and report changes in the status of native trout populations.
2. Share data on western native trout populations (and habitats) within guidelines established by a science and data sub-committee.
3. Work with the NFHP Science and Data team to incorporate the national data needs into WNTI's data collection and analysis efforts to meet WNTI's responsibilities as a national partnership.
4. Work with overlapping NFHP partnerships to develop communications between data teams to ensure that data collections meet NFHP expectations.
5. Work with NFHP and WAFWA to seek additional long-term funding for native trout data collection and population management.

Objectives A to D address the underlying concerns for maintaining the integrity – both physical and genetic – of native trout populations at a watershed level. Continual identification and characterization of watersheds and populations of western native trout are major objectives of the Western Native Trout Initiative. Monitoring of populations is required to effectively measure the impact and success of conservation actions. Developing a common language for describing the status of species will prioritize communication needs and describe progress at all levels of the initiative.

**Benefits:**

The effective characterization of native trout populations will serve as the basis for the various conservation and recovery teams to focus attention on specific actions that will contribute to improving the status of the species. Identification of key watersheds in each species range will provide opportunities for local partners to become involved in species conservation. Sharing data and updating range-wide databases with data from a well-designed field monitoring program will allow for monitoring of native trout status over time. Maintenance and expansion of the recreational angling opportunities for native trout will maintain and increase public support for the actions of WNTI.

**Goal 2 – Ensure protection and enhancement of intact watersheds, and enhancement or restoration of habitats that have been impacted by human activities or catastrophic natural events.**

**Objectives:**

**A. Support the use of habitat assessment data to identify, protect, restore or enhance existing native trout strongholds.**

1. Continue to characterize key western native trout habitats and watersheds for species not already characterized using GIS-based protocols (i.e. ICP) or similar techniques.
2. Support habitat actions at the local and species-levels that protect, restore or enhance core conservation populations and the life history and migratory needs of the species.
3. Support conservation strategies of species teams to enhance degraded watersheds for western native trout while protecting and maintaining current core conservation populations and high-value watersheds.
4. Secure and enhance watershed conditions through standard habitat manipulations (e.g., barrier placement or removal, in-stream structure, flow enhancement, habitat connectivity).
5. Implement, evaluate, and monitor best management practices that include but are not limited to: modifying grazing practices, fencing riparian areas, closing and obliterating roads in the riparian areas, and ameliorating road, timber and mining disturbances.
6. Restore and enhance water flow, water quality, natural sediment regimes, and physical integrity of channels where feasible by replacement of culverts to allow fish passage (where passage is desirable). Screen water diversions to prevent entrainment, modify diversions to allow fish passage, and restore and improve altered channel and riparian habitat and flow conditions.

**B. Encourage new research on native trout related to climate change, energy development, invasive species, and human encroachment or development in native trout habitats.**

1. Support new research on impacts of new and developing habitat concerns such as climate change, habitat loss from energy development and population growth and increased catastrophic habitat losses from fires, etc.

**C. Support local and regional recommendations for western native trout habitat restoration and enhancement actions and seek additional funding from WNTI partners.**

1. Maintain WNTI's status as a recognized partner under the National Fish Habitat Action Plan.
2. Coordinate with neighboring fish habitat partnerships to identify key watersheds where multiple species could benefit from mutual habitat conservation (protect, restore or enhance) actions.
3. Involve the WNTI species conservation teams through their respective US Fish and Wildlife Service regions to recommend and prioritize watersheds for project funding that will provide the best opportunities for native trout conservation and enhancement.
4. Modify habitat priorities based on best available science, the results of the 2015 National Fish Habitat Assessment, and in coordination with neighboring national fish habitat partnerships.

Objectives A to C are intended to address the underlying challenges of native trout habitat at a watershed level. A combination of protecting current habitat strongholds and rehabilitating potential or degraded habitats through a variety of means is necessary. Successful accomplishment will require agencies, organizations, industry, and private individuals working together to implement actions on a local level, guided by the overall approach of the WNTI Strategic Plan. Healthy watersheds are the keystone for WNTI success.

**Benefits:**

Healthy watersheds constitute the foundation for improving and protecting native trout populations. Prioritized habitat actions will address habitat needs for life stages and life forms of native trout. Specific improvement projects at a local level energize partners to participate in the shared objectives of WNTI.

**Goal 3 – Develop collaborative approaches and partnerships among agencies and stakeholders that emphasize cooperation and shared effort, and increase funding to implement high-priority projects for the protection, restoration or enhancement of western native trout.**

**Objectives:**

**A. Continue to support and assist in the completion of conservation agreements or recovery plans for key western native trout based on collaborative development and publication of realistic conservation strategies with priorities at the local and regional level.**

1. Stimulate and inspire – through funding and meeting frameworks – the initiation of planning efforts for those native trout species that do not currently have a multi-state, multi-agency conservation plan or strategy.
2. Encourage periodic updates of the conservation agreements and strategies among states, agencies and partners that revise and refine the priorities for action to protect, restore, or enhance native trout populations.
3. Support actions and projects consistent with action plans and conservation recovery plans for each species to prevent federal listings.

