



# State Wildlife Summit Guide

## WHY ORGANIZE A WILDLIFE SUMMIT?

This guide is designed to help state conservation group leaders generate interest and momentum around their State Wildlife Action Plan, and to plan an event that will cement these lasting partnerships for strengthening state wildlife agencies including increased wildlife funding for implementation of the action plan.

State Wildlife Action Plans, and the federal and state programs that fund their implementation, are our nation's best defense in preventing wildlife from becoming endangered in every state. Nearly all Americans enjoy the places and animals that benefit from wildlife conservation efforts, but most are unfamiliar with how wildlife conservation is funded and even what agency has the mandate to be their stewards. A wide array of stakeholders was engaged in developing the wildlife action plans, but few took an active role in promoting the plans to the public or building a coalition to advocate for the funding they need. Organizing a wildlife summit in your state accomplishes three key objectives to help reverse these trends:

- 1. The summit can bring together a wide variety of stakeholders to build a solid group of core supporters that will actively raise the profile of the state wildlife coalition and your state's wildlife action plan:**
  - Hunting, birding, gardening, hiking, paddling, fishing and other outdoor recreation groups,
  - State fish and wildlife managers in addition to other wildlife, land, and water conservation groups, and
  - Elected officials and other political champions.
- 2. The summit invitation process provides an opportunity to educate a broad constituency of interests about state wildlife agencies including funding opportunities and the advantages of joining a state coalition.**
- 3. It gives you an opportunity to mobilize your existing wildlife action plan stakeholder meeting participants as champions in an effort to build a powerful and effective wildlife funding coalition.**

A well-organized summit can be a great way to achieve tangible results in education, advocacy, grassroots mobilization, and publicity around strengthening your state wildlife agency.

Several states held "wildlife summits" with their action plan stakeholders aimed at updating their plan, setting priorities or bringing in partners for implementation. Even if implementation is the primary focus of your "wildlife summit," don't miss the opportunity mobilize your stakeholders on funding advocacy and to include events for the media.

## DOING YOUR HOMEWORK

It's important to understand your community and understand the ways state wildlife conservation has benefited from State Wildlife Grants and the state wildlife action plans. Give yourself the time to do research in the following three areas:

### 1. Wildlife Funding History in Your State

Familiarize yourself with the basic history of wildlife funding in your state. How many local and state projects have received funding? How much money did they receive and when? Which projects have been the most successful? You can obtain a list of State Wildlife Grants projects from your state fish and wildlife agency. Communications is key! Talking with people involved in State Wildlife Grant projects is an important part of understanding your state wildlife conservation efforts.

### 2. Community Organizations and Their Wildlife Priorities

Learn about the relevance of wildlife advocates near you, and collect contact information. Who is working to support wildlife areas, educational programs, outdoor recreation, and hunting and fishing activities? Meeting with these groups is an excellent opportunity to learn about their priorities and introduce or reintroduce them to State Wildlife Grants and the new state wildlife action plans.

### 3. Community Group Dynamics

It is valuable to understand the history of any past coalition or summits in order to avoid unnecessary hassles and special arrangements. Make a point of discovering special relationships, good and bad, between individuals within these communities.

Gathering this important information will help you proceed with confidence to the next phase. You will feel well-versed in the local history of wildlife planning and, consequently, be able to sell the merits of the program to others. Furthermore, you will establish important preliminary contacts and learn the “lay of the land.” These contacts will also help you develop your core group. Meeting with 10-20 organizations over the next few months will help you build relationships with invaluable partners for your state wildlife coalition.

Working with wildlife experts will give you an excellent base to earn trust and credibility for the summit, and begin a long-term relationship to further the state wildlife funding campaign. In a sense, having a summit gives you a good reason to spend the time to develop these critical partnerships.

## DEVELOPING A CORE GROUP

You could try to organize the event by yourself, as the sole planner, but unless you belong to a large organization or agency with vast resources, you will be missing an opportunity to create a shared vision for the summit and for the community. Forming a state wildlife coalition could be a very useful first step in the planning process.

