

## **Wetland Program Plans: A Strategic Tool for States & Tribes**

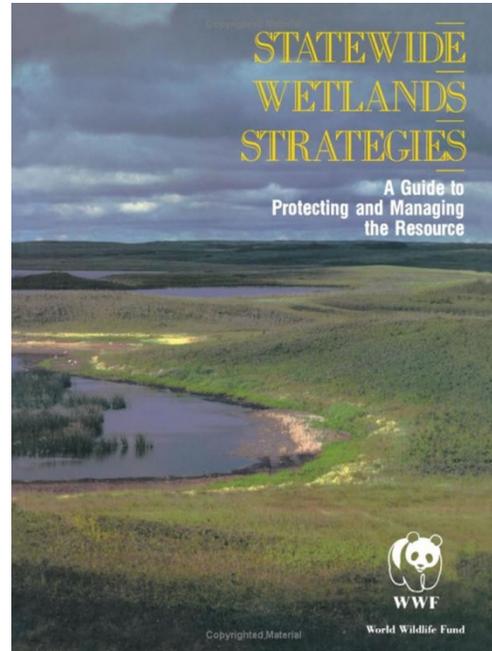
by Leah Stetson, ASWM

“It’s more than just our strategy, it is our state wetland policy,” says Cherie Hagen, Wisconsin Wetland Team Leader, of Wisconsin’s wetland program plan, titled *Reversing the Loss*. For states and tribes, writing or revising a wetland program plan provides an opportunity to get back to the basics, to think carefully about what’s important and to find common ground with potential wetland partners. A wetland program plan is a working document—not designed to sit on a bookshelf—but to be utilized as a collaborative product for strategic planning.

### **What’s a Wetland Program Plan?**

Historically, states’ environmental agencies developed planning documents called “wetland plans” or “wetland strategies” to help develop a new state wetland program, or to enhance an existing wetland program. A wetland plan served a number of purposes from outlining the goals of a wetland protection and permitting program in order to facilitate efficiency and effectiveness within the program—to communicating those goals to state legislators, federal agency partners and to the public. A number of states already have comprehensive Wetland Program Plans (WPPs), and a good number of states and tribes have recently completed (or revised) their wetland plans.

In the early 1990s, the World Wildlife Fund published a comprehensive guide, *Statewide Wetlands Strategies: A Guide to Protecting and Managing the Resource*, and much of the concepts in that publication continue to resonate with states and tribes developing or revising wetland plans today. For instance, the *Statewide Wetlands Strategies* guide describes a wetland program strategy, similar to a plan, as one that “draws clear guidelines that eliminate confusion; brings all interested parties into the decision-making process; streamlines existing state and local programs to address gaps and shortcomings; dovetails with federal programs where possible; makes better use of staff and financial resources and creates a coherent plan to protect wetlands tailored to that state’s particular needs.”<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> *Statewide Wetlands Strategies: A Guide to Protecting and Managing the Resource*. World Wildlife Fund. Island Press. 1992.

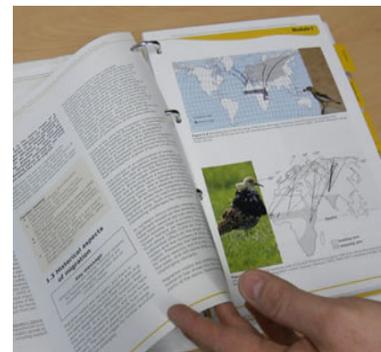


A wetland program plan is a strategic tool for the use of planning, which can include communications and development. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) encourages states and tribes with wetland programs to write a wetland program plan that incorporates at least one, if not all, of the four elements out of the Core Element Framework (CEF), introduced in 2008.

These four core elements were introduced as part of EPA’s Enhancing State and Tribal Programs (ESTP) Initiative in 2007. The four elements are 1) Monitoring and Assessment, 2) Regulation, 3) Voluntary Restoration and Protection, and 4) Water Quality Standards for Wetlands.