**B. Foster and support a diverse array of western native trout conservation actions based on public, private, and conservation organization partnerships. These efforts should be formed around distinct watersheds, species, or geographic areas, based on conservation agreements and strategies.**

1. Maintain a steering committee in accordance with WNTI Bylaws . Use the WNTI operational structure to seek and promote public/private partnerships for on-the-ground actions.
2. Develop a prospectus to inspire new partners to contribute financially to western native trout actions.

**C. Promote and foster new partnerships at all levels to increase funding and public support for identified needs.**

1. Identify and communicate the need for funds with potential public/private conservation partners to encourage involvement in the Western Native Trout Initiative. This will broaden the scope of support for improving the status of the native trout species.
2. Develop a WNTI Partners Council or Friends Group and invite entities to propose projects, provide financial assistance, and share ideas for improving the status of western native trout.

3. Work with current funding partners – states, federal agencies, the National Fish Habitat Action Plan, Trout Unlimited, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and others – to focus on implementing on-the-ground improvement actions.
4. Utilize venues such as the Wild Trout Symposium, local AFS Chapter meetings, and the Western Division American Fisheries Society annual meeting as forums to re-energize local support for native trout conservation and provide ideas for future direction through discussion of large-scale issues that impact western native trout (i.e. continued human population growth, impacts from a warming climate and increased emphasis on extractive energy development, mining and increased water use).

**D. Develop a long-term funding approach and Plan to secure funding from NFHP and alternative sources to fund both habitat and non-habitat WNTI Projects.**

1. Continue to work with outside funding organizations such as Trout Unlimited, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, etc. to promote availability of non-NFHP funds for western native trout conservation projects that include fish population data collection, renovation and management actions.
2. Continue to meet NFHP responsibilities to ensure WNTI receives NFHP funds for conservation projects.

Objectives A to D are designed to foster and support a diverse array of western native trout conservation actions based on public, private, tribal, and private partnerships. These efforts can be formed around distinct watersheds, species, or geographic areas. Collaborative development and dissemination of realistic conservation strategies at the local and regional level has been cited as a critical component to jump-start the conservation of a particular species. Improving the status of western native trout and providing additional recreational opportunities will require the involvement of partners at all levels. Support for future funding and on-the-ground projects absolutely requires partnerships.

**Benefits:**

One of the key features of WNTI's strategy is the reliance on the existing strengths of ongoing efforts for native trout in the West. Cooperative development, publication and update of conservation strategies with priorities at the local and regional level are critical components to unite the efforts for improving the status native trout. Increasing local efforts and providing additional recreational opportunities will require the involvement of partners at all levels. Support for future funding and on-the-ground projects absolutely requires partnerships and joint ventures that build upon existing local and regional efforts. In order to effectively utilize scientific data, and make good management decisions, there must be effective sharing of information between and among agencies and their partners.

**Goal 4 – Develop and implement effective communication, education and outreach programs as a tool to increase public awareness and encourage partnerships that benefit western native trout.**

**Objectives:**

**A. Complete the communications and outreach plan for WNTI by December 2016.**

1. Work with WNTI NGO partners and the National Fish Habitat Action Plan communications director to increase effectiveness of communications to a variety of media and other potential partners.

**B. Annually develop communication products for WNTI partners, anglers and others.**

1. Engage partners, the fish conservation community, and other western native trout interests to initiate communication, to understand their communication and outreach needs, and to determine the most effective means of information dissemination.
2. Identify elements of success in other campaigns that have promoted recreational use of western nonnative trout and incorporate successful elements into WNTI communications and outreach..
3. One product per year will be developed and made available to WNTI partners to promote public education and support for western native trout conservation.

**C. Use the WNTI website as a comprehensive source of information on western native trout species.**

1. Maintain the WNTI website as a comprehensive source of information on all 21 western native trout species and include information on their status, biology, distribution, conservation needs and impediments, and conservation actions. Include links to official recovery plans, conservation strategies and conservation agreements and action plans. Develop the website as a repository for WNTI-related planning, news releases, informational brochures and other related items.
2. Pursue establishment of a western wide native trout “Challenge” program by 2020.
3. Develop enhanced communication to anglers about angling opportunities in existing programs such as the Wyoming Cutt-Slam, California Heritage Trout Challenge, Nevada Native Fish Slam, Utah Cutthroat Slam, and Arizona’s Trout Challenge and the benefits of conservation and management of western native trout to recreational angling opportunities.
4. Maintain links on the WNTI website to all western states and partners that promote and educate WNTI visitors about special angling programs for western native trout.
5. Serve as a clearinghouse and source of information about how to obtain funding for native trout projects.
6. Develop and promote western native trout educational opportunities through web links to the various state, Tribal and NGO organizations that have native trout conservation and programs with educational materials about western native trout for use in schools and community-based events.