We recommend recruiting a “core group” of key planners, ideally six to ten, among whom responsibilities are clearly delegated. Delegating tasks makes everyone’s life easier. It lessens frustration, increases optimism and generates enough resolve to deal with unavoidable stumbling blocks. However, it’s best to have a single point person who keeps track of everything going on, so nothing important falls through the cracks.

How do you go about choosing the appropriate people? Due to the amount of time and energy you’ll be spending together, you’ll want to pick people who are **dedicated** to the event’s goals, who are **motivated** by the issue, who are **dependable** in finishing a project, and who can **work together** as a team. Your preliminary research will give you some ideas.

In addition to your state fish and wildlife agency, you can look for partners from the following groups:

- **Influential grassroots organizations with a vested interest in wildlife conservation** - e.g., local conservation advocates, hunting and fishing or birding clubs, chapters of national conservation groups, environmental educators, and community-association groups.
- **Influential government bodies with a vested interest in conservation** - e.g., state land and conservation agencies, federal land agencies, members of congress, mayor’s or governor’s offices, city and county councils or commissions.
- **Influential outdoor businesses and user groups with a vested interest in recreational opportunities** – e.g., outdoor equipment manufacturers and retail stores, guides and outfitters, nature-based travel such as bed and breakfasts, hotels and restaurants near popular wildlife watching areas.
- **Influential business leaders** – e.g., prominent professionals in the community, members of the Chamber of Commerce, and individuals with an interest in local land use or wildlife conservation. In a rural state, involving a major agricultural or other natural resource-based group or business would be powerful.
- **Non-traditional supporters** – e.g., civic associations, youth sports leagues, girls and boys’ clubs

Working with both government and non-government organizations is a great way to send a message that wildlife funding is about partnerships and collaborating at the local, state and federal levels, as well as a way to build

communication between the public and private sectors. Even if there is disagreement on other issues, there should be plenty of common ground around conserving wildlife. Wildlife funding is a great issue on which to build long-term trust. Try to recruit at least one or two people who have experience organizing successful conferences or large events. Be cognizant of those individuals and groups that you want to develop long-term relationships with after the summit. Try to include someone from each that has a stake in a successful wildlife program.

**REMEMBER** - Work with people who are community leaders, i.e., those who can help you network and have access to influential organizations (potential co-sponsors and summit attendees) and individuals (potential summit speakers)

Once your core group is assembled, give yourself the time to build trust while confirming summit details. Expect to meet several times before you find the group gelling and really understanding the purpose of the summit. Also, broadly and fairly delegate responsibility for different planning aspects.

## SELECTING A DATE

The single biggest factor to consider when selecting a date is the turn-out. Generally, the best times of the year are:

- **January/February** - People are just getting back from holiday vacations and they have energy. It's also when Congress and state legislatures begin to consider budget priorities for the coming year.
- **April/May** – Its right before summer begins and is a time when people are thinking about vacationing outdoors and planning their outdoor activities for the summer.
- **September/October** - People are fresh from summer vacation, their kids are back in school and they are ready to work.
- **TIP**- Every community/state has its own timeline of activities. The above dates are examples only. It's always a good time to organize a wildlife summit. Avoid conflicts with other major conservation meetings and all religious holidays.

## FINDING THE RIGHT LOCATION

Picking a good location is very important. The ideal location will meet the following guidelines:

- **The Right Size** - Too small a venue will force people to stand and too large a venue will give the impression that not enough people attended.
- **Well-Known** - Obscure locations will deter people from coming because they may be afraid of getting lost. If people know a place and enjoy going there, they will be that much more likely to come.
- **Centrally Located** - No complicated, time-consuming directions.
- **Public Facility (such as a library or university)** - They are well known and keep costs down.
- **Neutral Territory** - A comfortable setting for different people with different perspectives. Look at the pictures on the wall to be sure they reflect your values.
- **Transportation** - Easily accessible (easy directions, public transportation, parking).
- **Inspirational** – A nature center or site tied to a park or other conservation setting can remind people as they enter the doors of why this issue is important to them setting the tone for the event.

**REMEMBER** - Acoustics: Everyone and everything must be heard. Make sure to budget in a sound system and AV technician if your gathering will be more than 40-50 people. Food, while adding cost, can also create a welcoming atmosphere.

