Endangered Wetlands and New EPA Office of Wetlands Protection

[EPA press release - October 6, 1986]

EPA Administrator Lee M. Thomas today issued the following statement on endangered wetlands and the formation of a new Office of Wetlands Protection.

A Statement by EPA Administrator Lee Thomas

The protection of America's endangered wetlands resources is one of my top priorities at EPA.

As a measure of my commitment to a strong and visible program, I am today announcing the creation of a new EPA Office of Wetlands Protection reporting directly to Lawrence J. Jensen, the Assistant Administrator for Water.

The wetlands program has been ably administered by a division in the Office of Federal Activities, under EPA's Assistant Administrator for External Affairs. Transferring its responsibilities to the Office of Water, however, and elevating the program from division to separate Office stature, will result in enhanced wetlands protection. This enhanced protection will result from the technical expertise and strong enforcement capabilities of the marine, estuarine and groundwater protection programs ongoing in the Office of Water.

I have directed the new office to take on five key objectives for immediate environmental enhancement: First, it will increase coordination of the long-range research efforts underway at EPA and other federal agencies. We must improve our scientific understanding of wetlands ecosystems. Second, it will expedite the achievement of consensus on the value and uses of wetlands. A National Forum will be held to bring together representatives from a broad range of key interests to develop options for a national policy. I will play a personal role in these deliberations. Third, this new Office will build on the progress already made in cooperation with other federal agencies to establish consistent policies and procedures for wetlands protection. EPA will continue to implement its responsibilities under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act vigorously. Fourth, it will redouble efforts to identify, protect and restore wetlands, strongly stressing the early identification of particularly valuable and vulnerable wetlands. Fifth, it will include an aggressive outreach program to individual property owners and developers to give them a better understanding of the value of wetlands resources.

Attached to this statement is a speech giving more details on the new wetlands office, delivered today by Lawrence J. Jensen, EPA Assistant Administrator for Water, at the Water Pollution Control Federation meeting in Los Angeles.
Remarks
Lawrence J. Jensen
Assistant Administrator for Water
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
at the Water Pollution Control Federation Meeting
Opening Ceremonies
Monday, October 6, 1986, 10:00 a.m.

Thank you.

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Federation, I am pleased to be able to fill in for Lee and speak
with you today. He sends his warmest wishes that your conference be successful.

I can't let this opportunity pass without commending you on your water pollution control
efforts. You are the architects of clean water, and the treatment systems that you have
designed, built, regulated and operated stand as monuments to this Nation's commitment to
clean water. Your success stories weave a tale that vividly describes how many of our
Nation's waters were brought back from the brink of pollution-induced destruction.

The beauty of what we in the water quality field have accomplished lies in the simplicity of
the pollution control concept we have pursued: Control the pollutants getting into our waters
by controlling what comes out of the pipe. Further down stream, that same water is
channeled into plants where it is finally prepared for consumption in our homes and
industries.

I'm not suggesting that this is a simple task. Indeed, the complexity and magnitude of the
task are staggering. But the concept is simple. Control the cleanliness of the water by
focusing on the discharge pipe and assure the water's usefulness to humans by treating it
before it enters the cup. From the pipe to the cup and back again.

Over the last 15 years, our relationship to our water resources can be simply described by
this pipe and cup analogy. Even at EPA in my office, the Office of Water, we organized our
activities around the pipe and the cup. We permitted the water that comes out of the pipe,
scrutinized the water that goes into the cup and enforced against those who did not comply
with the regulations.

Over the past few years, however, our efforts have expanded. Largely because of our success
with traditional controls aimed largely at protecting human health, we have expanded our
environmental vistas. We are exploring watery new frontiers--frontiers delineated by
ecological and environmental concerns.

In these frontiers, we find a unique set of resources and challenges. Ground water, for
instance. In 1984, we created the Office of Ground Water Protection. The mission of this
office is to protect an unseen treasure found beneath the earth. The resource itself was
difficult to describe, so we called it ground water--an oxymoron, for water isn't ground, and
ground isn't water.

In that same year, we established the Office of Marine and Estuarine Protection to deal with
another unique set of resources--our estuaries and oceans.

The creation of both of these offices is evidence that end-of-pipe permitting and drinking-
water-standard-setting is no longer the only show in town. We have rightfully increased our
interest in environmental and ecological protection.

Today, I am announcing an action that will take us one more step beyond the pipe and the cup. That announcement will impact on another of our poorly named yet ecologically vital water resources: wetlands.

I am pleased to announce the formation of the Office of Wetlands Protection in the Office of Water.

My hope today is that, as I describe the reasons for this action and the objectives of the new office, your vision beyond the pipe and the cup will be enhanced. As water quality professionals, I hope that you will commit yourselves to reinvigorated diligence in the shop, revived environmental activity in your communities, and renewed attention to your own actions as water quality-conscious individuals.

Let me turn, then to answer the question "why?" Why increase our attention on wetlands?

Our desire for progress, productivity, development, and convenience has placed our wetlands resource in jeopardy. Many of us have thought of wetlands as wastelands. We felt that the faster we could drain them, the better. For most people, words like marsh, swamp, bog, and fen did little more than conjure up visions of dampness, disease, difficulty and danger.

No wonder, then, that flourishing farms, busy malls and sprawling subdivisions sprang up where wetlands used to thrive, and that transportation-efficient channels replaced boggy, meandering watercourses. Many of us viewed such wetlands development as evidence of our mastery over an inhospitable environment.

