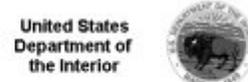




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# News Release



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## **SECRETARIES NORTON AND JOHANNIS COMMEND GAINS IN U.S. WETLANDS**

**WASHINGTON** -- Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton today released a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service report that shows a net gain in America's nonagricultural and agricultural wetlands for the first time since the Service began compiling data in 1954. Norton was joined by Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns as a partner in achieving this goal.

At a press conference in Washington, D.C., the Secretaries announced that approximately 191,800 acres of wetlands were gained between 1998 and 2004, bringing the nation's total wetlands acreage to 107.7 million acres, or 5 percent of the land area of the lower 48 states.

The net gain was achieved because increases in shallow-pond-type wetlands offset the continued, but smaller, losses in swamp and marshland type wetlands. This report shows a loss of 523,500 acres of swamp and marsh wetlands and a gain of 715,300 acres of shallow-water wetlands.

"This report, prepared as part of President Bush's initiative to stem the loss of wetlands, is good news not only for biologists but for all of us. We all depend on wetlands as the nurseries of life," Norton said. "Although the overall state of our wetlands is still precarious, this report suggests that nationwide efforts to curb losses and restore wetland habitats are on the right track. A multitude of government, private and corporate cooperative conservation efforts helped the nation reach this milestone. We hope it will become a turning point."

The net gain in wetland areas in the report was attributed to construction of freshwater ponds in combination with wetland restorations on agricultural and conservation lands.

"Farmers and ranchers are leaders in the wetland restoration and protection efforts throughout the United States," said Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns. "The President's historic support of voluntary conservation programs has led the nation to this important milestone and we are committed to bolstering our conservation partnerships with producers."

As the most recent in a series of reports published by Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service to track wetlands, *Status and Trends of Wetlands in the Conterminous United States* covers 1998 through 2004. Past data show that from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, the United States was losing almost

500,000 acres of wetlands per year. This rate of loss was substantially reduced to about 59,000 acres annually by 1997 and then eliminated by the first net gain in acreage by 2004 in the new report.

The report does not reflect the wetlands losses suffered along the Gulf Coast during the 2005 hurricane season. “Because of the massive loss of coastal lands in Louisiana over the past four decades, Hurricane Katrina was much more destructive than Hurricane Camille, which followed the same path in 1969,” Norton said. “The message we are trying to get out is that creation and restoration of marshes and wetlands not only help wildlife, they help protect people from storm damage. Marshes protect levees, and levees protect people.”

The report details a smaller loss of natural vegetated wetlands than in previous periods and substantial acreage gains in wetlands that include man-made ponds such as water traps on golf courses recreational or decorative ponds in residential areas, and storm water retention ponds. The shallow-water category also includes fish ponds and similar water areas.

Freshwater wetland losses that occurred primarily as a result of urban and rural development offset some gains. Urban and rural development combined accounted for an estimated 61 percent of the net freshwater wetland losses between 1998 and 2004.

On Earth Day 2004, President Bush announced a wetlands initiative that established a federal policy beyond “no net loss” of wetlands, aiming for an overall increase in the quality and quantity of wetlands. To continue tracking wetland trends, the President further directed the Fish and Wildlife Service to complete an updated wetlands status and trends study in 2005—five years ahead of the date mandated by legislation

The report is a scientific and statistical analysis of observed wetland change made using satellite and aerial imagery between 1998 and 2004. The Fish and Wildlife Service captured all the change observed at each of almost 4700 plots in the 48 States, using the latest technologies in remote sensing, geospatial analysis and computerized mapping.

*Status and Trends* collects only data on wetland acreage gains and losses, as it has for 50 years. It does not measure qualitative changes. However, because the President’s wetlands policy aims to improve the quality as well as quantity of wetlands, the agencies that are participating in the president’s Wetlands Initiative will continue working and will identify how best to track and report more detailed information on wetland function, quality and condition.

Although the report does not study the effects of programs, Secretary Norton notes that multiple partnerships must have played a role in the results of the report.

“We believe that cooperative conservation programs have contributed to this wetlands milestone,” Norton noted. Since 2001, for example, 16 million acres of wetland and associated upland habitat have been restored, protected and enhanced through North American Wetlands Conservation Act grants.

Under the Coastal Program, since 2001 some 364 partnerships have helped to restore and conserve nearly 65,000 acres of coastal wetlands, 12,300 acres of native grasslands and 659 miles of streams. The program also has assisted communities and nongovernmental organizations to protect more than

735,000 acres of wetlands and native grasslands, as well as nearly 118 miles of stream and streamside habitat.

Under the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, another cooperative conservation program, 10,600 voluntary partnership agreements with landowners have restored 175,000 acres of wetlands, more than 950,000 acres of native grassland prairie and uplands and 2,400 miles of streams.

Secretary Johanns discussed the importance of programs such as the USDA Conservation Reserve Program, which has a maximum enrollment of 39.2 million acres for conservation, more than double the acreage of the National Wildlife Refuge System in the lower 48 States.

The Secretaries said that the Administration recognizes the importance of wetlands conservation. At the Interior Department alone, the proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2007 includes a total of \$1.1 billion for wetlands establishment, re-establishment, rehabilitation, enhancement, and protection involving various agencies.

In order to further the President's wetland goals, the 2007 Budget also proposes \$403 million to enroll 250,000 acres into USDA's Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). The WRP is a crucial contributor to the President's wetlands initiative, and the Budget's request represents a 100,000-acre increase above the FY 2006 enrollment level.

The Administration also supports the provisions of the Farm Bill that promote wetlands protection and restoration, such as the Conservation Reserve Program and Swampbusters. The Farm Bill provides more than \$3 billion annually for on-the-ground conservation programs, most related to wetlands.

In April of 2005, USDA released the 2003 Annual National Resources Inventory (NRI) results on gains and losses of wetlands on agricultural lands for the period 1997 to 2003. This was the first statistical study that showed gains for a category of wetlands were larger than losses, on a national basis. The results of the Fish and Wildlife Service report, which covers a number of categories, are in general agreement with those of the 2003 annual NRI.

"The new report should give us encouragement to redouble our wetlands protection and restoration efforts," said Secretary Norton. "In 2004 President Bush directed that the nation move beyond the 'no net-loss' of wetlands in America to having an overall increase of wetlands over the next five years. We are certainly on the way to meeting that goal."

For more details on the report, visit,

[http://wetlandfws.er.usgs.gov/status\\_trends/national\\_reports/trends\\_2005\\_report.pdf](http://wetlandfws.er.usgs.gov/status_trends/national_reports/trends_2005_report.pdf)