While EPA recommends that a state or tribal wetland program plan incorporate these four elements—and requires at least one element to be included for Wetland Program Development grants (WPDGs)—the agency does not expect every state and tribe to address each of the four core elements in the activities and goals within each plan. Part of the Initiative’s goals was to align the WPDGs with a framework that incorporates more clearly defined core elements and to track programmatic progress among state and tribal wetland programs. The main goal of having wetland program plans is to strengthen state and tribal wetland programs. A secondary purpose is to allow EPA to track the progress of its technical assistance grant program. For the 2009 memorandum from EPA to state & tribal wetland program managers detailing the new requirements for Wetland Program Development Grants in RFPs starting in FY2011, see: [http://water.epa.gov/type/wetlands/upload/wetland\\_program\\_plan\\_memorandum.pdf](http://water.epa.gov/type/wetlands/upload/wetland_program_plan_memorandum.pdf)

EPA defines Wetland Program Plans (WPPs) as voluntary plans developed and implemented by state agencies and tribes which articulate what these entities want to accomplish with their wetland programs over time. The timelines for state and tribal wetland program plans varies, but on average, reflects a 3-6 year timeframe. A few states have developed a plan that serves as an umbrella document, covering a broad set of goals, which is supplemented by an action plan, or a set of action points, which may be updated annually, every other year, or some other established timeframe, e.g. every 2-3 years.



## Trends & Targets: What's Included? Who Reads It?

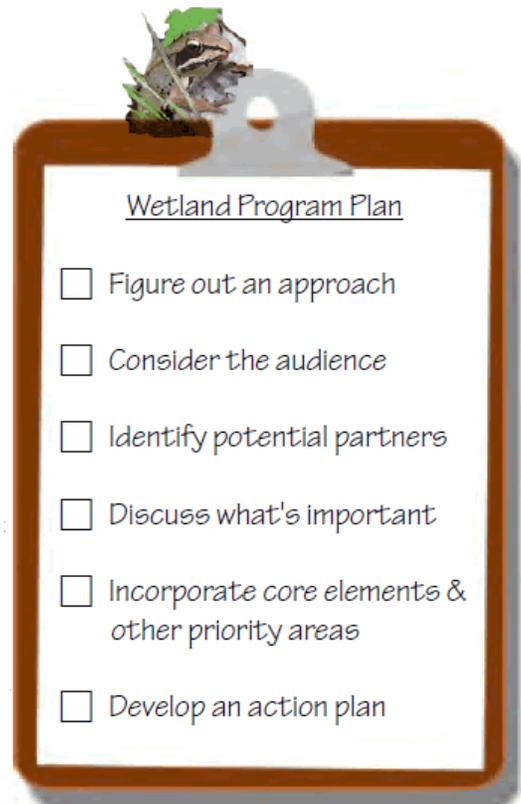
Although state WPPs will not look alike, and will vary in their goals, action plans and state-specific needs, the content of a wetland program plan may typically include these things:

- A summary of how the wetland program will work to promote effective wetland protection and restoration, or describe the goals of the program
- Specific actions to achieve those goals, and/or priorities; an action plan
- A brief assessment of the current strategy in place to manage the state's wetlands
- Communication tools relevant to distributing or presenting this information
- Information about the state's wetland resources, including threats, impacts
- Funding strategy, if appropriate
- Potential partners, if applicable

Additionally, if the Wetland Program Plan is submitted for approval by EPA, the plan should address at least one, if not more, of the four core elements identified above. Wetland program plans should be generally consistent with the Wetland Program [Core Element Framework](#). An EPA region may work with a state wetland program to allow the state to tailor the WPP to the state's needs, or to update an existing strategic plan to incorporate one or more of the core elements. In some states, there may be additional priority areas identified in the plan outside of the core element framework. For example, Virginia's Wetland Program Plan addresses all four core elements, but also includes three other sections: Planning & Sustainability, Information Acquisition and Outreach & Education. Under its Planning & Sustainability section, the plan addresses impacts from sea level rise when discussing its strategy for managing coastal and tidal wetland losses. The plan also incorporates local government involvement via an agreement with the [Chesapeake Bay Program](#) (2008). There is some good analysis of Virginia's Wetland Program Plan in the newsletter for the [Center for Coastal Resources Management Rivers & Coasts](#) Summer 2011 issue. In addition, the plan is also on the EPA webpage here: [http://water.epa.gov/type/wetlands/upload/virginia\\_wpp.pdf](http://water.epa.gov/type/wetlands/upload/virginia_wpp.pdf)

Wetland program plans may take a variety of approaches: a) "framework approach" –focusing on the incorporation of the core elemental framework, b) "minimalist approach" –focusing on the bare nuts and bolts of a wetland program's goals and action plans, c) "comprehensive approach" –including a broader set of goals and detailed description of the strategic and communication components of the plan, along with an action plan. However, even when a state takes a minimalist approach to writing its wetland program plan, there is still a lot involved in the process, and it should not be considered "less" valuable a tool when compared to a WPP that takes a more comprehensive approach. Some WPPs have illustrations or photos, which can make it more "reader-friendly" for the public's eye, or for legislative staff to view, whereas a document that is text-only may be intended primarily for in-house planning and strategic discussions.