## THE SUMMIT SLIDE SHOW/ POWER POINT PRESENTATION

A good way to kick off your summit is to feature a slide show or PowerPoint presentation highlighting successful state wildlife projects. Try to get a prominent politician (the mayor or representative from the governor's office would be best) to narrate the presentation as the combination of both pictures and words will powerfully display the history of wildlife management in your community. The presentation can be a cornerstone of the summit because it reminds everyone that wildlife funding is about restoring a sense of place for both people and critters. It can open the summit by showcasing the places that matter to people, rather than focusing on the state wildlife grant program or state wildlife

action plan. This is an important point; it is not that people will care about wildlife funding itself -- they will care about the places and animals that benefit from the program. Start by focusing on a sense of place, not on the details of wildlife funding and the legislative budget process.

Some tips for developing a presentation:

1. **Identify Success Stories** – Start with asking your wildlife agency for success stories they are most proud of starting with projects using State Wildlife Grants funding. Be sure to find some that include re-introduction of species, habitat restoration, and ones that will benefit multiple species and outdoor enthusiasts.
2. **Narrow Your Choices** - Pinpoint the most impressive, compelling, and diverse projects from the wealth of suggestions generated through your conversations. Take into account the following factors as you narrow down your list.
  - **Diversify Choices** - Strive to achieve a balance of different wildlife types. Choose the best examples of a stream restoration, survey/monitoring, scientific research, and an economic anchor (something that contributed to improving the state's economy).
  - **Politically Important Places** – remember that the whole idea of organizing a summit is to eventually develop champions of elected officials, as they have the clout to make a difference. Try to highlight examples of wildlife projects and areas that are near and dear to members of Congress, governors, and local officials.
3. **Collect Pictures & Gather Narratives** - You want outstanding, compelling pictures and stories of wildlife *and people*. Pictures of people enjoying nature remind people of their own love for the outdoors. Pictures with water in them always test well in surveys. Remember this should reflect a diversity of gender, race and outdoor activities, region of state, rural and urban locations, etc. Collect “before” and “after” slides and computer images. You want to show pictures of the site before the project was completed and pictures of what the site looks like now. This will showcase the project's appeal and make the audience members understand how wildlife funding can transform a community or area into something special.

**Tip** –Nature photographers can be great advocates for the cause; save money in your budget to buy their photos or give them credit for their donations.

## RECRUITING CO-SPONSORS

Co-sponsors are organizations or individuals who care about summit goals strongly enough that they are willing to actively participate in some capacity before, during, and after to ensure the event's success.

1. **Before** - Co-sponsors give your event credibility and demonstrate broad appeal. They may also give a hand in planning or funding the summit. This might range from providing mailing labels or emails of people to invite to the event, to helping develop the agenda or inviting key speakers.
2. **During** - Co-sponsors also attend the conference and might speak, run workshops, or help with logistics.
3. **After** - Co-sponsors are encouraged to participate in related follow-up activities (writing letters to legislators, attending lobby meetings, etc.)

## RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

A successful summit will draw a lot of participants from a variety of communities who will then become advocates for wildlife funding.

***Who are the people most likely to attend?***

1. **Concerned Organizations** –it's also important to reach out to local wildlife conservation, outdoor recreation and conservation education organizations;
2. **Concerned Citizens** - passionate individuals who care about their community's sense of environment;
3. **Government Agency staff** - people in city or state government responsible for the administration of state wildlife grants and other open space and animal programs;
4. **Key Policy-Makers** - federal, state and local elected officials and their staff; and

5. **Media** - local, state and national news media that cover environment, wildlife, recreation, and state and local politics.

### ***How do you get your target audience to the summit?***

1. **Mailing** - Mail to all of your target audiences (both “snail mail” and email). Rely on the mailing and email lists of your co-sponsors. You will need to send approximately ten times the number of invitations as you wish the final number to be.
2. **Phone Calling** - Set-up a phone bank and call through your lists starting two weeks prior to the event for maximum turn-out.
3. **Create a “Blog”** – Create a web log that potential attendees can use to voice their opinions on wildlife and what type of agenda they would like to see at a wildlife summit. The more you engage your audience, the more likely they will attend.

