

Understanding the Species Mitigation Market in the United States and the Impacts on Sustainable Development

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As the United States transitions to a clean energy future, a commonly overlooked challenge is the large scale footprint that accompanies renewable energy development. The infrastructure of renewable energy, or “energy sprawl,” is often developed on land with critical wildlife habitat. In order for the United States to meet its ambitious renewable energy targets, it is important to accelerate renewable energy without negatively impacting threatened species and their habitats.

Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs) approved by the Federal Government under the Endangered Species Act allow project developers to plan ahead in order to avoid, minimize and mitigate for the harm of their projects on threatened wildlife and habitats. The HCP program has been in place for more than 30 years, providing substantial levels of mitigation funding for conservation. However, as a mitigation market for species, the program is not well understood. Little is widely known about the national program’s direction over time, the total amount of compensatory mitigation being delivered, and whether or not mitigation dollars are being directed to maximize conservation outcomes.

In this study, we sought to identify trends in the program, and to study the design and delivery of compensatory mitigation under a set of 30 HCPs. Since the first Plan was approved in 1983, 946 HCPs covering over 97 million acres of land nationwide have been implemented across the United States. Additionally, we looked at 30 plans in detail, with planned compensatory mitigation totaling \$6.3 billion dollars. Given the large sums that are to be spent on critical habitat, it is essential that the delivery of the HCP program is able to be easily understood by all stakeholders- the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), which manages the program; communities; advocates, and developers.

Throughout our study, we encountered obstacles in accessing accurate, complete, and consistent information about HCPs. Therefore, the final portion of this project includes recommended improvements to the accessibility, accuracy, and consistency of this information. Moreover, we recommend the development of standardized metrics for the implementation of HCPs, and we propose a framework for reporting these metrics, which would allow stakeholders to more easily find and understand whether permittees were delivering on the commitments in their HCPs.

In order to understand the species mitigation markets under HCPs in the United States, it is important that cumulative compensation delivered to date is tracked. The integration of a high-level framework to track spending on mitigation projects under HCPs in the national database will provide a single location to input and monitor the progress of all plans in the history of the program, enabling all stakeholders to have a better understanding whether permittees were meeting their compensatory mitigation obligations, and delivering conservation outcomes across the country.

