

NON-REGULATORY WETLANDS PROTECTION PROGRAMS OF U.S. E.P.A. REGION IV, WETLANDS PLANNING UNIT

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INTRODUCTION

The Environmental Protection Agency has organized a Wetlands Planning Unit in an effort to emphasize advance planning for wetlands protection and management. The planning activities in EPA Region IV include programs in Advanced Identification of Wetlands, State Wetlands Protection Development Grants, and Wetlands Public Education and Outreach. This presentation will outline the objectives of these planning programs in the southeastern U.S.

BACKGROUND

The Region IV Wetlands Planning Unit was created in January, 1989 in response to recommendations by the National Wetlands Policy Forum. Non-regulatory approaches, in conjunction with improvements in regulatory policies, were recommended by the Forum in an effort to achieve no net loss of wetlands and in the long-term, a net improvement in the wetlands inventory.

Advanced Identification of Wetlands

The Advanced Identification of Wetlands program (ADID) serves as a valuable, non-regulatory complement to the Region's regulatory program. Two ADID's within the state of Georgia are described in more detail by Kalla and Fasselt in this proceedings. These and other planning projects throughout Region IV (Figure 1) are initiated and managed by EPA in cooperation with the Army Corps of Engineers, state and local governments and environmental organizations. Information is collected and evaluated on the natural characteristics and functions of the area wetlands.

State Wetlands Protection Development Grants

The Wetlands Planning Unit also administers the State Wetlands Protection Development Grant Program (SWPDG). This grant program was established in Fiscal Year 1990 to support the development of new State wetlands protection programs and/or to support improvements of existing programs. Grant funds are available to State

wetlands regulatory agencies, State planning offices and other State agencies with wetlands related programs. Federally recognized Indian Tribes are also eligible for funding under this program. Figure 2 shows the location of the FY 90-92 grant projects.

EPA has established three priority projects under SWPDG including State Wetland Conservation Plans and Strategies, State Section 404 Assumption Assistance, and Watershed Protection Approach Demonstration Projects. These three project areas require a comprehensive and integrated approach to wetland management with geographic, inter-programmatic and inter-governmental emphasis.

The Florida Department of Environmental Regulation received funding in FY 92 for the priority project - Section 404 Assumption Study. The overall goal of this project is to merge existing State and Federal permit programs into a single unified program that can effectively regulate and protect the State's wetland resources. Activities include developing and implementing all necessary statutes and associated rules, determining staffing and cost estimates, and developing and distributing public education information on the new program.

The Tennessee State Planning Office is developing a State Wetlands Conservation Plan using funding from the SWPDG. To date, development of the Plan has involved all state and federal agencies with program responsibilities affecting wetlands and private conservation and landowners groups. Tennessee's planning process includes three elements: a planning framework element to establish a strategy for future direction of state and allied programs; a technical element to conduct an extensive evaluation of the state's wetlands resources - historic, existing and, through conservation and restoration, future; and a regulatory element to review and revise regulatory programs in the state. The methodology for the Plan development that is being used in Tennessee is outlined by the World Wildlife Fund publication entitled *Statewide Wetlands Strategies* (1992).

In addition to the priority projects described, the EPA SWPDG program funds a wide variety of projects including: the development of water quality standards; incorporation of wetlands into the Section 401 program;

