

Fact Sheet

Wetland Conservation Act

Recognizing the important benefits of wetlands, the Minnesota Legislature enacted the Wetland Conservation Act (WCA) in 1991. The legislation's goal is for no-net-loss wetlands. The law regulates draining and filling wetlands and, if wetland loss is unavoidable, requires replacement. The law is one of the most comprehensive state wetland protection laws and has been used as a model for other states.

Because local officials generally have a good grasp of community needs and values, the WCA gives administrative authority for the act to local governments. In the Twin Cities metropolitan area, a city, town or water management organization may administer the act; in Greater Minnesota, it may be a county or city. These local government units may delegate the responsibility elsewhere (to the local SWCD, for example). The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) oversees the act on the state level.



What is a wetland?

When most people think of wetlands, they picture swampy, marshy areas complete with ducks and cattails. While those areas are indeed wetlands, many other wetlands look quite different and may even be completely dry for the majority of the year. A wetland is defined by three criteria: 1) it must have mostly hydric soils; 2) it must be generally inundated or saturated above or below the surface; and 3) it must support a prevalence of vegetation adapted to wet soil conditions.

A private consultant can help you determine if an area is a wetland. The consultant is referred to as a wetland delineator, and the determination is referred to as a wetland delineation.

Why are wetlands so important?

Wetlands have been considered wasted space and drained and filled for development and crop production for many years. In Minnesota, an estimated 11 million acres of wetlands have been lost over the last 100 years, leaving about 7.5 million acres -- this represents a 60-percent loss. Far from being useless, wetlands provide many important benefits, which have only become apparent as wetland numbers have dwindled. These benefits include:

- Wetlands reduce flooding by slowing excess water runoff during times of heavy rainfall
- Wetlands improve water quality by filtering sediment, nutrients and toxic substances out of water before it washes into rivers and lakes
- Wetlands provide habitat for many fish, wildlife and plants, some of which can only survive in wetlands
- Wetlands provide opportunities for recreation such as canoeing, hunting, hiking, fishing and birding
- Wetlands offer commercial uses like growing wild rice or cranberries and trapping animals
- Wetlands are important outdoor science classrooms and laboratories.

Caring for these wetlands

Contact the Scott SWCD, which has been designated as the "clearinghouse" for local wetland information and find out if the land to be altered is a wetland and ask for the wetland delineators list. An area can be a wetland even if it doesn't have standing water.

Then fill out a "Combined Project Application," which will be sent to all wetland regulatory agencies, asking if they have jurisdiction over any wetlands in the project area. Scott SWCD can provide you with this application and help you with all the appropriate steps.



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