Objectives A to C and related actions will guide more consistent communications and coordination among WNTI, the fish conservation community, and groups that can play roles in education and outreach such as school teachers, universities and recreation and tourism interests. There is a need to develop, implement, and manage comprehensive communication and outreach efforts to engage, inform, and inspire the public and agency program managers about conservation and management of western native trout. A more engaged citizenry can lead to development of strong partnerships between states and federal agencies, conservation organizations, and citizens.

**Benefits:**

It is essential to keep local governments, tribes, landowners and public land managers informed about native trout conservation and techniques that can be used to achieve conservation goals. This will ensure more routine and consistent communication and coordination between WNTI and the fish conservation community. It also will generate public and private funding and support for WNTI and fish habitat conservation, and support for continued recreational opportunities for western state anglers.

## WNTI Accomplishment Reporting

### Objectives:

- A. Update the WNTI strategic plan every ten years and the 2007 Species Status review *Western Native Trout Status, Concerns and Opportunities A Special Report of the Western Native Trout Initiative* and individual species Status Reports every five years to provide new recommendations for conservation actions.**
- B. Complete performance evaluations as required by NFHP to assess the impact of WNTI accomplishments and to maintain the Initiative's NFHP status.**
- C. Develop and maintain a catalog of local, state, and range-wide success stories that can be shared among groups and disseminated to the public.**
- D. Update the species project lists on the WNTI website and post completion reports as they become available each year.**
- E. Develop progress and accomplishment reporting guidelines and annual reports for WAFWA, WNTI Partners, the NFHP Board, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, WNTI partners, the media, and other interested parties.**

Objectives A to E will keep WNTI and WNTI-related planning and assessment up to date and help provide useful information to those seeking to improve WNTI's funding base. Revisions and regular updates of the strategic plan and species assessment report will describe changes in the overall status of western native trout.

### Summary of common obstacles, concerns, and threats to viability of western native trout that are addressed in the WNTI strategic plan

Not unexpectedly, the obstacles and threats to improving the status and protecting populations of western native trout are fairly similar across the wide geographic range considered. Opportunities and potential actions for achieving the WNTI objectives are likewise relatively similar across geographic areas, but vary in design and emphasis to reflect the specific needs of each taxon (see Table 1 on next page). Maintaining and increasing the geographical distribution of healthy populations of all western native trout is basic to improving their status. Concerns common to all species assessments include habitat loss and degradation and impacts of non-native salmonids. Other concerns include sustaining current genetic diversity, maintaining and using protective land use regulations, buffering against climate change, improving conservation planning and cooperation among agencies, and providing additional information to the public. Other obstacles and concerns frequently identified, but not common to all species, include impacts of invasive and aquatic nuisance species, data shortfalls, and energy development. Species-specific concerns, obstacles and opportunities for future projects are detailed in individual native trout assessments. These status reports are available on the Western Native Trout Initiative website, [westernnativetrout.org](http://westernnativetrout.org).

**Table 1. Relative level of concern of obstacles preventing improvement in status**

Concerns: 3 = high 2 = medium 1 = low	Health of populations (genetically, physically)	Degraded or isolated habitats	Available comprehensive range- wide conservation plans	Data shortfalls	Lack of public awareness of species needs	Aquatic nuisance species or disease	Non-native species impacts	Climate Change
Alaskan Kokanee	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	2
Alaskan Lake trout	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	1
Alaskan Rainbow trout	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	2
Apache Trout	2	3	1	1	1	1	2	3
Arctic Char	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2
Arctic Grayling	1	1	1	3	2	1	1	1
Bonneville Cutthroat Trout	1	3	1	1	2	2	3	2
Bull Trout	2	3	2	2	2	1	2	3
California Golden Trout	3	2	1	1	2	1	3	3
Coastal Cutthroat Trout	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	1
Colorado River Cutthroat Trout	2	2	1	1	1	2	3	2
Dolly Varden	1	1	3	2	2	1	1	1
Gila Trout	2	3	1	1	2	1	2	3
Greenback Cutthroat Trout	3	2	3	1	2	1	3	2
Lahontan Cutthroat Trout	2	3	2	2	2	1	3	3
Little Kern Golden Trout	3	2	3	1	2	1	2	3
Paiute Cutthroat Trout	2	3	1	1	2	1	3	3
Redband Trout	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	3
Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout	2	2	1	1	1	2	2	2
Westslope Cutthroat Trout	2	2	2	2	2	1	3	3
Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout	2	2	1	2	2	2	3	1