
Today Wetland Looks Better Than Cropland

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Some 5 percent of the surface area of the 48 contiguous States is wetland, but its productivity is disproportionate to its size and its value, frequently underrated. Pollution control, flood reduction, and habitat for fish and wildlife are wetland values important to everyone. However, farmers and ranchers have used wetlands for irrigation water, grazing lands, livestock water, hay, timber, and crops. Even more valuable to the agricultural community are the drained wetlands that today make up much of the Nation's farmland. Today Americans are looking to halt further depletion of wetlands through effective legislation and wider public awareness.

What's Important Today?

Wetlands are useful environmental filters. Small wetlands perched high in watersheds act as traps for soil sediments to keep them out of rivers and lakes. Excess fertilizers and pesticides that run off the land are also trapped in wetlands where they are broken down chemically or absorbed by wetland vegetation and broken down by biological processes. Water which leaves wetlands, whether to surface streams or underground

aquifers, contains fewer chemicals to jeopardize future users.

During heavy storms, wetlands immediately swell as they hold back excessive runoff. They recede slowly—releasing the excess water and reducing the height of downstream floods. Wetlands help water to percolate through soil and ultimately into underground aquifers.

Waterfowl, shorebirds, aquatic mammals, and fish depend on wetlands. The commercial marine fishery, worth \$10 billion annually, is largely dependent on species that spawn in coastal wetlands. Equally dependent are sport fishermen who spend \$17 billion a year and waterfowl hunters who spend another \$638 million on sports made possible by wetland. Upland game birds and small and big game animals use wetland habitat, too.

1800's Wetlands Policy

Federal policy toward wetlands has undergone considerable change. In the 1800's most Americans were farmers and Federal policy was to transfer public lands, including wetlands, to private owners for agricultural development. In the mid-19th century

a series of Swamp Land Acts gave 65 million acres of Federal land to 15 States for reclamation. Some of the Nation's best farmland was converted from wetland during that period.

Protecting Waterfowl Habitat

By the turn of the century, however, at least one wetland value, waterfowl habitat, was in jeopardy. Conservationists used the 1916 Migratory Bird Treaty with Great Britain as an opportunity to reconsider the Nation's wetland policies and programs. As a result, laws created and enlarged the National Wildlife Refuge System. Using funds mostly from hunters and other recreational wetland users, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) began wetland acquisition and to date has acquired control of more than 4.6 million acres of wetland in the contiguous 48 States.

Impact of Water Projects

Twentieth century Federal water projects profoundly affected wetlands. Drainage and flood control projects destroyed wetlands or provided convenient outlets into which individual farmers could drain their wetlands. Searching for a balance between needs for resource development and resource conservation, Congress passed laws requiring that wildlife habitat and other environmental values be considered in the planning of Federal projects.

Foremost were the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act of 1958, the National

Environmental Policy Act of 1969, and the Endangered Species Act of 1973. These acts established requirements to minimize environmental damages, including avoidance of wetland loss and mitigation where wetland was unavoidably damaged as a result of Federal water projects.

United States Army Corps of Engineers

In 1972, Congress expanded the United States Army Corps of Engineers regulatory authority to include wetlands. Corps permits are required for the discharge of dredged or fill material into wetlands. However, most agricultural and forestry activities were exempted by a 1977 amendment.

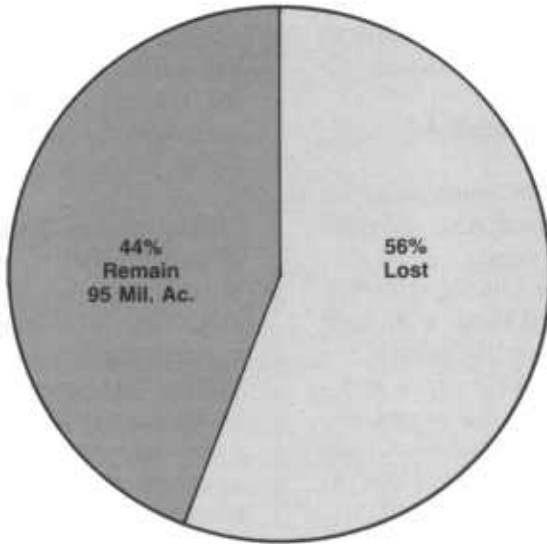
U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

Recognizing the contributions of wetland as well as its endangered status, the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) revised its policy of cost sharing for drainage and creation of wetlands in 1975. It ceased providing technical and financial assistance for drainage of permanent wetlands. In 1977, SCS further restricted its drainage assistance to seasonal wetlands only if they had been cultivated for 3 of the 5 years before the drainage request.

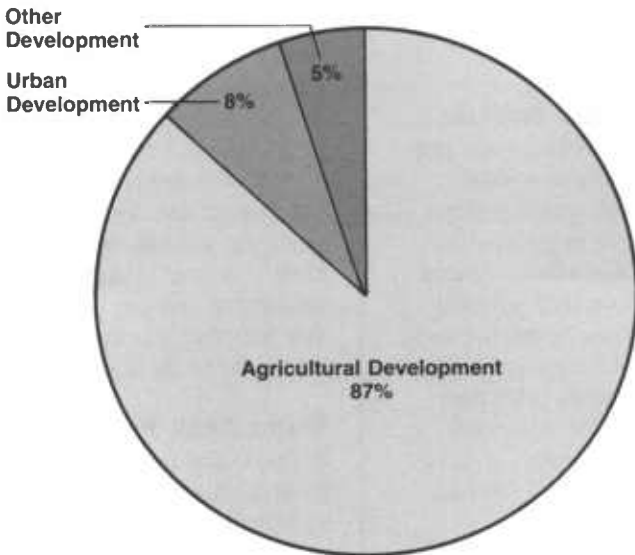
Water Bank Program

In 1979, USDA began a major wetland preservation program with the authorization of the Water Bank Program. Under Water Bank, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation

