

Wetlands policy doesn't fit Alaska

by Becky Gay

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A new nationwide policy has been proposed to achieve a "no overall net loss" of the nation's wetlands.

If the policy were adopted and applied to Alaska, it would pose serious impediments to virtually every public and private project throughout urban and rural Alaska.

OPINION

Sweeping changes in wetlands management have been proposed by the National Wetlands Policy Forum, organized in 1987 to develop recommendations aimed at curbing the loss of wetlands.

The recommendations may have some merit in states where the majority of the wetland base has been significantly altered or destroyed by erosion, settlement, agriculture, urban and/or industrial uses.

However, that problem does not exist in Alaska. Alaska is one state which does not contribute to the alarming loss of wetlands in America. Even with recent world-class development on the North Slope and elsewhere in Alaska, even while producing 25 percent of America's domestic oil supply, 99.95 percent of Alaska's wetlands are intact.

The federal "no net loss" concept could come to mean that any wetlands used for development would have to be purchased, restored or preserved elsewhere as compensation for a project. Such a requirement has diminishing marginal return in Alaska, a state rich and replete with wetlands.

In addition, there are few privately owned wetlands in Alaska that could be purchased for mitigation or restoration. The vast majority (88 percent) of Alaska's lands are under state or federal ownership and therefore not available to buy and are already managed under strict regulation for any development.

About 45 percent of Alaska is covered by wetlands. In fact, wetlands account for 74 percent of Alaska's non-mountainous area. The result is that wetlands of many types and descriptions form the bulk of the developable land in the state. Therein lies the problem.

The broad definition of wetlands, combined with the emerging federal policy of "no net loss," would place remaining lands and development projects in a precarious situation. It would be almost impossible for an area sur-

rounded by wetlands to expand and develop.

Since oil and gas, minerals, fisheries, timber and tourism are the mainstays of Alaska's economy, the Resource Development Council believes community development opportunity must not be overlooked in wetlands policies. In Alaska, with its limited overland transportation routes, each of these sectors and most communities rely heavily upon the use of coastal and inland waterways.

Surrounding or adjacent wetlands must be available for infrastructure and other support facilities.

Although the "no net loss" policy has yet to be enacted, the general concept is already being applied to some degree by federal regulatory agencies.

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A case in point is the municipality of Anchorage's efforts to secure the needed permits to fill in 14 acres of land adjacent to its port for infrastructure expansion. In addition, the city intends to fill in about 50 acres immediately south of the port. The permits have been pending since last year.

The "alphabet soup" of state and federal agencies participating in the exhaustive permit process all agree that use of the land for port facilities is appropriate. However, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Environmental Protection Agency are demanding that Anchorage do substantial offsite mitigation.

They all agree that no mitigation is possible within the 14-acre area, but the agencies want the city to spend anywhere from \$200,000 to \$1 million in some other areas to create or enhance wetlands.

The great fear is that President Bush is going to issue an executive order

establishing a "no net loss" of wetlands policy. This policy is rumored to require the creation or enhancement of new wetlands for any used, resulting in virtually no use because of the very crushing offsite mitigation costs.

Alaskans can help make a difference in Washington through direct action of their local assembly, council and/or village council. The Resource Development Council believes it would be most effective for local communities to send a message to President Bush and the Domestic Policy Council.

The Southeast Conference, an organization comprised of both large and small communities throughout Southeast Alaska, recently passed a resolution requesting President Bush

to "avoid subjecting Alaska to a blanket policy which portends so much harm to its local communities."

We cannot afford to sit passively by while the self-appointed "environmental" community, citing the recent oil spill, capitalizes on the anti-Alaska mood in Washington to use the wetlands issue as a way to stop energy, minerals, timber and community development projects in our state.

Time is short, action may be taken in Washington before the end of the year regarding the wetlands policy. With your help, for once Alaska may be "ahead of the curve" on a lands issue before it avalanches on our citizens!

Becky Gay is the executive director of the Resource Development Council.