



Status and Trends of the Nation's Wetlands

A new report by the Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service, *Status and Trends of Wetlands in the Conterminous United States 1986 to 1997*, indicates the rate of wetland loss in the United States has decreased by 80 percent in the past decade. This is the greatest measured overall decline in the rate of wetland loss since records have been compiled by the Federal government. These results point out that the American public needs to remain diligent in its commitment to wetland protection, so the substantial progress being made in wetland protection is not lost in the future.

A separate scientifically-based survey, the National Resources Inventory (NRI), conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service, on the Nation's private lands for the period 1992 to 1997, also showed a significant reduction in wetland losses. The NRI reports that the rate of wetland loss has declined even more between 1992 and 1997 than in the previous five years. The NRI differs from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Wetlands Status and Trends report in its legislative mandate and purpose, as well as time frame, scope, focus, and methodologies. The revised 1997 NRI provides information on the status and trends of soil, water and related resources on the Nation's privately owned lands on a national, regional, and state basis.



The Fish and Wildlife Service Wetland Status and Trends report shows that the loss rate of estuarine wetlands along the nation's coastlines declined substantially. However, freshwater wetlands in coastal areas remained susceptible to loss because of development. While the study also reported that between 1986 and 1997, forested wetlands and freshwater wetlands continued to show the most dramatic losses, the conversion of forested wetlands to agriculture had been reduced in places such as the lower Mississippi alluvial plain and southeast coastal states.

Much of the overall decline in wetland loss can be attributed to wetland policies and programs enacted in the past decade that have helped reduce draining and filling of wetlands, while increasing wetland restoration, creation and enhancement. Important among these were more vigilant regulation of activities that impact wetlands, elimination of incentives for wetland drainage, acquisition and conservation easements, public education and outreach about wetlands. Other efforts included private land initiatives, coastal resource protection programs, and wetland restoration and creation actions by Federal, State, and local agencies, working in concert with business, citizen associations, and youth groups.

The Nation is clearly on the correct path to fulfill the National goal of “no net loss” of wetlands. These wetland findings of the Service further demonstrate that economic growth and development can occur in concert with natural resource conservation.

Recognition of Wetlands as Valuable Habitats

The United States has made a nearly complete reversal from the days of the Swampland Acts of 1849 and 1860, when many wetlands were cleared and drained. Today, wetlands are widely recognized for the multitude of benefits they provide society. Wetlands perform important functions to protect water quality by filtering out pollutants, providing natural flood control by slowing down and absorbing excess water, buffering coastal areas from erosion, waves or storm surge. They also provide varied aesthetic and recreational opportunities for millions of people.

Wetlands are biologically diverse and dynamic ecosystems that occur in every State. They support diverse populations of fish, wildlife, and plants of economic and social importance. Many of the Nation’s endangered and threatened species are dependent on wetlands, and wetland habitats provide hunting, fishing and birdwatching opportunities.

A Continuing Record of Success

Since early in 1993, Federal agencies have adopted policies accentuating fair, flexible approaches to wetland conservation and stewardship, which include educating the public about wetland values, benefits and the sustainable use of wetland resources. There have also been dramatic additions to wetland preserves and Federal lands including National Parks, National Monuments, National Wildlife Refuges, Scenic Riverways and wilderness areas. An array of Federal, Tribal, State, local, and private organizations are actively working to achieve the world’s largest wetland restoration project ever conceived in the Florida Everglades.

The findings of the Fish and Wildlife Service’s wetlands status and trends report reflect the results of many ongoing landscape and local level changes on both Federal and non-Federal lands. Substantial progress during the past decade has been accomplished on three fronts to help achieve wetland resource goals:

- Loss and degradation of wetlands have been avoided by Federal, Tribal, State, and local programs that regulate development activities that affect wetlands and waters.
- Refined land and water management practices and strategic acquisition initiatives have been implemented to conserve or add unique and imperiled wetland resources to the nation’s network of public lands.
- New initiatives have been developed and implemented to intensify wetland restoration and creation efforts. These incentive and partnership-based programs have set the stage for Federal agencies, Tribes, the States, and other partners to expand these efforts in coming years to benefit impaired aquatic habitat resources.



Wetland Protection and Management

Federal agencies have traditionally focused on the protection, monitoring, and regulatory oversight of wetlands and the species that inhabit them. Many States have established wetland protection statutes and regulations, coastal zone and growth management plans, and wetland resource agencies and programs. Tribal and local governments also participate in protecting and managing wetlands important to their communities.

