



The Iowa Environmental Council's position on Wetland and Riparian Resources

Wetland and riparian resource policy and management is as complex as the threatened ecosystems themselves. Current approaches fail to recognize the full value of Iowa's remaining wetlands; they fail to offer adequate protections of existing wetlands; and they sometimes hinder comprehensive planning and management efforts for some of Iowa's most valuable natural resources.

The Iowa Environmental Council supports initiatives to:

1. Stop wetland destruction and loss, and strengthen wetland protections and restoration efforts.
2. Develop comprehensive and coordinated approaches to wetland management.
3. Dedicate sufficient resources to wetland education, research, protection, and restoration efforts.

Definitions: *Wetlands* are defined by the presence of water, soil type and plant type. These ecosystems are periodically saturated and under normal circumstances support plants that are adapted to saturated soils. Examples of wetlands include open water, ponds, marshes, wet meadows (transition zones between marshes and low prairies), and alluvial forests (typically in the floodplains of rivers). *Riparian areas* are typically the floodplains and banks of rivers and streams. Vegetation cover can vary from woodlands to shrubs to prairie.

Wetlands and riparian areas are distinct ecosystems. From a policy perspective, they can be joined. For this reason, and to make this paper more readable, we use the term "wetlands" to describe both technical wetlands and riparian areas.

Background

Iowa's wetland and riparian resources have suffered extensive change, degradation, and destruction. Iowa has lost 89-95% of its original wetlands—one of the highest rates of loss in the nation. Once, Iowa could boast of 4 to 5 million acres of wetlands. Today we have an estimated 500,000 acres remaining.

There are many reasons for this loss. Wetlands were drained and streams straightened to make land more suitable for farming. Public health concerns linking wetlands to disease prompted additional destruction. However, these historical trends are changing. After 150 years of destruction, we are learning the value of wetlands. They provide important plant and animal habitat. Wetlands control pollution (especially sediment and nutrient runoff), reduce flooding, recharge aquifers, provide drinking water, and offer recreation opportunity.

Across the nation, many states are working to protect existing wetlands and restore others. While wetland destruction has slowed as Iowans have come to recognize the value of wetlands and the costs

associated with their destruction, the loss of Iowa's wetlands has not stopped.

Protection and enhancement of the Iowa's wetlands are hindered on several fronts.

The limits of our expertise. More and more wetlands are being constructed to mitigate or replace existing wetlands consumed by development—from farmland drainage, road building, and urban expansion. However, where studies are being done, it appears constructed wetlands have yet to match the functional quality of the natural wetlands they are meant to replace. Studies continue to improve the quality of constructed wetlands—including where best to site them in a watershed, the most effective sizes, and appropriate mixes of groups and isolated wetlands.

The lack of a general public appreciation of the benefits of wetlands. Wetlands and riparian areas are complex and varied ecosystems. Some areas look like wetlands but technically aren't; some areas don't look like wetlands, but they really are.

Background (con't)

Too many Iowans still think of wetlands as insect-breeding swamps or marginal farmland in need of improvement, instead of appreciating wetlands' role in water quality, flood control, wildlife habitat, and recreation.

Contradictory and complex public efforts. In Iowa, wetland policy and management falls under the jurisdiction of four federal agencies, two state agencies (in close relationship with the 100 Soil and Water Conservation Districts), 99 county conservation boards, and about 3,500 local Drainage Districts.

This complex labyrinth of federal, state, and local efforts sometimes works at odds. Some policies and programs support activities that destroy wetlands, while at the same time other policies seek to protect and restore wetlands.

In addition, recent policy changes, particularly at the federal level and through the courts, have curtailed or weakened some wetland protections. In particular, isolated wetlands (those not connected to a river or a stream)—of which Iowa has a great many—are at much greater risk today than they were just a few years ago.

The Iowa Environmental Council's position

1. Stop wetland destruction and loss, and strengthen wetland protection and restoration efforts.

- Due to January 2001 U.S. Supreme Court decision, isolated wetlands are in immediate need of protection through state legislation.
- The Army Corps of Engineers should reinstitute the March 2000 restrictions in the nationwide general permit process, rather than the more recently adopted rules.
- The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) should be expanded to allow for higher enrollment. The most immediate need, however, is to eliminate the current backlog in WRP applications.
- Whenever possible, wetland programs should be coordinated to improve their efficiency and effectiveness. Watershed Group formation and action should be encouraged, and should seek to transform Iowa's Drainage Districts into mechanisms for greater wetland protection.
- The Protected Wetlands law of 1990 (456B, Iowa Code) should be updated, strengthened, and adequately funded.
- Rules and regulations encouraging wetland destruction should be re-examined. For example, Chapter 468 of the Iowa Code states: "The drainage of surface waters from agricultural lands and all other lands . . . shall be presumed to be a public benefit and conducive to public health, convenience, and welfare."

2. Develop comprehensive and coordinated approaches to wetland management.

- Assemble, maintain, and make easily accessible accurate data on Iowa's wetlands—including monitoring data, data on isolated wetlands, and the quality of mitigated wetland reconstruction.
- Support wetland management within watershed-based management, particularly relating to water quality, flood control, and economic development issues.
- Work to implement the *Iowa Wetlands and Riparian Areas Conservation Plan* by maintaining and coordinating a Council presence on relevant committees and regulatory advisory boards and commissions.

3. Dedicate sufficient resources to education, research, protection, and restoration efforts.

- Iowa should establish a realistic goal for a net gain of wetlands in the state, and dedicate sufficient resources to achieve that goal.
- Educational, research, and other outreach programs should be developed to foster greater understanding and appreciation for the functions, values, and economic benefits of wetlands and riparian areas as they relate to water quality, public health, flood control, community development, agricultural production, and wildlife habitat.

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