

Chapter 2

Discussion of Regionally Significant Environmental Resources

Environmental Resource Categories

Regionally Significant Environmental Resources represent state conservation plans, maps, and inventories in a comparison with the regional transportation plan. The resources within the OKI Region that are included in these state conservation documents and data are referred to as Regionally Significant Environmental Resources in the consultations process. They represent a priority for conservation or protection because of state investments, regulations, or policies. For the most part, project impacts to these resources require mitigation and increase costs.

OKI defined five categories of Regionally Significant Environmental Resources. Appendix B contains a map and tables with information on the local resources within these categories. These are high quality or rare resources and/or help to sustain other high quality or rare resources. The environmental and economic value of these resources and their functions is not discussed here but is the basis for their selection as resources that the states conserve or protect.

OKI presented information on each category at the beginning of the consultation sessions to provide a common understanding for use in the comparison. Information included explanation of why and how the states conserve or protect these resources and the sites of local resources. The presentation was modified per session to account for differences in state plans, programs, and policies and for descriptions of the resources located within each county. Appendix C provides the version presented for the consultation sessions in each state and information on the locations of Regionally Significant Environmental Resources in each county.

Each category of Regionally Significant Environmental Resources is defined in Table 1 and further described below.

State-Conserved Area includes state parks, wildlife areas, and preserves. These are areas where states have invested to conserve natural resources. Preserves, which protect rare species as part of state efforts to conserve remnants of their natural heritage, are distinguished from other State-Conserved Area by establishment under state law. Preserves account for 5% of State-Conserved Area. Sites are coded on the map, listed in Table 2 of Appendix B, and explained in Appendix C per state.

Scenic River is the Little Miami River, which is designated at national and state levels for outstanding qualities that warrant conservation for present and future generations. The Little Miami River is a State Scenic River for its entire length, a National Scenic River north of Foster, and a National Recreational River below Foster. Its conservation value is indicated by the Little Miami River's inclusion among the one quarter of one per cent of rivers in the National Scenic River Program. Appendix C contains the explanation provided per state.

Regionally Significant Streams are high quality streams identified for conservation or protection by the states. OKI classified streams in this category based on their having one or more of four criteria. Appendix B contains a map that identifies these streams and Table 3 lists the Regionally Significant streams and stream segments in each county, the indicators of its ecological value used as basis for its classification, and the state programs that represent selection criteria. Appendix C provides explanation of the state programs and lists the streams in each county that meet each criteria.

The following criteria are the basis for classifying streams as **Regionally Significant**.

Conservation priority in the state wildlife plan: Streams or stream segments are considered Regionally Significant if they are designated as a state priority area for conserving aquatic species. Every state has developed a wildlife conservation strategy for conserving habitat before wildlife becomes more rare and protection becomes more expensive.

Designated use in state water quality standards: Streams or stream segments are considered Regionally Significant if they are designated for use as Exceptional Warmwater Habitat or Coldwater Habitat in Ohio or as Outstanding State Resource Water in Kentucky. Uses are designated for individual streams based on existing and potential conditions. Designated Use is a key part of the strategy for achieving the Clean Water Act goal to maintain and restore surface waters to levels that support fish and wildlife (more specifically, to levels that provide for the protection and propagation of fish, shellfish, and wildlife and recreation).

Assessment results in the state Integrated Report: Streams or stream segments are considered Regionally Significant in Ohio if they meet some designated uses; in Kentucky, if they fully support their aquatic habitat designation; in Indiana, if they fully support their designated aquatic life use. Integrated Reports contain water quality data and classify streams in one of five categories to indicate the state's progress in meeting the national water quality goal.

Ecological value in state anti-degradation policy: Streams or stream segments are considered Regionally Significant if they are classified as Outstanding State Water or Superior High Quality Water in Ohio policy or as Exceptional Water in Kentucky policy. Anti-degradation policy defines procedures in state code to keep clean waters clean, so that the quality of the cleanest streams is protected rather than lowered to the level of minimum water quality standards. Dischargers can reduce water quality, but not below conditions that support existing uses.

Wetlands are areas where transportation projects are likely to involve additional costs if impacts to wetland functions are not avoided. Local wetlands are widely dispersed and most are small. The map in Appendix B does not include wetlands except for a symbol for the Oxbow of the Great Miami River, which is 2500 acres of habitat important for rare species and migration.

Wetland functions are of such value (regardless of wetland size) that most are protected by federal and state law. Appendix C contains the explanation provided per state.

Endangered, Threatened, and Rare Species are indicators of area/resources where transportation projects are likely to involve additional costs if impacts to habitat are not avoided. Table 4 in Appendix B lists species by county that are native to the OKI Region and listed at federal or state levels as endangered (in danger of extinction), threatened (likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future), or otherwise at risk. The table also includes data on global heritage rank. Appendix C contains the explanation of this data provided in the consultation sessions.

