

# ESA Vegetation Classification Panel Meeting Notes

## Part II: Friday October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010

### Attendance:

Scott Franklin, Chris Lea, Orie Loucks, Don Faber-Langendoen, Dave Tart, Alexa McKerrow, Eileen Helmer, Bob Peet, Jill Parsons, Ralph Crawford, Bill Gould, Cliff Duke, Aysik Solomeshch, Todd Keeler-Wolf, John Sawyer, Michael Jennings, Serguei Ponomarenko

### Action Items:

- **Scott** will speak with Rob Jackson about using the term “Associate Editor” in reference to the peer review board.
- **Scott** will make edits to the Associate Editor job description.
- **Todd** will ask the Data Management Group to help add California data to DOPLR.
- **Don** will talk to Kristen about what is feasible in terms of getting more data before completing the association reviews.
- **Don** will create a spreadsheet and begin assigning Associate Editors to macrogroups. At the next Panel call we will walk through the spreadsheet, see where we sit regionally, and solicit feedback and recommendations of people who can help fill the gaps.
- **Orie** and **John** will create a one-page briefing paper on the issue of keys and other tools for the NVC to help frame this discussion and move it forward. The paper will define challenges, potential hazards, possibilities, and likely successes in the effort to make the NVC more accessible to users while also maintaining the scientific integrity of the classification. This will be a way to have a trackable conversation about meeting user needs and scientific needs, and will pave the way for making scientifically credible tools to ensure we can make informed decisions in resource management. Orie and John will draft the briefing paper by the **end of November**. The Panel will review this in December and plans to submit it to the Subcommittee in **January 2011**.
- **Ralph** will send the Panel more information on the Experimental Forests, including a map, and will potentially do a presentation on this at the next meeting. **The next Panel call would be another opportunity to talk about this.**
- **Ralph** will speak with the USFS Deputy Chief about “big science” issues with the experimental forests and ranges in terms of the NVC and will keep the Panel informed. **Ralph** and **Don** will talk more about the possibilities as well.

### Peer Review (Don and Scott)

#### Two stages in the peer review process:

1. Short-term peer review – this will be a rapid process to get the descriptions for all the levels in place and in the initial NVC database. We will be ranking these according to how sure we are about them (high, medium, low). The Data Management Group will be moving the current database from Biotics over to the NVC database.
  - There were some concerns over credibility

- The content is always publicly available, but we could advertise a period for public comment and a closing date to get feedback on the initial descriptions.
2. Long-term peer review – this will be more of an external process, and we need to figure out how this will work.

### **Upper Levels:**

- HRWG is writing the upper level descriptions. Level 1 (8 units) will be ready in January. Levels 2 and 3 should be ready by March/April 2011.
- **The Panel will peer review Levels 1, 2, and 3 internally, starting in May, with a deadline for completion by early August 2011.** These levels are well-known, and we're just trying to establish what is already a solid framework.

### **Comments:**

- If a description is in doubt, we need to have a place to say what our reservations are.
- We need to make sure descriptions are based on what we envision that level being described at.
- Doing a good job on diagnostic characteristics is essential to developing keys, and we should think about keys when reviewing these levels.
- We could use a SharePoint site to do the review, make edits, and then send recommendations back to the HRWG
- At some point we need to set a time frame for how often these can be changed, so government agencies can plan ahead.

### **Middle levels:**

- The middle levels are new to the hierarchy, so we are not as confident in their content as we are with the upper and lower levels
- The Panel completed a pilot review, so a process is in place:
  - 330 groups will be fully described by Jan 2011.
  - Associate editors: we need 15 across the country to handle 20-30 groups each and identify two reviewers for each group.

### **Discussion:**

- We should consider adding a field (possibly "contributing parties") for the author, editors, and other contributors of the description, as well as a narrative history for the description and changes.
- Down the line we may want to allow for anonymous reviewers.
- We need to ensure that suggestions made by Associate Editors get put into place. When changes are very complicated, we need to at least keep these comments in an archive for future use somehow.
- Associate editors may not be sure about all the changes – there may be a need for a meeting to work out any kinks/challenges.
- We won't know the full workload until changes start coming in and we can see how extensive they are.

### Outcomes:

- Associate Editors can recommend placeholders if they think a new group is needed.
- The Panel has been doing the work of the Peer Review Board, but once the Associate Editors are assembled they will become the Peer Review Board. We need to start using this language, as laid out in the USFS agreement.
- Depending on peer review results, we may need to work with USFS and USGS to find more funding for a further extensive review.
- We want this process to move quickly – reviewers should have a deadline of two weeks or less, and Associate Editors will have the right to make changes and put descriptions into the NVC.
- Everyone who helped complete the pilot review is an Associate Editor (Chris, Dave Tart, Aysik, Serguei, Bob, Don are all listed). John and Bill are interested in helping.