The audience of a wetland program plan is different from state to state, and the targeted audience may in fact change from one version of a wetland plan to another within the same state. An earlier version of a wetland program plan, for instance, might be updated to include a local government role, or revised to improve public understanding for the wetland protection goals. States that are updating an earlier version of their wetland program plan may find that it takes as long as developing the original plan. States may take between 6 to 18 months to write or revise a wetland program plan. It takes time to bring all of the parties together to come to a consensus about what's important, priority actions, how it plans to achieve results, and other concerns. Some states are writing and submitting a version to EPA to meet the voluntary requirements of the WPDG funding component, but plan to craft a more comprehensive document in the near future, which may require additional discussions, collaboration and staff time.



A state wetland program, or other agency/group that is writing a new—or revising an existing WPP, may include other elements in their plan depending on the intended audience. For instance, a state that intends to use the plan as an in-house planning document may refer to actions or goals that pertain to activities the agency is already working toward, or planning to do, such as developing water quality standards for wetlands, or creating a new database for wetland mapping information.



Maine’s original wetland program strategy, for example, was state-specific, and did not have the federal “footprint” on it. A different version was drafted for the 2011-2016 timeframe, and this revised version incorporated the core elements, in addition to state-specific goals and action points for Maine’s wetland program. As with a number of the state wetland program plans, [Maine’s WPP](#) is a collaborative effort of the Maine Department of Environmental Protection and the Maine Interagency Wetlands Work Group.

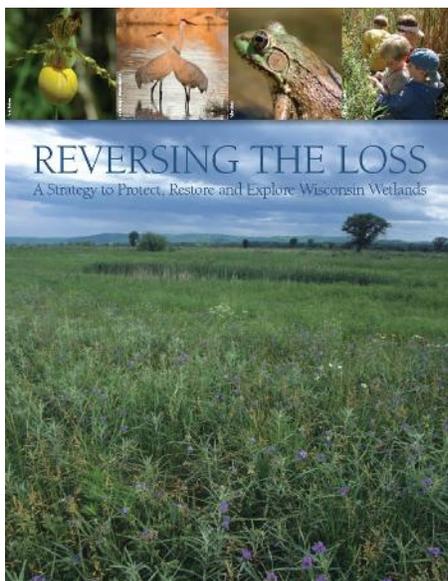
By contrast, a state that intends to utilize the WPP as a communication tool for the public’s eye, may identify a broader scope of overall goals with specific activities described to illustrate how they benefit the public to improve general understanding of the need to attain those goals, e.g. encouraging the public role in wetlands conservation, including local government.

A wetland program plan that is intended for a legislative audience may additionally demonstrate a state’s need to protect and restore wetlands, and include economic analyses (dollar values) to support the basis for wetlands protection goals outlined in the plan. In addition, a wetland program plan may provide an opportunity to present the results of a threats analysis to further support the goals of the program (why protect wetlands). It is possible to use a wetland program plan to answer questions when state legislators raise concerns. Having an up-to-date wetland program plan may be the first way to answer the question, “Why is the program doing X?” The answer may well be, “It is an action identified in our Wetland Program Plan (or Action Plan).”



### Benefits of a Wetland Program Plan: Opportunities for Collaboration & Strategic Planning

While there is a tie to potential grant funding, there are other equally important benefits to states and tribes in developing Wetland Program Plans. One of the main benefits of a wetland plan is that it can be used as a strategic tool for state wetland programs. Wetland program plans can be used to facilitate effective planning. “One of the benefits of having a plan is that it encourages strategic thinking—and prompts a state to ask, ‘are we putting resources in the right places?’” according to Trish Garrigan in EPA’s Region 1, who has worked with states in New England to submit their wetland program plans. During the discussion process—before drafting a plan—a state may start out using a system that rates and ranks what’s most important to the state’s wetland program. EPA regions help facilitate meetings and discussions, but the responsibility and creativity in writing the actual plan lies with the state, or work team, when there is an interagency wetlands team or group of partners involved.



