



Final Position Statement

Alterations of Stream, Riparian, and Wetland Habitats in the U.S.

Wetlands and streams have distinct biotic communities with unique and diverse flora and fauna. Wetlands provide a diverse and important array of ecological goods and services such as: sustaining and recharging groundwater that maintains base streamflows and water supplies for fish and wildlife, and domestic, irrigation and other human use; retaining surface water and reducing the negative impacts of flooding; processing nutrients that support the associated food webs and downstream ecosystem structure and function; and retaining sediment and reducing pollution of downstream waters, and processing and retaining chemical constituents of the system.

However, according to a 1990 report by the Department of Interior, 53% of the nation's wetlands have been drained or filled, and the biological, physical, and chemical integrity of a high percentage of the remaining wetlands have been degraded. Thousands of miles of streams have been channelized—or otherwise altered—for flood control, commercial development, irrigation, power generation, and navigation. The unsustainable use of uplands surrounding many wetlands, which in many areas of the nation are continuing or accelerating, has not only irreparably damaged many water bodies but also adversely affected associated aquatic and riparian biota. These serious wetland, stream, and riparian conservation issues have been significantly exacerbated by the interpretations of two recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions (*Solid Waste Agency of Northern Cook County v. Army Corps of Engineers* in 2001, and *U.S. v. Carabell and Rapanos v. U.S.* in 2006). These interpretations removed federal Clean Water Act protections from at least 20 to 40 million acres of geographically isolated wetlands and thousands of miles of streams, particularly headwater streams.

Environmentally disruptive programs of upland management and wetland and stream alteration are subsidized by taxpayer funds in direct conflict with wetland conservation efforts supported with other public funds. Furthermore, intra-program measures designed to mitigate wetland and other resource losses resulting from these conflicting programs and practices are inadequate. Net loss of wetland and stream habitats and functional capacity has continued.

The policy of The Wildlife Society in regard to alteration of stream, riparian, and wetland habitats is to:

1. Support programs that evaluate and mitigate, to the extent possible, adverse effects on the physical, chemical, and biological integrity from alteration or utilization of stream, riparian, and wetland habitats.
2. Encourage legislation that promotes maintenance and sustainable management of the structure, function, and biota of stream, riparian, and wetland habitats.

3. Support programs and practices designed to enhance retention of surface water in its watershed of origin, to conserve natural reservoirs of underground water, and to maintain high standards of water quality.
4. Encourage governments and organizations with jurisdiction over water rights to set minimum flow rates for streams and minimum levels for lakes and reservoirs necessary to maintain ecologically viable aquatic systems.
5. Educate the public about the ecological and economic values of unaltered streams, riparian areas, and wetlands.

Approved by Council September 2009. Expires October 2017.