

# TENNESSEE WETLANDS CONSERVATION STRATEGY

THIRD EDITION



THE GOVERNOR'S INTERAGENCY WETLANDS COMMITTEE  
AND TECHNICAL WORKING GROUP

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## PREFACE

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The Tennessee Wetlands Conservation Strategy, first published in February 1994 and revised in January 1996, is a blueprint to guide agency and organizational decisions, research, and actions to better understand and conserve Tennessee's wetlands resources. This is the third edition of the Strategy, developed to provide a progress report on implementation of the Strategy and to identify new goals for the upcoming years.

The development of a Wetlands Strategy in Tennessee began in the fall of 1989, when Governor Ned McWherter appointed an Interagency Wetlands Committee (IWC) to advise him concerning the status of the state's wetlands. Members of the Committee are the leaders of state and federal agencies with program responsibilities related to wetlands, and the leaders of private user groups and organizations. The purpose of the Committee is to exchange information and coordinate the programs of federal, state, and local agencies, conservation organizations and private landowners to manage, conserve or restore wetlands for beneficial uses. The Committee appointed a Technical Working Group (TWG), consisting of professional staff members from each agency or organization, to carry out necessary research and technical analysis. A list of present members of the Committee

and of the Working Group appears in Appendix A, Part I.

In December 1989, the IWC recommended that the State develop a comprehensive statewide Wetlands Conservation Plan for Tennessee. Their decision was partially based on guidance from the 1987 National Wetlands Policy Forum, which recommended that all states develop conservation plans. In July 1990, EPA awarded a \$102,910 Wetland Program Development Grant to the State to initiate the planning process.

Tennessee was one of the first two states in the nation to attempt development of a State Wetlands Conservation Plan (WCP). As work on the state plan progressed, it became quickly apparent that data needed to formulate quantified objectives were not available. Concurrently, the state of the science of wetlands qualification, including classification, characterization, and functional value assessment was undergoing a major transition.

The TWG concluded that it was not possible to produce a comprehensive State Wetlands Conservation Plan as originally conceived, but that it was possible to develop a comprehensive conservation *strategy* to guide statewide wetlands policy and technology development.

At about the same time, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) convened an advisory panel, including Tennessee

and 16 other states, to formulate State Wetlands Conservation Plan Guidelines. WWF's advisory panel also agreed that a Strategy rather than a comprehensive plan was the most viable option.

The TWG decided to prepare a Wetlands Conservation Strategy following the 1992 WWF strategy guide. A strategy defines a process that can be used to adopt a statewide goal and define objectives; to review the current status of the state's wetlands resources, and the programs affecting them; and to develop an action plan to meet the State's objectives.

The TWG developed the state strategy through an interactive and iterative process. Members of the group worked intensively to capture the group's knowledge and advice, and to draft a Strategy that the State can use to guide policy decisions.

On August 24, 1993, the Clinton administration issued a wetlands policy document entitled "Protecting America's Wetlands: A Fair, Flexible and Effective Approach." The policy paper proposed a series of improvements to the federal wetlands regulatory programs, and other programs. The proposed actions were intended to simplify regulatory programs, improve interagency coordination, and decrease uncertainty for landowners and the regulated community. The 1993 proposal confirms the previously adopted "no overall net loss" policy, and the policy "to increase both the quantity and quality of the nation's wetland resource" as a long-term goal.

After finding the Strategy to be consistent with the President's policy, the final document was approved by the IWC. On February 22, 1994, Governor Ned McWherter endorsed the Strategy

as an official instrument of state wetland policy.

Governor Don Sundquist recognizes the value of the consensus approach taken by the IWC, as well as the importance of executive level sponsorship of the Strategy. His leadership in supporting two additional editions of the Strategy has enabled the IWC and the TWG to continue to work toward fulfilling its objectives.

The generous financial support of the Environmental Protection Agency in developing the Tennessee Wetlands Conservation Strategy has been a critical component of its success. Since 1989, the State has received \$2,209,227 in grants from EPA for the development and implementation of the Strategy.

Implementation of the Strategy is predominantly on schedule, and we have advanced our wetlands knowledge base through targeted research and advances in geographical information system data collection. The focused, action-oriented structure of the Strategy has enabled it to be a working plan, rather than just a policy document. Its broad based support, and cooperative tone have helped to diminish negative perceptions of wetland conservation. It has also encouraged numerous state program actions and has increased federal and state coordination. (See Appendix I for detailed information concerning implementation accomplishments).

Tennessee's Strategy has attracted the attention of states across the nation. Staff from Tennessee have presented the Strategy to other states as a planning model. Since its adoption, eighteen presentations have been made at state regional and national conferences sponsored by private and

public interests. Persons from 41 different states have requested a copy of the Strategy and information related to “lessons learned” in the Tennessee planning experience (See Appendix G for summary of “lessons”). An article was also published in the Wetlands Newsletter regarding Tennessee’s approach to wetlands planning.

Overall, the atmosphere for wetlands conservation in Tennessee has been very positive since initiation of the Strategy. Acquisition of targeted wetlands by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency has continued. Increased cooperation among other wetlands interests to purchase and protect unique wetlands has also occurred. In 1995, local organizations, state agencies and national conservation groups banded together to purchase a largely pristine, 4000 acre tract of bottomland hardwood and cypress-tupelo swamp wetlands on the Wolf River in Fayette County. In 1997 Governor Sundquist named the Ghost River section of the Wolf River a State Natural Area.

Important advances also continue to be made through the efforts of the West Tennessee Tributaries Steering Committee. Their restoration demonstration project seeks to restore over 21 miles of river meanders along a previously channelized river. EPA wetland grants received through the Strategy will result in implementation of a restoration demonstration project at Stokes Creek in 1999. The West Tennessee Tributaries Steering Committee originally proposed this project.

Federal and state sanctioned mitigation banking, with a strong emphasis on wetland restoration as opposed to creation, continues to grow.

Renewed emphasis on greenways and wildlife corridors also offer new opportunities for wetland conservation in rapidly urbanizing areas.

Challenges in wetland conservation still exist. As our communities continue to grow, more local governments are faced with tough planning decisions and the need to balance resource protection with economic development. Regulatory decisions concerning wetlands protection have resulted in several high profile court cases. Exotic species such as purple loosestrife threaten the ecological integrity of Tennessee wetlands. In addition, the increased fragmentation of natural areas and floodplains disturb the delicate balance required for wetlands function. There also continues to be a lack of conclusive data on the success of restoration projects and the acreage of wetlands restored since the plan was first implemented.

It is clear, after four years of plan implementation, that cooperation can effectively focus a broad array of resources and expertise on a mutually agreed set of objectives and actions. The end result however, must be actual conservation and restoration of wetlands in Tennessee. Data on the actual wetlands acreage in Tennessee is difficult to collect. Several experts agree that wetlands losses in Tennessee have stabilized, and that wetlands acreage may actually be increasing. Continued implementation and active data collection on the status and trends of Tennessee’s wetlands over the next two years will hopefully reveal the progress of this Strategy and associated conservation efforts.