**TIP** - Ask all of the summit co-sponsors to supply mailing labels, phone lists, and email addresses.

**REMEMBER** - Set-up a database of all summit registrants prior to the event to keep track of numbers and diversity of participants. Expect approximately 20-25 percent of people who register to a free event not to show-up.

## **SETTING THE AGENDA**

The event should be structured in a way that inspires your audience and moves them to action.

- 1) **PROBLEM:** Start with an overview of why wildlife funding and planning is important and the major challenges to improving wildlife areas. The challenge that you want to focus on, of course, is funding.
- 2) **SOLUTION:** Move to an overview of wildlife planning, how the program works, what programs it compliments and what projects it has funded.
- 3) **ACTION:** Break into smaller groups and focus on how people can get involved. At the very least, make sure participants get copies of the endorsement form and marching orders to gather endorsements from organizations and businesses in their communities.

Throughout the whole agenda, constantly incorporate visuals and stories depicting wildlife success stories, as well as specific projects and priorities.

As indicated above, an initial draft agenda should be created by the core group very early on in the planning process and then further developed with the help of summit co-sponsors.

**TIP** - After the core group hammers out a first draft of the agenda, consider holding a series of “community action” meetings, and bring in activists/agency personnel outside the core group to further develop and alter the initial agenda and suggested speakers. They will make invaluable suggestions, including what agenda makes a good fit for that state.

**REMEMBER** - Maintain speaker diversity throughout the program. It is important to know what types of citizens constitute the area/region/state in which the event is held. Be as inclusive as possible.

**REMEMBER** - Schedule plenty of time for breaks and assume the conference will run a little longer than expected.

Of course your agenda may vary substantially depending on your audience. For instance, if your audience is primarily stakeholders who have been engaged in the past, you’ll probably want to start with an activity related to your plan, such as setting priorities for implementation. Likewise, if your summit is primarily intended as a media event you’ll want to adapt it accordingly.

## **FUNDRAISING**

Obviously, it takes some money to hold a successful event. It is important to have no admission fee to include as many people as possible. Use lots of volunteers and generate a number of in-kind contributions. For example, find someone to design the brochure for free and work with the city to provide the space at no cost.

Once you know how much the event will cost, you need to know how to raise that amount. Try to raise the bulk of the budget through corporate donations.

1. **Start Early** - Start fundraising as early as possible. Foundation grants require a lead time of at least six months; corporate grants also take several months.
2. **Research** - Spend time to discover which foundations and corporations care about local conservation and recreation issues. Or ask those groups that consistently rely on grants for funding to help you through the maze of foundation fundraising.
3. **Write Proposal** - Put together a well-written formal proposal and include letters of support from prominent individuals.
4. **Invite & Thank Funders** - Remember to invite funders to the summit and send them a formal thank you letter including highlights of the event. Always acknowledge them in all event materials.

**TIP** - Community size affects donation amounts. For larger communities, focus on getting \$2,500 grants from funders. In smaller communities, focus on getting \$500 grants from funders.

## PUBLICIZING THE SUMMIT

Recruiting the obvious wildlife proponents to attend the event should be easy, but what about the other target audiences like garden club members? How do you get people outside your existing network to register? The answer is *publicity*.

Some things to think about:

1. **What Is Your Message?** - Before contacting these other audiences, clearly spell out what you want people to know about your event. Revisit your event goals. Reaffirming your purpose will help your event and solicit interest. (Sample message: "Oklahoma Wildlife Summit will highlight need to conserve wildlife and natural areas for future generations.") Try to work this message into the summit title, as well.
2. **What Are Your Targets?** - Armed with your message, determine what options you have, and prioritize them in order of importance. Which outlets are likely to give you the best "bang for your buck?" The following sources should be considered (you may know of others):
  - Facebook Event
  - Create a hashtag for your event and get partner organizations to tweet regularly
  - Organizational Newsletter Articles
  - Large media outlets, including news, features and editorial section
  - Local outdoor recreation businesses
  - Newspaper Calendars
  - Target audience website calendars

**If you wish to get broad publicity for your summit: The purpose would be raise the overall issue not to drive attendance:** - Invest your energy into acquiring at least one large promotional piece (e.g., a Sunday opinion article in the leading newspaper or radio show devoted solely to the event topic), then saturate as many smaller channels as possible. Do not devote all of your time to the big article while neglecting smaller channels altogether because if your big opportunity falls through, you've got nothing. Similarly, don't only consider small channels without taking some risks on larger opportunities.

