

# Report: Program to protect wetlands is hurting them

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USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — The U.S. government's main program to keep wetlands from disappearing is badly flawed and is leading to further destruction of these vital landscapes, says a report Tuesday by the National Academy of Sciences.

Wetlands include bogs, marshes and other swampy places once derided as breeding grounds for mosquitoes. Scientists now say they provide shelter for endangered species, a filter for water flowing into lakes and rivers, and storage grounds for floodwaters.

The report found the government is far from meeting its goal of "no net loss" of wetlands, set by President George Bush in 1989.

"On paper, it looks like there is a net increase," said Joy Zedler, a scientist at the University of Wisconsin and chairwoman of the committee that wrote the report. "But in actuality ... it looks like there's a loss in acreage."

For years, developers, miners and others have been allowed to destroy wetlands if they get permits from the Army Corps of Engineers. As compensation, the Corps often requires companies to restore or create wetlands elsewhere.

Developers often cite Army Corps statistics showing that, thanks to the Corps' programs, more wetlands are created or restored each year than are destroyed. But the dozen or so academic and government scientists who wrote the Academy's report found that the data collected by the Army Corps and other federal agencies are so sketchy that it's impossible to know for sure whether wetlands acreage is rising or falling.

What is certain, the report says, is that many man-made wetlands aren't designed to last and aren't similar to the wetlands they were supposed to replace.

The committee found that some companies flouted the requirement to create new wetlands, and that even when they fulfilled the mandate, the work was often shoddy.

Developers say the committee may have missed many good projects. "This cannot be a definitive

report," said Susan Asmus of the National Association of Home Builders. But developers and the committee agreed that the Corps' program needs to be overhauled so developers aren't ordered to build wetlands on dry land, as sometimes happens now.

## 5/26/02 Slow wetlands work spurs purchase plan

Associated Press

RALEIGH | A proposal to preserve wilderness land in exchange for faster approval in building state roads for the next few years attempts to succeed where a current wetlands restoration program has failed.

The state Department of Transportation and two environmental agencies have circulated a draft agreement for a "ecosystem enhancement program" that could be official within weeks.

The program, which would be fully operational in 2005, seeks to ensure that roads and bridges can be built while upholding the federal goal of no net loss of wetlands.

Since the late 1990s, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources has required that DOT and other land developers compensate for destroying wetlands, principally through restoring damaged wetlands elsewhere.

But until 2005, the program would provide faster road approval in exchange for DOT spending \$100 million to buy up to 100,000 acres to protect pristine acreage, as opposed to restoring wetlands.

"The problem is, the natural resource base is being consumed faster than it can be replaced," said Roger Sheats, deputy secretary of DOT for environment, planning and local government affairs.

Under the plan, DOT would spend \$250 million to \$300 million to improve the practice of restoring degraded streams and wetlands.

The department then would be allowed to spend a third of that money buying pristine land. That land could then be credited as compensation for half of its lost wetlands and stream miles.

In exchange, DOT would avoid delays in getting permits for dozens of other projects that would damage or destroy an estimated 3,000 acres of wetlands and 100 miles of streams and rivers, Mr. Sheats said.

By 2005, Mr. Sheats said, restoring wetlands — and not preserving land — would again become the main way DOT would compensate for the environmental consequences of its projects.

DOT, DENR and the Army Corps of Engineers' district office in Wilmington would have to sign off on the new idea for it to take effect.