### Clarification of Associate Editor duties. They will:

1. Recruit peer reviewers for their assigned groups.
2. Funnel information to reviewers, including a description in SharePoint.
3. Collect edits from reviewers and ensure they meet the deadline.
4. Compile and synthesize edits.
5. Send recommendations and changes to the original author and request a turnaround time.\*
6. Receive and incorporate changes from the original author.

\*If the author is overloaded or unable to review the description again, there may be some back and forth between him/her and the Associate Editor. Either way, the responsibility falls to the Associate Editor to create the final version.

### To be determined:

- If we need an Editor in Chief, who would only be responsible for “cracking the whip.”
- If the Associate Editors need to have a meeting or an online meeting.

### Lower Levels:

- Association screening should be completed by July 2011.
- In the screening tool reviewers can: calculate confidence, override confidence if you state a reason why, (descriptions must have plot data to receive a high confidence ranking), and add comments on the history of changes.
- We could try to get additional metadata from partners with classification plots – targeting Heritage Programs is a possibility. We can solicit this information in a short time, possibly before the screening is completed. Don will ask Kristen if this is feasible – it would result in more descriptions with higher confidence levels.
- We should consider making a funding proposal on enhancing the database with plot data – this is a long-term issue.
- **The Panel will go over the association descriptions at the August ESA meeting in Austin after NatureServe has completed the quick review process.**

## **Concerns about the challenge of proposing changes in the NVC (Bob)**

Bob described Liz Matthew's graduate research who was studying riparian vegetation in NC. The paper she has written represents tensions between taking extant types in the NVC and analyzing/collecting data with an aim to improve the NVC. She was working with a broad geographical context, did her classification, but her types didn't match well to the NVC. We need to think about how to deal with situations like that in the future, and how her types relate to those in the NVC.

Bob was concerned with how to publish this document and relate it to the NVC, and was uncomfortable with the lack of fit with the NVC.

### **Discussion:**

- This information will feed into the NVC at some point in the future, when someone is able to do a complete review in relation to this geographic range.
- If this can get into the database it will help make it better – it's a question of "here's my plot, and I have all these question marks about whether I can assign a code."
- Current plot data is sparse. The current idea is to have clear borders between types, but there are lots of grey zones. If we add these types to the current classification it will create overlaps, but we'll be given an opportunity in the future to sort out the mess.
- There was general agreement that Bob and Liz should feel fine publishing their types.

### **Possible next steps:**

- To develop a robust proposal on changes to the NVC - what this means for the broader NVC, and submit it as an example proposal.
- If anyone is in a position to encourage or guide studies, it would be helpful to recommend they are done on a range-wide basis, rather than by state boundaries, as often as funding allows.
- We need to encourage downloading plot data to VegBank from all regions and look for funding to support this. We need to ensure the NVC is able to respond to data and not set the bar too high for changes.
- If we wanted to take this a step further, next time you could take data from VegBank, put it in a table, and reanalyze the types together. At that point, we would be more confident if one of the types needed to be rejected, merged, etc.
- We want to make sure the door is wide open for others to come forward and do these studies that can add info and data, and we need to think more about how the NVC should deal with types as better data comes forward.

## **Applications, Tools, and Keys:**

### **Things to consider:**

- How can we ensure keys are done well?
- What implications does the changing hierarchy have for keys?
- How can we make keys foolproof for nonspecialists?
- Should keys go through an approval process?

- Could we write a national key and prune it for each ecoregion?

#### Discussion:

- LANDFIRE has funding to develop keys down to the group level.
- With the current database we have two choices: we can pigeon hole, take plot data and place it as best as possible, or we can develop keys that will help with placement.
- In order to build plot data we need to allow people to attach a name to a plot. We need something, even if it's not perfect, to make it usable.
- We can't avoid having keys that are jurisdictionally based, but being consistent from one jurisdiction to the next is something to strive for.

#### Moving forward:

- The upper levels are moving forward, and we hope to have keys down to the group level within a year or two (we need to scope this out with LANDFIRE – hopefully they will want to implement this).
- The effort to create keys is moving slow – not because we don't want to do it, but because it takes time.
- It doesn't have to be a national key, but agencies do want keys down to the association.
- The Subcommittee has asked for some guidance from the Panel on how to move forward. (see details of briefing paper in action points).

#### **NEON/LTER/USFS Experimental Forests:**

##### Experimental Forests:

- For more information, see: <http://www.fs.fed.us/research/efr/>
- There are 81 experimental forest and ranges, and the older ones are unique because they have long term climactic data. This could be an interesting opportunity to plug in from a veg standpoint.
- They are set aside for education and manipulative research.

##### NEON:

- Scott met with NEON to explain what we are about. They are starting veg classification on core sites, but don't yet don't know if there is money to do them all.

##### LTER:

- This is getting scrutinized more tightly than before, and in some places NEON may be taking over for them. We haven't had contact yet, but would like them to be compatible with our standards.