

CONVENTION ON WETLANDS OF INTERNATIONAL
IMPORTANCE ESPECIALLY AS WATERFOWL HABITAT

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WETLANDS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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(English only)

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INTRODUCTION

The Wetlands of the United States of America (U.S.A.), have become recognized as vital areas that constitute a productive and invaluable public resource. Within the United States, roughly two-thirds of the commercially important fish and shellfish species harvested along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts and half of the Pacific coast species are dependent on estuarine wetland habitats for food, spawning and/or nursery areas. U.S.A. wetlands provide essential nesting, migratory, and wintering habitats for many species of migratory birds. In the 48 states that are contiguous, 60 to 70 percent of the 10 to 12 million nesting waterfowl reproduce in the "prairie pothole" region in the upper midwestern portion of the country. Countless shorebirds, egrets, herons, terns, gulls, pelicans, and other birds annually utilize the U.S.A.'s wetlands. Several rare and endangered waterbirds from the State of Hawaii depend on wetlands for survival. Additionally, millions of waterbirds, other wildlife and fish depend upon the wetlands in the State of Alaska.

WETLAND TYPES AND STATUS

The U.S.A. encompasses area of approximately 8,625,000 sq. km. and extends from the Arctic Circle south to the Hawaiian Islands which lie just below the Tropic of Cancer at 23 1/2 N. Politically, the U.S.A. is comprised of 50 states. Wetlands occur in every state, and depending on climate, vegetation, soils, and hydrologic conditions, there is a great diversity of wetland types ranging from wet tundra along Alaska's north slope to tropical rain forests in Hawaii and even desert wetlands in the arid southwest.

Estuarine wetlands are found scattered along the entire coastline of the U.S.A. They are associated with brackish tidal waters. These wetlands develop behind barrier islands and beaches or form along coastal rivers. A variety of wetlands develop in estuaries largely because of differences in salinity and duration and frequency of tidal flooding. Major types of estuarine wetlands include: emergents, intertidal flats, and brackish shrubs. Marine wetlands and deeper aquatic habitats generally occupy the oceanic side of the estuarine system and can be represented by reefs, shoals of kelp beds.

Inland wetlands are referred to as palustrine habitats or wetlands associated with riverine or lake systems. These freshwater systems are often dominated by emergent shrub or forest vegetation. A number of colloquial terms are used to describe these wetlands; Bog, fen, mire, marsh, slough, pothole, swamp, and swale are a few examples.

A great number of these fresh water wetlands are located in the temperate climatic regions of the northeast and states of the Great Lakes Region. These wetlands are often found in association with extensive lake complexes. They are, for the most part, the result of glaciation, and because of their latitude are subject to freeze and thaw cycles. They are also tremendously important for migratory bird populations of the North American Continent.

Wetlands in the U.S.A. are dynamic systems that are subject to both human and natural alterations that may affect their abundance as well as their quality. Natural events, including coastal subsidence, rise in sea level, sedimentation and succession can impact the number and type of wetlands found in any given region of the country. Human activities have mainly tended to reduce the number of wetlands by drainage for agriculture, channelizing waterways, dredging for navigation, harbors and marinas, filling for urban or industrial development or disposal of waste materials.

Despite the recognition of the environmental importance of wetlands, losses continue at an alarming rate. Within the U.S.A. there is evidence to indicate that over half of the wetlands in the contiguous states have been lost. In coastal regions wetlands losses are directly related to population density. Pressure on wetland resources brought on by population shifts to coastal areas and associated industrial and municipal expansion will probably continue to erode coastal wetland resources.

Inland, the conversion of wetlands to agricultural production accounts for the majority of losses. This, in combination with degradation of wetlands by contaminants or encroachments by incompatible land use practices, can adversely impact fishery resources, migratory bird habitat, and other environmental functions.

The U.S.A. continually faces the challenge of identifying and reconciling physical and environmental limits with the development of its natural resources. To meet the demand for resource development, the United States, like other countries, has developed laws, regulations and policies to increase the benefits of development while protecting fish and wildlife, environmental quality and socio-economic resource values. These values are often misunderstood or frequently overlooked and there is growing awareness that a better understanding of the environmental and ecological consequences of all types of resource development will lead to better solutions to potential conflicts between development and environmental protection.

THE WETLANDS CONVENTION IN THE UNITED STATES (RAMSAR)

One of the avenues that the United States has pursued with regard to wetlands conservation is to become a contracting party to the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat (Ramsar). The United States of America became a full party to the Convention in 1987.

Since that time the U.S.A. has listed wetland sites as being internationally important. These include:

- Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge
State of Nevada - nominated for its importance in supporting endangered species.
- Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge
State of New Jersey - nominated for its value as education center and high public use.
- Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge
States of Georgia and Florida - nominated for unique flora and fauna of southern bottomlands.
- Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and State Game Range
State of Alaska - nominated for its importance to migratory birds and other wildlife.
- Everglades National Park
State of Florida - nominated for its unique role in hydrologic cycling and support of south Florida's ecosystems.
- Chesapeake Bay Wetlands System
State of Maryland and Virginia - nominated for its ability to support high populations of migratory birds.
- Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area
State of Kansas - nominated for its importance to shorebirds and other migratory species.
- Cashe-Lower White Rivers Joint Venture Area
State of Arkansas - nominated for its value to an array of wildlife species, and its importance as a bottomland hardwood ecosystem.

The U.S.A. has served on the Convention's Standing Committee, and has tried to play an active role in supporting the Convention and the Secretariat. Through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the United States has developed internal policy guidelines for the

nomination of additional sites to the List of Wetlands of International Importance.

With regard to implementing the concept of "wise use" of wetland resources, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has prioritized waterfowl habitat areas of major concern to further emphasize waterfowl resource needs. Resource management planning has been initiated to provide needed conservation of important fish spawning, nursery, and feeding habitats in inland and coastal areas. Wetlands conservation and management have continuously been of major concern in land acquisition and wildlife refuge management. Field stations have established planning efforts to protect the Nation's wetlands, especially concentrating on multiple values of these habitats for migratory birds, other wetland wildlife, fisheries, threatened and endangered species, and other wetland functions such as floodwater retention, aquifer recharge, and purification. Work has been initiated to increase our capability to assess and correct wetlands contamination in industrial, agricultural, and urban areas. However, much work remains to be done in the U.S.A. before the wise use of wetlands resources is a reality.

ONGOING ACTIVITIES AND FUTURE DIRECTION

There are several convention related activities that are ongoing within the U.S.A. These include:

- Exchanging technical wetlands information and assistance with other Contracting Parties.
- Further publicizing the Ramsar Convention within the U.S.A.
- Promoting the wise-use of wetlands concepts.
- Listing additional internationally important sites within the U.S.A.

The U.S.A. sees continued involvement with the Convention as an important component to our wetland preservation efforts. There are two immediate benefits to this involvement. First, is exchange of technical information on how best to manage, maintain, sustain and preserve wetland resources. For some wetland habitat types occurring in the United States, we have little data on their ecological character. For systems such as boreal forested wetlands, peatlands, tropical forested wetland, or extensive mangrove swamps, the U.S.A. should look to international experts to better understand these ecosystems. Secondly, the Convention provides a degree of publicity needed to make decision makers, resource planners and the scientific community aware of the plight of wetland resources. Through the workings of Ramsar, political decision makers can be made more aware of the global importance and

interdependence of wetland systems and those who manage those systems.

For more information on Wetlands or U.S.A. involvement in Ramsar contact the following:

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