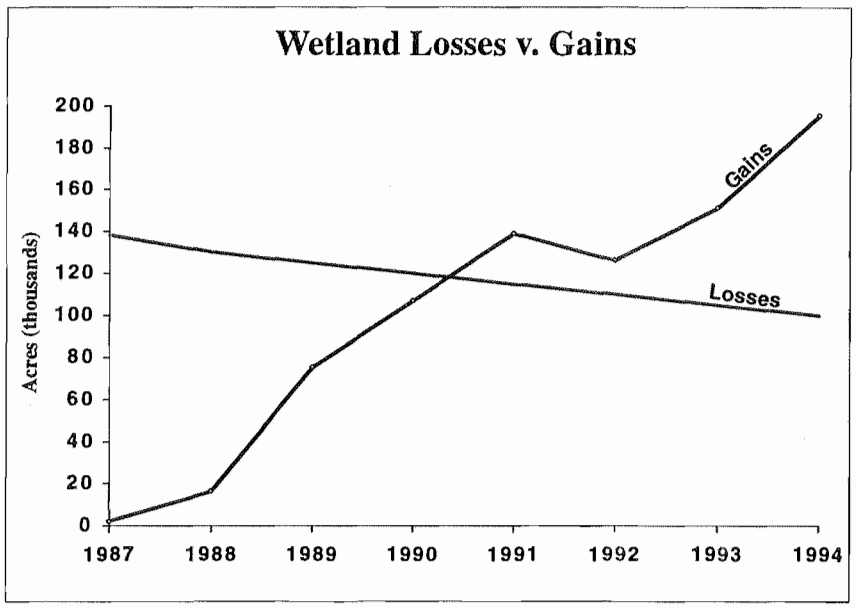
National Center for Policy Analysis

BRIEF ANALYSIS
No. 172
For immediate release:
Wednesday, August 16, 1995

Why We're Gaining Wetlands

At the turn of the century, the U.S. Supreme Court characterized wetlands as "the cause of malarial and malignant fevers" and proclaimed that "the police power is never more legitimately exercised than in removing such nuisances." Given this historic attitude toward wetlands, it is not surprising that by 1991 the United States had lost half of all the wetlands that were present in colonial times.

Since then, the federal government has made a complete about-face. Over the last few years, a largely unnoticed transformation has taken place. Where once wetlands were being drained and filled, today they are being restored at such a rapid pace that, as the figure shows, the U.S. is now gaining wetlands.



Determining Losses of Wetlands. Three government studies have analyzed the status and trends of the nation's wetlands.

- The Department of Interior surveyed wetlands between 1954 and 1974 and found an average loss of 458,000 acres a year.
- The Department of Interior also studied the years from 1974 to 1983 and found an estimated loss of 290,000 acres of wetlands a year.
- The Department of Agriculture's National Resources Inventory determined that the United States had lost approximately 156,000 acres a year from 1982 to 1992.

Why the Losses Have Declined. Although the three studies reported wetland losses, examined together they reveal a significant slowdown in the rate of loss. This was noted by the authors of the second Department of the Interior study: "Since the mid-1980s, indications are that wetland losses are slowing." In fact, wetland losses appear to have been slowing since the mid-1950s. And it appears from the studies that wetland losses have been slowing almost exclusively because of decreased conversion of wetlands to agricultural use.

The most likely reason behind the decline in agricultural conversion appears to be increasing agricultural productivity. In the past, as a farmer's productivity on a particular parcel of land decreased, he usually would retire that land and plow up previously unfarmed acres. But as new technologies increased the productivity per acre of farmland, the need to plow new land diminished.

As demand diminishes, the market value of cropland decreases and the relative cost of converting wetland to cropland increases. For example, it costs an estimated $700 an acre to convert wetland to cropland. Since 1985, average farm real estate values have been below $700 an acre. Thus, in most parts of the country it may be more economical to purchase idle farmland than to convert wetland.

Assuming that the loss of wetlands to development and other causes remains constant at roughly 89,000 acres a year, current wetland losses should not significantly exceed 100,000 acres a year.

Dallas Headquarters: 12655 N. Central Expy., Suite 720 • Dallas, TX 75243-1739 • 214-386-6272 • Fax: 214-386-0924
Washington Office: 727 15th St. N.W., 5th Floor • Washington, DC 20005 • 202-628-6671 • Fax 202-628-6474

For more information: Glenn Mitchell or Windi Fuller 214/386-6272

Why Wetlands Have Increased. The 100,000 acres represents only the conversion of wetlands to other uses. It does not reflect the conversion of other types of land into wetlands. Wetland restoration has been occurring on both public and private lands. During the 1980s and early 1990s, Congress funded a series of programs designed to acquire, restore and enhance wetlands. One report by the Department of Interior indicated that between 1980 and 1992, 834,405 acres of wetland had been restored or enhanced. Many of these acres were publicly owned, but a significant number were private lands.

Complementing government restoration of public lands and privately funded efforts are four key programs for restoring private lands:

- The Partners for Wildlife Program, under which the Fish and Wildlife Service has entered into thousands of voluntary agreements with private landowners, has restored more than 210,000 acres of wetlands since 1987, according to the Department of Interior.
- The North American Waterfowl Management Plan, under which Congress has appropriated funds for the restoration of waterfowl habitat, has restored 400,000 acres of U.S. wetlands since 1986.
- Under the Wetland Reserve Program, the Soil Conservation Service secured permanent easements for the restoration of 50,000 acres of cropland in 1993 and 75,000 acres in 1994.
- The Army Corps of Engineers required the restoration of more than 15,000 acres of wetlands as mitigation for development or other projects in 1993 and more than 38,000 acres in 1994.

Wetland Restoration

Thousands of Acres

Year	Partners for Wildlife	Waterfowl Mgt. Plan	Wetlands Reserve Program	Required As Mitigation	Total
1987	2				2
1988	16				16
1989	37	38			75
1990	42	65			107
1991	41	98			139
1992	38	88			126
1993	35	51	50	15	151
1994	32	50	75	38	195

Sources: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

In 1994, the combined effect of these four programs was to restore an estimated 195,000 acres of wetlands. This does not include the thousands of acres restored on federal lands, nor does it include solely private efforts. These other sources of wetland restoration are not insignificant. For example, in 1994 alone, Ducks Unlimited restored or enhanced 51,260 acres of wetland. And this does not include Ducks Unlimited's numerous cooperative efforts with the Fish and Wildlife Service.

No Net Loss. The last 10 years have seen a dramatic alteration in the status of the nation's wetlands. When one compares the expected loss rates for 1994 — approximately 102,000 acres — with expected restoration rates — approximately 195,000 acres — it is clear that the U.S. is no longer losing wetlands. Most likely the U.S. as a whole is gaining tens of thousands of acres a year.

This is not to say that wetlands are no longer an environmental concern. Rather, the debate should turn away from alarmist rhetoric about wetland loss and focus on realistic policy solutions. The fundamental importance of wetlands to society is not their wetness, but their ecological value and functions. In some cases, it may even be possible to maintain the value and functions without maintaining wetness.

This Brief Analysis was prepared by Jonathan Tolman of the Competitive Enterprise Institute.