In recent years, the Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have improved the effectiveness of wetlands regulations under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. This has been accomplished by reducing losses from the use of general permits, addressing discharges of dredged material to the extent permissible under current law, and improving forestry practices in wetlands. These agencies have also developed innovative ways to compensate for unavoidable damages to wetlands, and have worked more closely with State, Tribal and local government agencies toward fair, flexible, and effective protection.

The rate of freshwater wetland loss to agricultural activities declined substantially from the previous



Wetland Protection Highlights

- The Fish and Wildlife Service is working to conserve coastal wetlands through Coastal Program partnerships that identify solutions and opportunities to solve mutual resource problems in concert with others through on-the-ground projects. The program is in place in 11 of the Nation's highest priority coastal areas, and has restored over 63,000 acres and protected 166,000 acres of coastal habitats in the past 6 years.
- The Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service continue to enter into innovative partnerships to protect habitat by completing over 300 Habitat Conservation Plans designed to protect more than 20 million acres of lands vital to the survival and recovery of over 200 threatened and endangered species.
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency grants have helped build and strengthen the capabilities of states, Tribes, and local organizations to develop and manage effective wetland protection and local restoration programs.
- Conservation partnerships have been strengthened with farmers as a result of Department of Agriculture conservation programs such as the Conservation Reserve and Wetlands Reserve programs.
- The Corps of Engineers is implementing new and modified replacement Nationwide Permits designed to reduce wetland impacts and that also provide additional protections to critical resource waters, 100-year flood plains, and streams.
- The U.S. Department of Transportation is continuing to minimize negative impacts on wetlands with the goal of replacing 1.5 acres for every acre affected within ten years.

decade. The implementation of "Swampbuster" provisions of the 1985 and subsequent versions of the Food Security Act, coupled with agricultural set-aside and land retirement programs such as the Wetland Reserve are most likely responsible for the reduction in wetland losses. This difference suggests that during the 1990s, agricultural wetlands policy was effective in slowing the conversion of forested wetlands for crop production.

Wetland Stewardship

Wetlands on Federal properties are an important component of the Nation's resource base. They help preserve wetland habitat resources and cultural heritage values for future generations to enjoy. This vast mosaic of protected lands and waters provide key strongholds of fish and wildlife resources, and unparalleled examples of habitats that are unique or representative of America. These Federal units include National Wildlife Refuges, and National Parks and Seashores that contain tracts of wetland habitats where human intervention is limited, thus permitting observation of natural changes in these wetland ecosystems that occur over time.



Wetland Restoration, Creation and Enhancement

In recent years there has been considerable emphasis on wetland restoration or rehabilitation activities. Now, Federal agencies such as the Departments of the Army, Interior, and Agriculture have been vested by Congress with new or redefined environmental missions that have benefitted wetlands. This has enabled many projects to begin to restore habitats, many of which focus on or include wetland systems and associated uplands. Using these authorities and by building partnerships, many worthwhile projects have been completed by Federal, Tribal, State, local, and private organizations and citizens working together.

Previous studies by the Fish and Wildlife Service have reported that, between 1987 and 1990, programs to restore wetlands under the 1985 Food Security Act added about 90,000 acres to the Nation's wetland base. Since then, additional programs and initiatives have been enacted to create or restore wetland acreage. Between 1986 and 1997, there was a net gain of about 180,000 acres of wetlands from uplands such as forest, grass and scrub lands. The majority of this gain in wetlands from uplands was attributable to Federal wetland protection and restoration programs.

Wetland Stewardship Highlights

- The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, provided organic legislation to guide Fish and Wildlife Service planning, management, and compatible uses for this 93 million acre system of Federal lands that protects and conserves a myriad of the Nation's wetland habitats.
- The Fish and Wildlife Service has expanded the National Wildlife Refuge System by acquiring interests in over 2 million acres of land, including the establishment of 34 new refuges and 24 waterfowl production areas between 1993 and 1999 that protect many important wetland habitats.
- The Clean Water Action Plan, a coordinated Intergovernmental effort, formed the core of President Clinton's Clean Water Initiative in 1999 to restore and protect watersheds.
- The America's Forests Initiative was designed to protect over 40 million acres of wilderness including many forested wetlands.
- The Department of Army Civil Works Program has jurisdiction over 12 million acres of water and related habitat resources. Using best management practices and stewardship programs, the Corps of Engineers manages these properties in ways to restore and protect wetlands.
- Presidential establishment of the California Coastal National Monument preserved thousands of acres of Federally owned coastal wetlands and islands along the California coast.

