

**Crucial Areas Planning System**  
**Frequently Asked Questions**  
**May 2015**

**Q: What is the Crucial Areas Planning System (CAPS)?**

**A:** CAPS is a Web-based mapping application intended to provide useful information during the early planning stages of development projects, conservation opportunities, and environmental reviews.

**Q: How can I use CAPS in my planning?**

**A:** CAPS is an informational tool that may be consulted at an early stage in your process - the sooner in the planning stages, the better. CAPS does not replace the need to consult with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) staff. FWP recommends that you contact local FWP biologists directly, to learn whether or not your area of interest may play an important role in supporting fish and wildlife populations.

**Q: Why can't I get species level data?**

**A:** FWP combined species level data with other pertinent information in order to develop the various data layers for CAPS. Species level data can be found at <http://fwp.mt.gov/doingBusiness/reference/gisData/dataDownload.html> or by consulting with the local FWP biologist.

**Q: Where are the crucial areas?**

**A:** Crucial Habitat Rank is a statewide layer that represents a single relative rank of each area from high to low. This final rank is a compilation of several contributing data sources. Examine each source and read the documentation to learn more.

**Q: Who developed these data?**

**A:** FWP's Fish and Wildlife Divisions developed the data with advice and input from other public and private sector biologists familiar with Montana's fish and wildlife resources.

**Q: How were these data developed?**

**A:** Details on the methods for developing each of the data layers are available from the documentation links on the Crucial Areas home page <http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/conservationInAction/crucialAreas.html> and at the bottom of the CAPS mapping tool page.

**Q: Are threatened and endangered (T/E) species represented?**

**A:** Yes, federally listed T/E species known to occur in Montana have been taken into account. However, CAPS does not replace the need for an Endangered Species Act federal consultation.

**Q: What is the scale of the data?**

**A:** Crucial habitat data are displayed in hexagons with a resolution of one square mile. This provides a coarse level of resolution and is more consistent with Westwide Crucial Habitat Assessment Tools. Use of these data layers at a more localized scale is not appropriate and may lead to inaccurate interpretations of the data.

**Q: Why is the data displayed using hexagons?**

**A:** The hexagonal grid used for displaying data was developed by the Western States' Crucial Habitat Assessment team. Hexagons were chosen because they are uniform in size, not dependent on political boundaries, and provide a minimum of distortion when displayed across the entire study area.

**Q: Can information presented in CAPS be used in place of information provided by the Montana Natural Heritage Program or consultation with an FWP biologist?**

A: No, information presented in CAPS is for preliminary landscape scale planning. Information provided through consultation with an FWP biologist and by the Montana Natural Heritage Program is still required for local site level analyses.

**Q: Where can I go to get assistance in using CAPS, or if I have other questions about CAPS (e.g. report data errors, offer additional information)?**

A: For program and/or policy questions contact Paul Sihler, Chief of Operations — (406) 444-3196.  
For technical and/or data questions contact Dawn Anderson, Data Services Bureau Chief — (406) 444-3373.

**Q: How do I cite CAPS and CAPS datasets?**

A: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. Crucial Areas Planning System (CAPS). Published April 2015. Accessed [Insert Date] <http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/conservationInAction/crucialAreas.html>.

**Q: How does CAPS differ from the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP)?**

A: Similar to CAPS, SWAP data uses categorical designations to display the relative importance of habitats to species throughout the state. CAPS data differs from SWAP data in that SWAP data primarily emphasize habitats for Montana's species of concern (SOC), whereas CAPS depicts both game and nongame species and their habitats as useful pieces of information when considering potential impacts from development, conservation, and land or species management actions. SWAP data were developed to fulfill obligations for obtaining funding through the State Wildlife Grant (SWG) program, a federal program that assists states to conserve wildlife and habitats at risk of being listed as threatened or endangered. Key elements of each SWAP are the identification of local management needs, threats, priorities, and actions that are needed to prevent declines in species of concern. As such, Montana's SWAP highlights priority areas where specific actions are needed to conserve at risk species and habitats.

**Q: How do I access or download CAPS data for use in my project?**

A: The statewide Crucial Habitat Rank and Tier 1 inputs layer is available on FWP's GIS data download page at <http://fwp.mt.gov/doingBusiness/reference/gisData/dataDownload.html>. The west-wide layer is currently available through the regional viewer at [wafwachat.org](http://wafwachat.org). Other FWP layers may be available through FWP's Mediated Data Request Process (see FWP's GIS data download page for more information).