A Decade of Effort by the ESA Vegetation Panel Leads to a New Federal Standard

On 11 February 2008 the Steering Committee of the U.S. Federal Geographic Data Committee formally approved the 2008 National Vegetation Classification Standard. This event represented the culmination of over a decade of effort by the ESA Panel on Vegetation Classification. The first FGDC Vegetation Classification Standard adopted in 1997 (following ESA Vegetation Panel review and recommendations) left unspecified the specific floristic classification units at the finest levels of the national vegetation classification: the associations and the alliances. The ESA Vegetation Panel immediately undertook the task of developing a process for recognizing these individual vegetation types. A decade of deliberations and collaborations led to a formal set of recommendations described in a detailed document available on the ESA Vegetation Panel web site ‹http://www.esa.org/vegweb/panelActivities.php› as well as an article on "Characterizing associations and alliances of the U.S. National Vegetation Classification," to be published in *Ecological Monographs* in 2009.

The 2008 Vegetation Standard established a dynamic content process for classifying vegetation in a physiognomic/floristic vegetation hierarchy. Interagency Federal use of the Standard will produce nationally uniform Federal vegetation statistics and will provide encouragement to non-Federal partners to follow the Standard when working with their Federal partners. The Standard was developed by Federal and nongovernmental partners, including the Vegetation Panel of the Ecological Society of America, the Federal Geographic Data Committee Vegetation Subcommittee, U.S. Forest Service, National Biological Information Infrastructure (USGS), and NatureServe. The U.S. Forest Service, acting through the Vegetation Subcommittee and working closely with the partners, is the lead federal agency tasked to oversee funding acquisition, partnership development, and effective operation of the components.

One problem confronted by the ESA Vegetation Panel and the FGDC Vegetation Subcommittee was that there is a need to recognize thousands of vegetation types distributed across the country, yet, as with classification of organisms or soils, our understanding of vegetation is continually improving. As a consequence, the slow and often tortuous path required for changes in FGDC standards would not be practical for handing the anticipated frequent changes in the recognized set of vegetation types. The solution adopted is a type of standard entirely new to the FGDC, a dynamic content standard.

As a dynamic content standard, the FGDC Vegetation Standard creates a process for adopting, describing, and improving individual vegetation classification types over time. This process brings together five core components: (1) maintenance and serving of classification content, (2) maintenance and distribution of supporting data, (3) preparation and submission of proposals for revision of the

content, (4) peer review and evaluation of proposals for revision of the content, and (5) publication of peer review results and incorporation of approved changes into the public record of the classification content. The ESA Panel has been intimately involved in the development of both the Standard and the requisite infrastructure for its implementation. The Panel, with support from NSF, built ‹Vegbank.org›, an international vegetation plot archive to provide access to the data underpinning classification decisions. The Panel also built a prototype web site for submission and processing of proposals for changes in the classification, and for dissemination of the accepted proposals through online publication of a Proceedings. The Panel anticipates continuing to bring ESA's professional credibility and expertise in peer review and publication to the partnership responsible for the implementation of the new Standard.

The partnership between ESA and the FGDC in development of the new Vegetation Standard is an outstanding example of the way ESA can constructively contribute at a federal level by providing scientific advice and guidance to federal agencies, and helping to develop and guide the implementation of government standards for science.

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Gift of *Plant World* from Mrs. Robert L. Burgess

Vera Burgess, the widow of Robert L. Burgess (1931–2002), former Chair of the Department of Environmental and Forest Biology at the State University of New York, School of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse, has donated 10 volumes of *Plant World*, the direct predecessor of the journal *Ecology*, to the Ecological Society of America. These early volumes contain valuable insights into the development of many of the ecological concepts important today, and also into the intellectual climate in which our society was formed. Professor Burgess was keenly interested in the history of ecology and the scientists who are landmarks in the development of the science.

The Ecological Society thanks Mrs. Burgess for this unique and significant gift. (A Resolution of Respect for Professor Burgess can be found in the online *ESA Bulletin* 88(2):123–125, 2007.)