

FACT SHEET



WETLANDS and the Agricultural Community



American farmers and ranchers provide our nation with an abundance of food and fiber. The agricultural community is a vital sector of the nation's economy that can benefit from wetland protection and restoration. This fact sheet provides valuable information concerning agricultural activities and wetland protection.

WHAT IS A WETLAND?

A wetland is an area of land where the soils are saturated for varying periods of time during the growing season. Wetland soils contain little or no oxygen, and as a result only support plants adapted to such conditions. Cottonwoods, cattails, rushes, willows and sedges are examples of wetland plants typically found in areas of the Northern Great Plains and Rocky Mountain regions. The types of wetlands found in these regions include prairie potholes, riparian areas

enhance water quality by absorbing and filtering harmful sediments, nutrients and other pollutants that can contaminate surface and ground water. In addition, wetlands are an important source of surface and ground water, providing for agricultural needs. Wetlands increase water availability by absorbing water during wet seasons and gradually releasing it during dry seasons. Similarly, wetlands help prevent floods due to their ability to hold large volumes of water, releasing it slowly into surface and ground water.

Several incentives exist to assist the agricultural community with regard to wetland protection and restoration.

(wet areas near rivers, ponds, or lakes), and wet meadows. If you would like to learn more about wetlands on your farm or ranch,

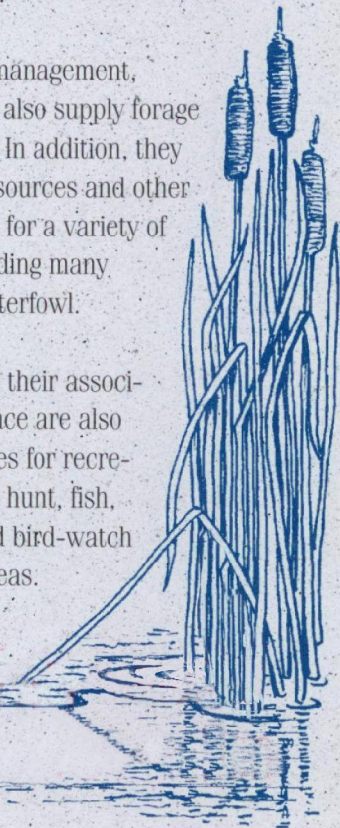
contact the Soil Conservation Service or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in your district.

FUNCTIONS AND VALUES

Wetlands are diverse and complex ecosystems that have many functions and values. For instance, wetlands

With proper management, wetlands can also supply forage for livestock. In addition, they provide food sources and other habitat needs for a variety of wildlife, including many species of waterfowl.

Wetlands and their associated open space are also valuable places for recreation. People hunt, fish, boat, hike and bird-watch in wetland areas.





TECHNICAL AND FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Several incentives exist to assist the agricultural community with regard to wetland protection and restoration. Leasing wetlands to hunters and bird-watchers, for example, offers financial incentive to preserve wetlands. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Soil Conservation Service, Ducks Unlimited, the State Fish and Game Agency and USDA are appropriate agencies to contact if you are interested in financial and technical assistance.

WHAT FARMERS AND RANCHERS NEED TO KNOW

The main tool governing wetland protection is Section 404 of the nation's Clean Water Act. Section 404 regulates the discharge of dredged and fill material into the waters of the U.S., including most wetlands. Section 404 establishes a permit program to ensure that any discharges comply with set standards. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency jointly administer this permitting process. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state agencies have advisory roles.

If you are planning to impact wetlands on your land, contact the Corps of Engineers office in your area and ask about the permitting requirements that may be applicable to your project. Failure to obtain the necessary 404 permit is subject to severe penalties.

Farming and ranching activities generally exempt from Section 404 include ongoing, normal farming operations such as plowing, seeding, cultivating and drainage maintenance. In addition, maintenance and construction of irrigation ditches, stock ponds and farm roads are exempt. Activities which *convert* wetlands for such uses are typically not exempt.

The Swampbuster provision of the Food Security Act of 1985 is another regulation that relates directly to the agricultural community. This provision denies federal farm benefits to any person who converts a wetland after December 23, 1985. Conversion includes draining, filling, leveling, dredging or any other practice for the purpose of growing commodity crops. Wetlands converted before December 23, 1985 are exempt from Swampbuster regulation. Contact your local Soil Conservation Service office for additional information.

REFERENCES

Agriculture and Wetlands. Six fact sheets available from the Office of Wetlands, Oceans and Watersheds, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (WH-556F), 401 M St., S.W. Washington, D.C. 20460.

Before You Alter Any Wet Agricultural Land...get the necessary determinations and permits. USDA Soil Conservation Service in cooperation with Colorado Associations of Soil Conservation Districts. 1990.

The Wealth in Wetlands. A video featuring five farmers who tell why they will keep their wetlands. Available for loan from the National Association of Conservation Districts, P.O. Box 855, League City, TX 77574.

Thompson and Tyler. *A Guide to Agricultural Wetlands Protection: National Governor's Association.* 444 N Capitol St., Washington, D.C. 20001-1572. 1991.

Wetlands in the Rocky Mountains and Northern Great Plains. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 8 brochure. 1992.

A wetlands poster is available on request. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 8. 1992.

FOR MORE INFORMATION Please contact:

EPA Wetlands Hotline
1-800-832-7828
M-F 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. EST.
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