All together, the OKI Region has 161 species that are federally or state listed. Of the 100 animal species, nearly two thirds depend on aquatic habitat for survival, and nearly half of these are “critically imperiled” or “imperiled” at global levels. The data on listed species indicates the value of this region’s least impaired rivers and streams, wetlands, and natural areas for species survival. The intent of federal and state policy to protect natural resources classified here as Regionally Significant Environmental Resources is partly to avoid the financial implications of a growing list of endangered species.

Table 1. Regionally Significant Environmental Resources

| Category | Description |
|---|--|
| State-Conserved Area | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ State parks, state wildlife areas (Ohio) and wildlife management areas (Kentucky), and state preserves ▪ Areas where states have made investments that conserve natural area |
| Scenic River | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Little Miami River ▪ Rivers designated in the national and state Scenic River Systems based on their outstanding qualities (national system includes one quarter of 1%, or 166, of the nation's rivers) |
| Regionally Significant Streams | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ High quality streams or stream segments identified for conservation or protection by the states ▪ Streams or stream segments that meet one or more of the following criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identified as a priority for conserving aquatic species (per state wildlife conservation plan) ▪ Designated for use as high-quality habitat (per water quality standards in state code) ▪ Documented as supporting its designated use for aquatic habitat (per 2008 state Integrated Report on water quality) ▪ Protected for its current use as high quality habitat (per classification in state Antidegradation Policy for maintaining the stream's current habitat use) |
| Wetlands | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Includes all wetlands regardless of size ▪ Includes the Oxbow of the Great Miami River (habitat important for rare species and migration) ▪ Areas where transportation projects are likely to involve additional costs if impacts to wetland functions are not avoided |
| Endangered, Threatened, and Rare Species | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Species native to the OKI Region that are listed at federal or state levels as endangered (in danger of extinction), threatened (likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future), or at risk ▪ 161 species native to the OKI Region are state listed (includes species federally listed); of the 100 animal species, nearly two thirds depend on aquatic habitat for survival, and nearly one half of these are “critically imperiled” or “imperiled” at global levels ▪ Indicators of area/resources where transportation projects are likely to involve additional costs if impacts to habitat are not avoided |

Local Agency Perspectives

In addition to an explanation of Regionally Significant Environmental Resources, each session provided opportunity for clarifying perspectives on the conservation need or value of these and other local environmental resources. Local perspectives were provided through a survey process, discussion of local conservation needs and priorities, and a suggestion for regional transportation planning.

Survey on Environmental Resource Categories

The consultations process integrated a survey into the explanation of Regionally Significant Environmental Resources at each session's beginning. The intent was to clarify local agency perceptions of resources conserved or protected by the states, awareness of state conservation policies and programs, and use of state conservation documents and data.

The survey and a summary of results are provided in Appendix D. Sixteen questions were asked for which the average scores ranged from 45 to 19. Survey responses will be used to provide insight to state agencies and to design future consultations. For state agencies, survey results may indicate needs to increase local awareness of resources that warrant protection, of opportunities for influencing state policy or advocating for local resources, or of the availability of data or state plans or policies for use in local planning and conservation efforts.

From regional and local perspectives, the survey results are a basis for the following observations.

- Greater awareness of state anti-degradation policy could expand local agency participation in opportunities to advocate for the least impaired local streams to be classified for the highest levels of protection.
- Greater awareness of designated uses for streams could increase local efforts to use the development process and conservation strategies to help streams maintain or attain water quality standards.
- Greater awareness of stream assessment categories could improve understanding of the environmental and financial implications of local streams' water quality conditions.
- Greater familiarity of the potential for specific local streams to conserve rare species could advance local efforts to use the development process and conservation strategies to protect these streams.
- Greater awareness among land use planning agencies of state conservation policy and programs, state conservation plans and data sources, and the conditions of local environmental resources could result in stronger efforts to conserve Regionally Significant Environmental Resources and distinguish their conservation value from the more general needs of other resources.

Discussion of Local Conservation Needs and Priorities

To facilitate discussion of local agency perspectives on environmental resources needs, and also facilitate the comparison with the transportation plan, OKI developed county versions of the regional map. The county map was presented to local agencies following the presentation of Regionally Significant Environmental Resources. The map included environmental resources shown on the regional map and also the following additional data:

- major parks and preserves (sites over 100 acres),
- other greenspace (smaller parks and greenspace-related uses such as golf courses, cemeteries, and camps),
- additional streams,
- watershed boundaries (for hydrologic unit code/HUC 12 watersheds), and
- tree canopy data for Kentucky counties (large-crown tree canopy in tracts 100 acres or more).