Wetland Restoration Highlights

- A coalition of Federal and State agencies in Florida is working together to revive millions of acres of saw grass prairies, mangrove and cypress swamps, hardwood hammocks, and coral reefs of the Everglades ecosystem. The recently enacted Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Program, the largest and most ambitious wetland restoration effort ever undertaken, will return natural water flows to benefit these wetlands and south Florida communities. To date this partnership has added nearly 70,000 acres to Everglades National Park.
- The Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act of 1990 (called CWPPRA or the Breaux Act) was recently reauthorized and provides funds for protecting, restoring, and conserving threatened wetlands. Louisiana is the focus of the Act, given that 40 percent of the coastal wetlands in the contiguous United States occur there. A multi-agency Federal Task Force, and the Louisiana Governor's Office annually select meritorious projects. To date over 120 wetlands projects have been authorized for construction.
- Through a broad stakeholder-based initiative called CALFED, restoration of the California Bay-Delta Ecosystem and development of a long-term strategy to ensure proper ecosystem management of water resources is underway. With leadership and support from the Department of the Interior, over 130 ecosystem restoration projects have been undertaken.
- The Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program is working with landowners on a voluntary basis to meet the Nation's wetland restoration goals by generating significant habitat restoration accomplishments. In the past decade, over 900,000 acres of wetlands and uplands have been restored, and over 2700 miles of riparian and instream habitat have been rehabilitated.
- The Wetlands Reserve Program of the Department of Agriculture is a voluntary program that offers financial support to landowners for wetland restoration projects. During 1998, roughly 212,000 acres were enrolled in this program.
- A consortium of 11 Federal agencies (including the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Interior) has been working on administrative reform actions aimed at halting wetland loss and accelerating the process of regaining wetlands through restoration and creation. A goal of this Clean Water Action Plan effort is to achieve a net increase of 100,000 acres of wetlands each year by 2005.
- The North American Waterfowl Management Plan, begun in 1986 to increase cooperative efforts to protect waterfowl habitat, was updated in 1994 and its commitments expanded. The Plan is responsible for many wetland restoration and enhancement activities throughout North America. Mexico became a signatory, joining longstanding partner Canada. Habitat protection increased to nearly 15 million acres, which includes many tracts of wetlands important to migratory birds and wildlife.
- The Environmental Management Program, administered by the Corps of Engineers, is a successful partnership with several Federal agencies, five States, and numerous stakeholder organizations to support ecosystem based restoration of fish and wildlife resources of the upper Mississippi River basin. Most of the over 30,000 acres of restored habitat in the past decade have been wetlands, riparian or river associated uplands.

Wetlands - The Road Ahead

Although the estimated loss of about 58,500 acres of wetlands each year is not “no-net-loss” of wetlands, the Nation has made substantial progress toward achieving this goal. With this substantial reduction in the rate of loss, and a solid foundation of wetland protection and restoration programs, the Nation is well positioned to achieve net gains of wetlands and related habitats. Additional steps to build upon our success in stemming overall wetlands loss and to achieve net gains of wetlands in the future will include:

- Forested wetlands and freshwater wetlands continue to show the most dramatic losses. A full suite of protection, acquisition, and restoration policy options need to be developed and implemented to curtail future losses and restore these vulnerable freshwater ecosystems.
- Although fewer wetlands are being lost nationwide, selected types of wetlands in specific locales remain vulnerable to loss and degradation. Wetland assessments specific to strategic geographic regions and watersheds of the Nation are needed to provide status and trends information to decision-makers to address these issues.
- To complement regional assessments, the Federal agencies should enhance existing partnerships or develop new ones, to promote wetland protection, restoration, and creation activities with States, Tribes, communities, industry, and other private-sector organizations.
- Our Nation’s wetlands goals have traditionally been based on wetland acreage. This standard has and will continue to serve us well as we strive to achieve sustained net gains of wetland acreage. However, the condition of many of our remaining wetlands is impaired, and addressing those problems must become an increasingly important part of national wetland protection efforts. Future wetland policies and initiatives will need to consider and emphasize wetland quality by promoting functional restoration of existing degraded wetlands, protecting and improving water and soil quality in aquatic habitats, and enforcing comprehensive standards for compensatory wetland mitigation efforts.
- Finally, the Federal community needs to intensify outreach efforts to disseminate information about successful partnerships working to meet national wetland goals, as well as future challenges and opportunities.



For More Information on Wetlands, Please Contact:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
National Marine Fisheries Service
Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

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<http://www.epa.gov/owow/wetlands/>
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