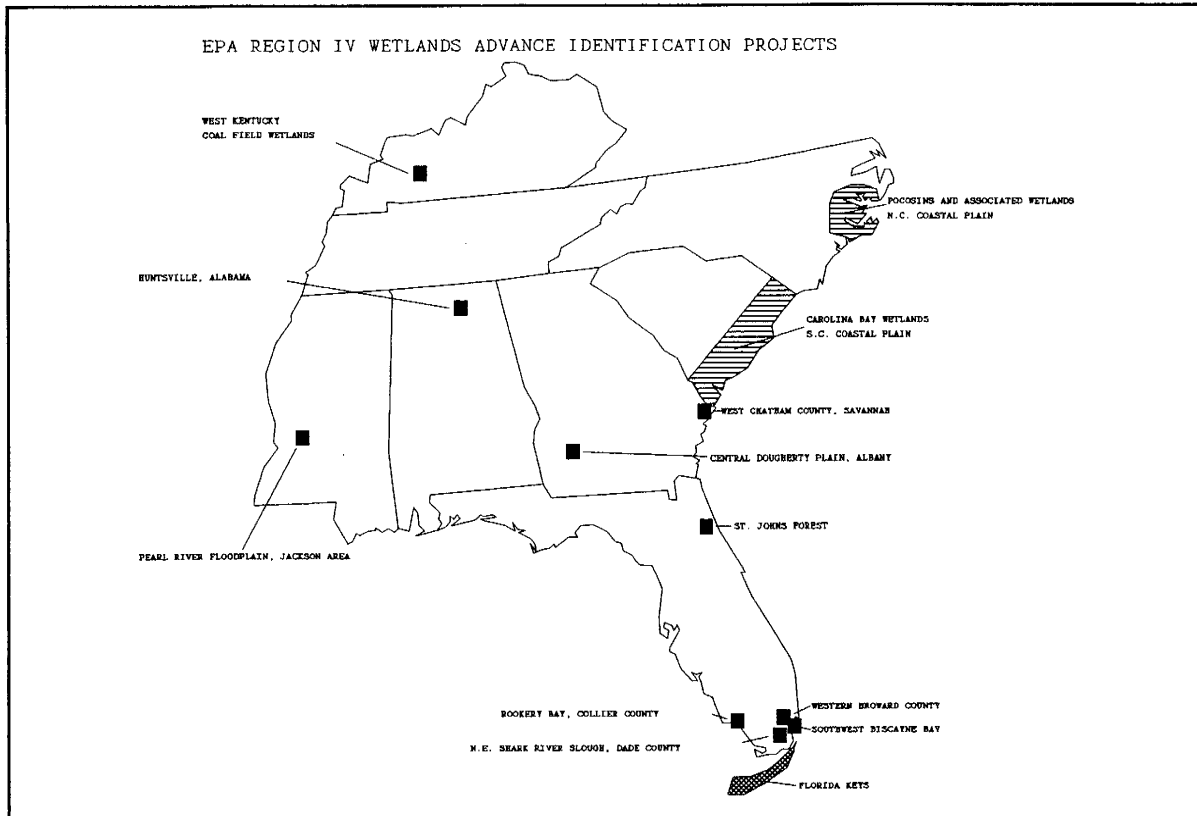


Figure 1. EPA Region IV - Wetlands Advanced Identification Projects.