3. **Materials to Generate** - After you prioritize your media targets, begin soliciting coverage. Make it easy for them by doing as much of the leg work as possible. That means having helpful materials, including:
  - Media advisory - Have a one-page "who, what, where, when and why" - goes out 1-2 days before the event.
  - Press release - A one or two page description of the event, including quotes and "news" from the event, should be faxed or emailed out the day of the event, and included in press packets at the event. Note: Keep in mind to think of media deadlines (e.g., TV and radio deadlines).
  - Event brochure—simple and to the point.
  - One-page fact sheets



- Draft newsletter article
- General event packet—including available b-roll, NAT sound for TV and radio outlets where necessary.
- Contact lists—Try to be as specific as possible. Do not email or call “general” listings. Try to reach a assignment editor (TV) or editor if you are having trouble reaching a specific contact.
- Radio Public Service Announcement - Write a script that times out to 10, 15 or 30 seconds. It should include the who, what, where, when, why information you describe in your media advisory.
- A list of event spokespeople (e.g. your agency or organization executive director). The higher-level leadership make a big impact.

**REMEMBER - Personal Contacts & Follow-Up** - Figure out which reporters, managers and editors make the decisions and speak to them in person or over the phone. Always remember to follow-up. Just because six weeks ago an editor said your event would be in the calendar does not mean that it actually will appear. Check in to make sure you are actually getting the coverage you seek.

**REMEMBER** - Make sure all your advertising **clearly** indicates where and when the summit takes place and how people can register.

## THE HOME STRETCH

By the time you reach the two last weeks before your event, all major planning should be complete. You should spend this time following up with your speakers, volunteers, reporters, event location, caterers and just about everyone else involved. This is also a big time for small details: nametags, signs, registration lists, tables, chairs, audio-visual needs, and the like.

## FOLLOW-UP

Think through how the summit fits into your long-term initiative and the larger state wildlife coalition you are building. The summit should be a springboard to action in your community and beyond. Consider these follow-up steps:

- Always thank speakers, planners, funders, co-sponsors, etc. in writing. Thank anyone who had anything to do with planning the event. They’ll appreciate it and will want to work with you in the future.
- Evaluate the event with your “core group” and decide on next steps.
- Send an email to all event attendees asking them to do something (write a letter, attend a meeting, etc.) Make sure all groups represented have endorsed the mission of the state wildlife coalition.
- Capitalize on political/grassroots momentum. Know what you want to do ahead of time (e.g., ask the Governor to contact the congressional delegation, ask the Mayor to lobby in D.C., etc.).
- Determine who will manage the event database over time.
- Media follow-up - Did the event create a post-media buzz? Help the event get covered as a news item.

## SAMPLE TIMELINE

4 Months Out	Begin initial research on State Wildlife Action Plan projects through meetings with wildlife groups and agencies.
4 Months Out	Recruit core group.
4 Months Out	Begin summit agenda planning. Determine possible date & location with core group. Identify possible funders.
3 ½ Months Out	Finalize date and location. Continue summit agenda planning.

3 ½ Months Out	Start Fundraising. Begin recruiting co-sponsors.
3 Months Out	Start gathering images and putting together slide-show/
3 Months Out	Put together PowerPoint presentation.
2 ½ Months Out	Hold meetings with co-sponsors to get input on agenda and speakers. Continue gathering pictures for slide-show/PowerPoint. Continue fundraising. Finish research.
2 Months Out	Finalize agenda. Continue fundraising. Continue getting pictures for slide show/PowerPoint. Design brochure.
1 ½ Months Out	Complete fundraising. Start publicity.
1 Month Out	Set up summit database. Send out brochures.
One Week Out	Follow up with everyone. Phone bank mailing list. Develop summit materials. Distribute Media Advisory.
Day of the Summit	Distribute your press release. Hold the summit.
After the Summit	Thank everyone. Evaluate summit with co-sponsors and core group. Get attendees involved in funding campaign.