U.S. Wetlands (Lower 48)



Man-Induced Wetland Losses Mid-50's to Mid-70's





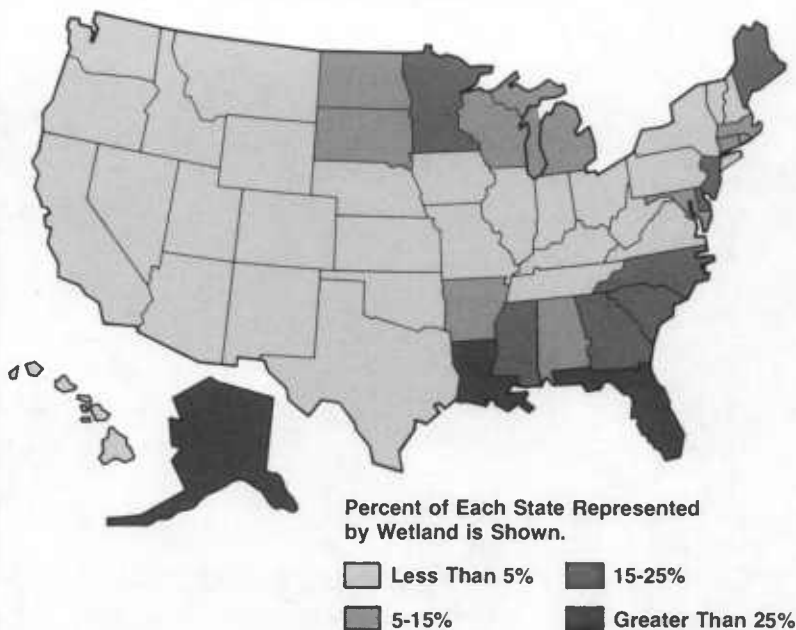
An average loss of more than 450,000 wetland acres a year occurred between 1954 and 1974, with 87 percent of that loss attributed to agriculture. Recent legislation may help reduce wetland losses in the future. (Tim McCabe, SCS)

Service (ASCS) makes annual payments to farmers who preserve their wetlands and maintain wildlife habitat on adjacent uplands. The program is located in the prairie pothole region and in other States that have significant production of breeding waterfowl. Currently 176,209 acres of wetland and 429,768 acres of adjacent upland, located in 13 States, are enrolled in Water Bank.

Classification of Wetlands

In May 1977, Executive Order 11990 was signed into law and it became official policy for all Federal agencies to coordinate efforts to preserve and protect wetlands. The *Classification of Wetlands and Deepwater Habitats of the United States*, published by the FWS in 1979, defines wetlands based on hydrology, hydric soils, and hydrophytic vegetation. This classifica-

Relative Abundance of Wetlands in the U.S.



tion system led to the development of criteria and lists of hydric soils and the plant species that compose hydrophytic vegetation.

Most Federal agencies now use these guidelines in determining what wetlands are. Many State and local governments also have adopted the classification system and used the inventory data in operating their wetlands programs.

Current Status and Trends

Of the 215 million acres of wetlands originally found in the 48 States, 56 percent has been destroyed. Of the remaining 95 million acres, more than one-fourth are currently owned and

protected by Federal, local, or tribal governments. Of the 70 million acres in private ownership, more than 5 million acres have been protected by hunting clubs or other conservation organizations such as Ducks Unlimited, the Audubon Society, and the Nature Conservancy.

Despite the combined efforts of government and private programs, wetlands losses between 1954 and 1974 averaged 458,000 acres a year with 87 percent of that wetland converted to agricultural uses. The cost of draining wetlands continued to be offset by the new crops grown on the converted acreage. The goals of wetland protection programs were under-

cut by USDA price support programs which enhanced grain prices and provided incentives to drain still more wetlands.

Food Security Act of 1985

This act contains the "swampbuster" provision which largely resolved the contradiction between USDA incentives to drain wetlands and the overall Federal policy to preserve them. Congress declared that any farmer who produces agricultural commodities on newly converted wetland will be ineligible for price support payments and other USDA benefits. Farmers may continue to convert wetlands to crop production but they must use private funds. They cannot use payments received from USDA for wetland conversion, and they must be willing to accept market prices rather than the government-supported prices. Exemptions are granted for conversion begun before passage of the act, December 23, 1985, for conversion of artificially created wetland, for production under natural conditions such as drought, and for conversions that have a minimal effect on wetland.

The "swampbuster" provision was the first national legislation to define wetland based on hydric soils and

hydrophytic vegetation—criteria also used in the FWS Wetland Classification System. In the 1985 act, wetland was defined as "land that has a predominance of hydric soils and that is inundated or saturated with surface or ground water at a frequency and duration sufficient to support and under normal circumstances does support a prevalence of hydrophytic vegetation typically adapted for life in saturated soil conditions."

A Growing Commitment

In addition to the Food Security Act, the mid-1980's brought other laws which strengthened wetland conservation.

The Tax Reform Act of 1985 eliminates the deduction for most drainage expenses and eliminates the capital gains benefit on appreciation of the value of converted wetland.

The Water Resources Development Act of 1986, which authorized new flood control projects, emphasizes the mitigation of wetland losses more than any other previous water bill.

The Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986 refines several wetland protection programs. Most notable are increases in funding for wetland acquisition by FWS.