



NEWS

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WETLANDS HELP CONTROL FLOODING

Record-setting floods occurring and expected around the country would likely be worse if not for nature's safety net of wetlands.

In places such as the Midwest, experts warn that this year's spring flooding could reach 500-year record levels. But wetlands serve as nature's sponge to absorb, then slowly release, spring runoff, softening the blow of devastating floods.

Acting U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director John Rogers said, "Water held in undrained wetlands won't be flooding roads, farms, and homes across the country." Although millions of acres of wetlands nationwide have been lost to urbanization and agricultural conversion, partnerships among the Service, states, other Federal agencies, conservation groups, and private landowners are making progress toward reversing that trend.

These partnerships are critical to the success of wetland restoration. More than 74 percent of wetlands in the lower 48 states are on lands controlled by private landowners, both individual and corporate.

Through the Service's wetland easement and agreement program, landowners have voluntarily protected 3,595,440 acres, a significant contribution to flood prevention. Research conducted by the Service and the North Dakota Water Commission in 1983 found that wetlands can store up to 1.74 feet of run-off water per acre. Storage in wetlands or private lands protected in cooperation with the Service could amount to more than 6.3 million acre-feet nationally, enough to supply the water needs of more than 25 million people for one year.

"As harsh as the floods may be this spring, they could be even more devastating without the real heroes: the farmers and landowners who decided to preserve their wetlands," Rogers said. "These people are true stewards of the land and its resources."

Historically, the lower 48 states contained an estimated 221 million acres of wetlands but that number dropped to an estimated 104 million acres in the 1980s. Ten states (Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, and Ohio) have lost 70 percent or more of their original wetland acres. And 22 states have lost 50 percent

or more wetland acres. Agricultural conversion has accounted for 87 percent of these wetland losses, while urbanization has accounted for another 8 percent.

However, wildlife habitat restoration efforts such as the Service's Partners for Wildlife Program have contributed to restoration of wetlands, with a total of 360,000 acres of wetlands, 128,000 acres of prairie, 930 miles of riparian habitat, and 90 miles of instream habitat restored as of December 1996.

Wetlands also help maintain high water quality, contribute to sustaining groundwater supplies, and provide critical habitat for hundreds of species including more than one-third of our endangered species.