



April 16, 2008

Chris McKinnon  
Western Governors' Association  
1600 Broadway, Suite 1700  
Denver, CO 80202

RE: Comments on the draft report of the WGA Wildlife  
Corridors Initiative Climate Change Working Group

Dear Mr. McKinnon:

The Rocky Mountain Climate Organization (RMCO) offers the following comments on the Western Governors' Association's draft report by the WGA Wildlife Corridors Initiative Climate Change Working Group. We support the report's recommendations for management strategies to adapt to the impacts that climate change could cause to the fish and wildlife resources that are such integral parts of the West's economy and quality of life.

RMCO is a mainstream coalition with 47 partner organizations, including 17 local governments, Colorado's largest water provider, 17 businesses, and 12 nonprofit organizations. We work to keep the West a special place by reducing climate disruption and its effects here.

We express general support for the draft report by the Wildlife Corridors Initiative Climate Change Working Group because and to the extent that it is consistent with some elements of the November 2007 report of the blue-ribbon Climate Action Panel (CAP), convened by RMCO to recommend actions to reduce Colorado's contribution and vulnerability to climate change. Patterned after projects to develop climate action agendas in other states, including many in the West, the Colorado Climate Project is the first in the nation to be undertaken by a non-profit organization. Appointed by a representative group of ten Project Directors, the 34-member panel of leaders from the state's public, private, and non-profit sectors recommended 70 actions to be taken in Colorado to reduce greenhouse gases and prepare for the changes that may be coming. Counting those who worked on six policy work groups that supported the panel's work, 116 Coloradans participated in the process that culminated in the adoption of the panel's recommendations. The year-long process built a strong consensus, with 62 of the 70 recommendations agreed to unanimously. See [www.coloradoclimate.org](http://www.coloradoclimate.org) for the full panel report.

To continue the consensus-building success of the CAP, RMCO is now in the second stage of the Colorado Climate Project, in which we are continuing to work with diverse organizations and interests to flesh out details for implementation of panel recommendations (where that is needed), to build broad public support for the recommendations, and to get them adopted.

Much as the WGA has through its Wildlife Corridors Initiative, the CAP recognized the need to adapt to the potential impacts of a warming climate by, among other actions, protecting susceptible fish and wildlife habitats. Out of the 15 adaptation recommendations included in the CAP's report, three recommendations are particularly relevant here. All three were adopted unanimously by the CAP, and are described as follows.

### **Cross-Cutting Issues Recommendations:**

In its Cross Cutting Issues Recommendation CC-9 (Vulnerability and Adaptation), the CAP observed that “. . . [N]ow is the time to begin preparing to deal with the changes that are already underway and likely to become more dramatic. Undertaking these adaptation efforts is urgent and essential to developing an effective and comprehensive action plan that will ensure that Colorado remains such a special place to live.”

In this general adaptation recommendation, actions relevant to fish and wildlife habitat protection include:

The CAP recommends . . . that state government conduct a comprehensive assessment of Colorado’s vulnerabilities to the effects of climate change. However, without awaiting the results of the vulnerability assessment, state government should take the lead immediately, with appropriate involvement by local governments, other governmental entities, affected businesses, colleges and universities, nongovernmental organizations, and others, in launching efforts to develop statewide action plans to prepare for and deal with the most potentially serious categories of adverse climate change impacts likely in Colorado. . . . Among the categories of climate-change impacts likely in Colorado for which statewide, and perhaps also local, action plans are needed include . . . effects on opportunities for recreational fishing (as higher temperatures push streams beyond their ability to support cold-water fish populations) and hunting (particularly for waterfowl).

### **Water Adaptation Recommendations:**

Among the CAP’s set of water adaptation recommendations are two particularly relevant to protection of fish and wildlife habitat:

- In Recommendation WA -11 (Recreation and Tourism), the CAP observed, “Scientists project that warmer trout streams will eliminate or reduce trout populations in many, perhaps most, streams in the West where they are now found. Lower summer flows may make trout more susceptible to disease and angling pressure. . . . Scientists project that climate change could lead to fewer wetlands, which could leave fewer nesting ponds for ducks and geese and fewer hunting spots in the fall. Vegetation changes may affect elk and deer food supply at different elevations.”

The CAP’s recommended actions include:

State government agencies, with invited participation by federal agencies, should undertake studies to evaluate possible impacts of climate change on recreation and tourism in Colorado. Responsible state agencies include the Division of Wildlife, Colorado State Parks, Water Quality Control Division, Air Pollution Control Commission, and Colorado Water Conservation Board. Responsible federal agencies include the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, Corps of Engineers, Department of Agriculture, and Environmental Protection Agency. . . .

The Colorado Water Conservation Board should evaluate its instream flow program for any changes needed in its administration to reflect the effects of climate change on the purposes for which the program was established.

The state government, with invited participation by appropriate federal agencies and others, should investigate habitat protection and enhancement needs for terrestrial and aquatic species particularly vulnerable to climate change.

- In Recommendation WA – 12 (Water Quality and the Environment), the CAP included a list of potential impacts on aquatic and riparian habitats:
  - Increased pollutant runoff from more frequent and severe rainfall events;
  - Periodic drought-related low flows below aquatic life needs;
  - Loss of anticipated dilution flows;
  - Channel reconfiguration and sediment transport through flooding;
  - Reduced dissolved oxygen levels in bodies of water;
  - A loss of, or change in, biodiversity;
  - An increase in forest fires and accompanying runoff concerns;
  - Reduced populations of cold water fish such as trout;
  - Reduction in aquatic and riparian biodiversity; and
  - Additional pressure on threatened and endangered species, including four fish species native to the Colorado River and its main tributaries, because of changes in stream flows, increases in water temperature, and degradation of other habitat elements.

The CAP's recommended actions include:

The state government should consider ways to enhance protection of aquatic and riparian ecosystems. They should consider methods of further reducing stressors on ecosystems, protecting core habitat areas, increasing the size and extent of fish populations, and monitoring aquatic and riparian ecosystems to quickly detect any deterioration in their health.

In summary, the recommendations of the draft report of the WGA's Climate Change Working Group are consistent with the recommendations of Colorado's Climate Action Panel, and ought to be pursued expeditiously. RMCO commends the WGA for recognizing the need to take a comprehensive approach to preserving the West's invaluable fish and wildlife resources. As demonstrated by numerous scientific studies and by RMCO's own recent report, [\*Hotter and Drier: The West's Changed Climate\*](#), fish and wildlife are not only vulnerable to the impacts of a warming climate but are already being affected.

Sincerely,

*Tom Easley*

Tom Easley  
Director of Programs