

Voluntary Wetland Program Development

How States and Tribes Can Support Long-Term Wetland Protection & Restoration

EPA recognizes Voluntary Restoration and Protection as one of four “Core Elements” of state and tribal wetland programs and administers a grant program to assist with program development. The purpose of this document is to share findings from a multi-state knowledge exchange focused on development of Voluntary Wetland Restoration and Protection programs and to provide recommendations to help EPA and State/Tribal Wetland Program Managers enhance voluntary wetland program work.

What is Voluntary Restoration and Protection? EPA defines voluntary restoration and protection as “activities not required by statutes or regulations,” and recognizes that voluntary projects and programs provide opportunities to: build partnerships; share data; pool resources among agencies and organizations; and educate the public about the value of wetland and water resources. Voluntary programs engage a diverse array of agencies, organizations, and experts to protect and restore wetlands with the result of improved watershed health.

Project description Three recognized leaders in voluntary wetland conservation, The Wetlands Conservancy (TWC), Montana Department of Environmental Quality Wetland Program (MDEQ) and Wisconsin Wetlands Association (WWA), established a peer-to-peer learning forum to share examples, successes and lessons learned in each state’s efforts to protect and restore wetlands through voluntary wetland program work. The project involved site visits to each state where visiting program managers met with the host state’s staff and partners to support an exchange of ideas to improve or expand voluntary wetland program work.

Project goals included:

- To support an exchange of ideas to improve voluntary wetland program work in each state;
- To identify and share common themes of effective voluntary wetland programs.

Project findings The work of voluntary programs often develops in response to needs and opportunities. The range of potential approaches may be as varied as the combinations of local/regional factors. Several common themes became apparent across all three states and may be instructive to help wetland program managers establish or expand state or tribal voluntary program work.



Common themes of effective voluntary wetland programs included:

■ **Convening** In person meetings with sufficient networking time proved critical for program building. Each program provided forums to support face-to-face networking and transfer of knowledge. These forums build community and catalyze new collaborations that result in increased wetland protection and restoration.

■ **Leveraging Strengths and Roles** Agencies and organizations all play different roles. Strong voluntary protection and restoration programs recognize institutional strengths and constraints, and leverage collaborations to identify holes and plug gaps. In each state, non-regulatory partners develop and deliver independent programming and serve as strong allies to build public support for state investments in wetland protection and restoration.

■ **Enhancing the Quality and Use of Wetland Spatial Data** Accurate data that is accessible to all is essential for wetland program building. All three programs were effectively engaged in supporting improvements to wetland mapping data and decision support tools and to promoting the use of the improved data in voluntary and regulatory program work.

■ **Training** Floodplain and storm water managers, land use planners, local governments, and watershed organizations are a few examples where people engaged in land and water resource planning and management often lack the skills or capacity to address wetlands. All three programs provided training and technical support to reduce barriers and build partner capacity to engage in voluntary wetland protection and restoration.

■ **Building Program Capacity** Capacity constraints such as not enough time, money, or expertise are all commonly cited reasons why agencies and partners do not engage in voluntary wetland program work. Capacity building projects can help address these and other common barriers. In each state the focus on capacity building increased the extent and effectiveness of the community of partners working on both voluntary and regulatory wetland programming.

■ **Supporting Regulatory Programs** Through education and community engagement, Voluntary Programs increase understanding and acceptance of wetlands and wetland laws. Wetland assessments, plans and decision support tools developed under voluntary programs also help to inform and improve wetland regulatory decisions.

Recommendations to improve voluntary wetland protection and restoration programs



STATES AND TRIBES

- Seek funding for projects that build capacity for and reduce barriers to voluntary wetland protection and restoration.
- Emphasize projects that create partnerships, build collaborative networks, and develop wetland decision-support tools and materials.
- Establish or participate in forums focused on voluntary wetland program development.

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- Expand the Core Elements Framework to recognize and encourage activities that build non-governmental capacity to support voluntary wetland protection and restoration work.
- Establish networking forums to help states, tribes, and non-governmental partners exchange knowledge on voluntary wetland program development and increase the volume/quality of voluntary wetland program development funding proposals.