

News Release



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New Report Shows Annual Loss of 59,000 Acres of Wetlands in Coastal Watersheds

While the nation as a whole gained wetlands from 1998 to 2004, a new report by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) documents a continuing loss of vital wetlands in coastal watersheds of the eastern United States.

The new report, *Status and Trends of Wetlands in the Coastal Watersheds of the Eastern United States*, shows an annual loss of 59,000 acres of wetlands in coastal watersheds of the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Great Lakes from 1998 to 2004. An estimated 18 percent of these losses occurred in tidal saltmarshes and the remaining 82 percent occurred in marshes and forested wetlands up in the watersheds. These losses of wetlands in coastal watersheds are in stark contrast to the nationwide increase in wetlands over this same time period. A Service report on the status and trends of wetlands nationwide from 1998 to 2004 found there was a net gain of 32,000 acres per year, due to wetland gains made in inland areas. That same report estimated the total number of wetland acres in the U.S. at slightly more than 107 million.

“Wetlands in coastal watersheds provide essential habitat for many migratory birds, fish, including a number of endangered species,” said Rowan Gould, acting director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. “The wetland loss in coastal watersheds is even more of a concern due to the additional losses of tidal saltmarsh resulting from hurricanes after the study period and the future threats posed by rising sea levels due to climate change.”

This wetland loss is concentrated in coastal watersheds due to the large number of people living in and moving to coastal areas. It is estimated that more than half of the country’s population now lives in coastal counties at densities approximately five times greater than inland counties. Land use changes associated with higher population densities further contributes to wetland losses. Another factor is that wetland restoration activities generally benefit far more acres of inland wetlands than coastal wetlands. This is due to competing interests, such as development, and because higher land costs make coastal wetland restoration more expensive.

“This report points to the need for an expanded effort to conserve and rebuild valuable wetlands in our coastal watersheds,” said Jim Balsiger, acting assistant administrator of NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service. “Coastal wetlands are the nurseries for important commercial and recreational fish and are vital to many threatened and endangered species. They also provide

natural protection for coastal areas from the most damaging effects of hurricanes and storm surges.’

The Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA are working with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Army Corps of Engineers to address the alarming loss of coastal wetlands documented in the new report. The agencies are analyzing data in key coastal watersheds to try and determine specific causes for the losses observed. The agencies’ efforts will formulate management and policy recommendations for the conservation of coastal wetlands. "Our coastal wetlands are ecological treasures that help protect shorelines and infrastructure in areas where more than half of Americans live," said Craig Hooks, director of the EPA’s Office of Wetlands, Oceans, and Watersheds. "This report emphasizes the need for action to protect these crucial resources."

Fish and Wildlife Service programs, such as the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, Coastal Program, and the National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program, are part of the Service’s larger effort to encourage voluntary contributions to habitat conservation. By providing financial and technical assistance to partners, including communities and private landowners, these programs enlist help in conserving coastal areas threatened by development and predicted sea-level rise resulting from climate change.

Status and Trends of Wetlands in the Coastal Watersheds of the Eastern United States, 1998 to 2004 is posted online at <http://www.fws.gov/wetlands> and printed copies will be available as a joint publication from the Service and NOAA.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov

NOAA understands and predicts changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and conserves and manages our coastal and marine resources. Visit <http://www.noaa.gov>.