To initiate review of county maps, participants were asked: Are there other resources or areas that should be added to the Environmental Resources shown on the map, as relatively unimpaired or conservation-worthy, or other types of resources? Suggestions for additional sites, revisions to site-specific information (boundaries, names), additional base map features, and use of local data sources are not included in this report but are being addressed or considered by OKI for its base data and future consultations.

Suggestions for types of environmental resources that could be added to the map for their conservation value or for potential inclusion in future consultations are listed below:

- farmland
- forested area
- prime farmland soils
- prime groundwater recharge areas (highly permeable soils over the aquifer; areas over the aquifer with very high rates of infiltration, where storm water runoff percolates downward rather than flowing into surface streams)
- soils valuable as habitat
- sole source aquifer boundary
- source Water Protection Areas/SWPAs (areas that contribute to a well or well field over a specified time span)
- streams: areas where stream setbacks are required or recommended
- streams: concentrations of headwater streams
- streams: designated Water Trails
- streams with mussel beds

As a basis for discussing local conservation priorities, local agencies were subsequently asked: If money were available for restoration or protection, where should it be spent first? Consensus on priorities for conservation and restoration investments would be useful at regional and local levels for planning, conservation, and mitigation. This issue was broached in the consultations to provide perspective for fuller discussion in the future.

The consultations process obtained local perspectives on conservation priorities for Regionally Significant and other environmental resources as indicated below.

- The environmental resource mentioned most frequently as having the greatest need of protection was not a site-specific resource but “streams.” Comments included:
 - *The greatest need for restoration or protection is in relation to streams.*
 - *Riparian corridors are the priority for restoration or protection.*
- The most effective approach to conserving streams was not a focus of discussion, but suggestions made during discussions indicated diverse opinions. The following comments suggest where to target conservation for streams:
 - *natural flood plains that are still left are the highest priority within priority area (within the stream corridors);*
 - *the headwaters,*
 - *the mainstem and work up the tributaries,*
 - *the property most threatened,*
 - *streams where investments in restoration or conservation have already been made.*
- The term “Regionally Significant Environmental Resources” applies to resources identified for state conservation or protection, but discussion indicates that other resources may be perceived as equally significant. Local agencies are interested in conserving and protecting environmental resources that are impaired as well as those that are not impaired. They identified resources where investments are being made in restoration as important to the local communities. The comment was made that: Restoration and acquisition are both important and should have equal priority for funding.
- References to environmental resources that are not classified as Regionally Significant but are the focus of a local conservation effort or suggested as warranting conservation include the following:
 - *areas along the I-74 corridor / potential to develop an I-74 greenway*
 - *Banklick Creek watershed*
 - *East Fork of the Little Miami River,*
 - *Licking River, especially the southern part,*
 - *Mill Creek,*
 - *Ohio River east of the Little Miami River / Ohio River still has value as habitat,*
 - *Western Wildlife Corridor / a greenway corridor of wooded hillsides along the Ohio River from the Mill Creek near downtown Cincinnati to the Great Miami River bordering Indiana,*
 - *Whitewater and Great Miami River Corridors.*
- Local agencies that could help protect environmental resources identified for state protection or conservation are not necessarily familiar with the environmental value, quality, or scarcity of those resources. In general, the Little Miami River’s designation as a Scenic River is widely recognized, but the Whitewater River and the Oxbow of the Great Miami River

are examples of resources with relatively low local profiles for their environmental functions and their roles in sustaining other significant resources.

Suggestion for Regional Transportation Planning

At one consultations session, discussion at the end of the session evolved into a suggestion for using the regional transportation planning process to better protect Regionally Significant Environmental Resources and also help local governments reduce costs for environmental impacts. The suggestion was for OKI to develop a scoring system to account for regionally-significant environmental resources in transportation project funding (in addition to considerations addressed by the scoring factor for the Strategic Regional Policy Plan). OKI will be responding to that suggestion as part of its preparation of the 2012 update of the transportation plan.

The discussion leading to this suggestion included the following observations:

- the prioritization system for transportation funding needs to better account for state concerns about Regionally Significant Environmental Resources;
- a transportation planning process or funding mechanism needs to include incentives for avoiding impacts to Regionally Significant Environmental Resources;
- environmental assets and concerns can be considered in the project design process but there are no consequences unless the findings affect funding eligibility;
- a scoring system could help local jurisdictions plan better so that projects that involve federal funds are not confronted with delays or increased costs to address regulatory requirements related to mitigation of environmental impacts (project sponsors are further penalized when transportation projects that use Surface Transportation Program/STP funds fall behind schedule); and
- a scoring system could be used to incentivize local governments to consider how a project will affect environmental resources and to secure their jurisdiction's environmental assets.