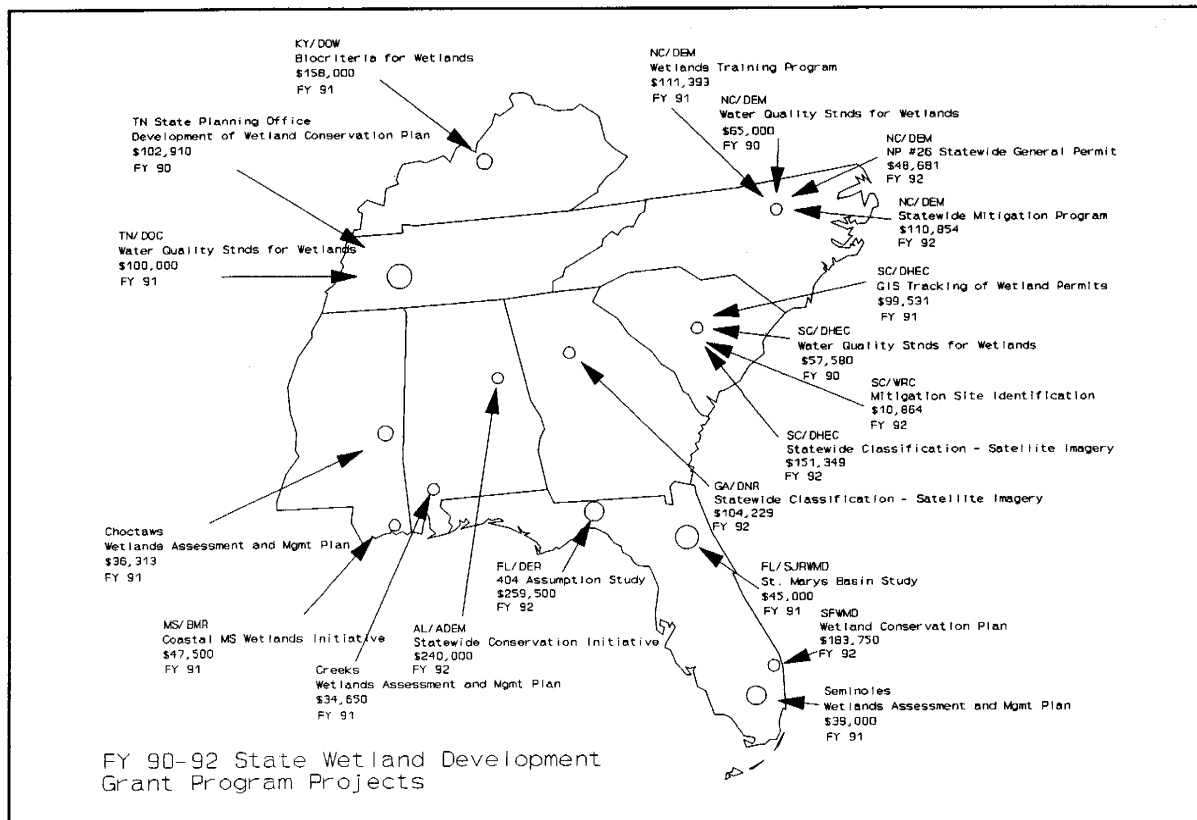


Figure 2. EPA Region IV FY 90 - 92 State Wetlands Protection Development Grant Program Projects.

multi-objective river corridor management; development of monitoring programs and streamlining of State regulatory programs.

In Georgia, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources received funding in FY 92 to refine and expand the digital statewide wetlands database for two selected watersheds - Lake George and Lake Blackshear. The Georgia Environmental Protection Division and the Georgia Department of Community Affairs will sponsor a series of workshops to share information and methodology with database users at the Regional Development Centers and the local planning departments. In addition, a builders/landowners guide to wetlands protection will be prepared.

Public Education and Outreach

One of the most important functions performed by the EPA Wetlands Planning Unit is to inform the public about the importance of wetlands resources and about the programs that exist for their protection and management. The WPU has developed an educational wetlands exhibit for use at events including agricultural, forestry, and sportsmen expos; nature centers; and Wetlands ADID program public meetings.

Numerous educational materials such as posters, fact sheets, and informational booklets have been developed and distributed to target groups including teachers and school age children, landowners and developers, and farming, mining and forestry communities. Press releases are prepared for WPU activities and grant awards, and congressional outreach on wetlands issues is conducted.

The annual American Wetlands Month is celebrated during the month of May. WPU plans and assists in events throughout the region. Groups participating in these events can include natural history museums and nature centers, wildlife refuges and state and federal parks, universities, environmental organizations and local/state government agencies.

SUMMARY

The Wetlands Planning Unit performs planning and other non-regulatory activities to improve the protection of important wetland resources. Financial and technical assistance is provided to the states for the development of more effective and efficient wetlands protection systems and regulatory programs. Education and outreach programs target private landowners, agricultural and forestry groups and the general public to provide information on existing protection and management programs and to emphasize why the protection of wetlands is important to the environmental and economic health of the country.

LITERATURE CITED

World Wildlife Fund. 1992. Statewide Wetlands Strategies: A Guide to Protecting and Managing the Resource. Island Press, 268 pp.