A secondary benefit of the planning process is an opportunity for collaboration with other groups interested in wetlands. While a variety of groups may have different missions, they may have a shared vision to protect and restore wetlands, and to achieve other related objectives, e.g. educating the public. It is helpful for a state wetland program to bring other agency partners and interested parties to the table in the early stages. It can be an opportunity to discuss the wetland resources, identify what’s important and find common ground. For example, there may be an existing wildlife action plan that could potentially integrate aspects with a wetland action plan. A transparent process fosters improved collaboration.

States may choose to enter into a collaborative work team, such as a “wetland team” with a shared vision for protecting wetlands in the state. Wisconsin’s Wetland Team is one example of such a collaboration, which was a chief component in the 2008 revisions of Wisconsin’s wetland program plan—Reversing the Loss, and its related action plans. Maine’s Interagency Wetland Work Group is another example of a “wetland team.”

The state of Wisconsin wrote a wetland program plan in 2001. It was a plan authored primarily by Wisconsin DNR that expired in 2006. When the state’s wetland program staff began the process of revising the 2001 plan, they took a collaborative approach. The state’s wetland program identified potential partners—about 15 partners at first, and created a Wetland Team with a shared vision to Protect, Restore and Explore Wisconsin wetlands. It took the Wetland Team a year and a half to complete the 2008 revision, Reversing the Loss, a collaborative effort for the whole state of Wisconsin; this was not solely a project of Wisconsin DNR. By involving all of the members of the team, Wisconsin DNR strengthened its strategic planning tool by including actions that other team members could take on. For instance, some of the partners might take a lead role in working with local government or education and outreach, while other partners might play a part in monitoring and research activities, or mapping. The state then can concentrate on other areas identified in the plan, such as regulation, monitoring and assessment. The Wetland Team decided to use a broad approach with a main wetland program plan and to supplement it with subsequent two-year action plans. The current action plan covers the 2011-2012 timeframe and incorporates the four core elements from EPA’s Initiative, in addition to several other priority areas. Since Wisconsin DNR established water quality standards for wetlands in 1991, the state did not need to include development of those standards (since they already exist). Instead, the wetland team identified other areas for the action plan: prevention and control of invasive species, increased wetland ecosystem resiliency and wetland conservation partnerships. This allows room for addressing future or new concerns, such as climate change. To see Reversing the Loss and the Action Plan 2011-2012, visit: <http://dnr.wi.gov/wetlands/strategy.html>

Montana’s Wetland Program Plan also took a collaborative approach. The plan is based on involvement by the Montana Wetland Council and extensive planning and assessments done prior to the 2011-2016 plan. The plan references a prior planning document, Strategic Framework (2008), in a similar way that Wisconsin’s 2011-2012 Action Plan references their strategic plan from 2008. Montana provides several documents on its [website](#), which helps to frame its current WPP, which is available on EPA’s [webpage](#).



In the context of funding, when a state wetland program collaborates with other groups (other state agencies, nongovernmental and nonprofit partners, etc.) there is an opportunity to identify areas of overlapping interests. On EPA's Wetland Program Plan webpage, EPA encourages other organizations to read the state and tribal WPPs to learn more about a state's goals and priorities for wetlands. For instance, if a university wants to do vernal pool mapping or monitoring, it might benefit from discussions with the state wetland program to see where there may lie opportunities to work together on a grant if vernal pool mapping/monitoring is an area identified in the state's WPP or action plan.

## Next Steps

A number of states have identified in their current Wetland Program Plans that they are in the early stages of developing [Water Quality Standards for Wetlands](#). The Association of State Wetland Managers is currently facilitating a work group with discussions on water quality standards for wetlands, and has prepared a webpage with some useful information for those states working toward that goal. In other states, WPPs are addressing new issues, such as climate change impacts on wetlands and water resources. While this is not necessarily required, the trend toward addressing sea level rise and other climate change impacts, has become increasingly important among states. For an overview of states with [climate change action plans](#), visit ASWM's webpage with that summary information.

To read the state and tribal WPPs currently available on EPA's webpage, visit: <http://water.epa.gov/type/wetlands/wpp.cfm> ASWM is currently underway with a project to help inform states and tribes that are developing WPPs and will be posting a new webpage in 2012.