Evidence of the depth of our feeling surfaces in some statistics: At one time there were 215 million acres of wetlands in the lower 48 states. Today there are only 95 million left. Between 1950 and 1980 over 11 million acres were lost. And that doesn't include the wetlands that were degraded by pollution.

We are losing 300 thousand acres of freshwater wetlands every year. In the heart of the Nation, conversion of wetlands to farm lands has destroyed 99 percent of Iowa's marshes and 80 percent of Minnesota's prairie potholes.

The bottomland hardwood forests in the Mississippi Valley decreased over 50 percent in the years between 1950 and 1977. Today that loss continues at a rate of 167 thousand acres a year.

The sheer magnitude of these numbers is staggering. But summarizing statistics on wetlands losses doesn't begin to capture the real reasons that we should be concerned.

Wetlands are habitat for myriad living things. Consequently, their destruction puts pressure on countless components of the life chain. We are finding that as wetlands disappear, so does the wildlife that is dependent on them.

In 1899, for instance, the California Klamath River Basin was the winter haven for more than six million migratory birds. Today, the basin can sustain fewer than a million. Right now 90 percent of the plants, 30 percent of the birds, 15 percent of the mammals, and 50 percent of the fish on the Endangered Species List depend on wetlands habitats.

If these statistics don't stir you to action, consider wetlands in their relationship to us, to our
standard of living. Far from being wastelands, they are among the most fertile and productive ecosystems on the earth. Witness, for example, that the first great civilizations sprang up in the flood plains and marshes of the Tigris and Euphrates, the Nile and the Indus.

While those civilizations have given way to modern living, wetlands continue to serve man dutifully. They are useful in controlling floods. They act as screens, filtering out all sorts of pollution before it gets into our lakes, streams, rivers and estuaries. They aid in purifying the water, provide nutrients for the early growth of animals and plants found on our dinner tables, give us recreation, and buffer us from some of nature's natural tempests. No wonder that some have begun to call wetlands our "waterlogged wealth."

The evidence is hard to dispute. Wetlands must join the list of resources vital to man. Just as importantly, they must be considered as part of our ecological heritage. These are the reasons that wetlands are worthy of our increased attention and protection.

But if I have convinced you of their importance, I have only partially met my objective. What remains is for me to instill in you a desire to do something about it. Perhaps I can instill that desire by telling you what the new Office of Wetlands Protection has been given as its mandate.

The Agency has worked with wetlands for some time. Formerly, this activity was housed in the Office of External Affairs.

The effectiveness and strength of the Agency's current Wetlands Program will be enhanced by placing it in the Office of Water. There it will benefit from the technical expertise, permitting strengths, enforcement capabilities and State program development experience which currently exists in the water program. Our wetlands efforts will be integrated more effectively into EPA's overall water resource protection activities, including those dealing with estuaries and near coastal waters, non-point source pollution, and ground water.

The new Office of Wetlands Protection will have four key objectives.

First, it will coordinate the long-range wetlands research efforts underway at EPA and other Federal agencies. Research is vital, for the wetlands, ecosystem is complex. The prevailing public view of wetlands as wastelands suggests that wetlands are yet an unknown resource. The second objective, therefore, is outreach and public education. Through the new office, we will build understanding of the ecological value of wetlands. Lee has indicated his intention to sponsor, with the Conservation Foundation, a National Forum on Wetlands. This forum will bring together people from many walks of life to discuss the development of a new national wetlands protection policy.

In addition, the new office will undertake an aggressive public education program. We want to communicate with individual property owners and developers to foster in them a better understanding of the value of wetlands. I am hopeful that individuals in individual settings will become better stewards of wetlands once they become aware of their vital importance.

Third, the new office will continue to work with other Federal agencies to establish consistent policies and procedures for wetlands protection. We will implement our permit review and policy responsibilities under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act vigorously, increase enforcement against unpermitted discharges that significantly alter or destroy wetlands, step up our advanced identification program, and expand State program development efforts.
Fourth, we will strengthen our efforts to identify, protect, and restore the most valuable and vulnerable wetlands. To do so, we will begin to assess and catalogue the Nation's remaining wetlands. This will allow us to flag the most valuable wetlands outside of actual development debates.

In all of these efforts, state, local and individual involvement will be key to our success. Local officials, not Federal regulators, know about the unique characteristics of local aquatic resources. They are sensitive to the land use planning and property rights issues that surround wetlands decisions. In short, without their expertise and commitment, we will not realize a lasting improvement in our wetland resource.

**Near Coastal Waters**

Our wetlands are treasures wherever they are found, whether in Kansas or California or Alaska. But our coastal wetlands, the fringes of our Nation where the land meets the sea, are especially important.

Let me turn, then, to these unique wetlands and the near coastal waters into which they fade.

The coasts of our land hold a special beauty and have long drawn man to stand in awe. The poet captures this image in simple words when he asks "What do men find when they go to the sea?" But our coastal wetlands and our near coastal waters hold value far beyond the artistic.

What *do* men find when they go down to the sea? Yes, they find fascination in fantastic sunsets, rolling dunes and unique wildlife. They find abundant wealth in myriad fish, sturdy grasses and hearty waterfowl. But, sadly, they also find residues of man's progress--putrid pollution, contaminated fish and unsightly squalor.

Coastal populations increased by 69 percent from 1950 to 1980. And our trek to the sea is not yet completed. Recent estimates say that by 1990---that's just a little over three years from now---75 percent of our population will be living and working within fifty miles of the coastline.

Florida's coast is being settled at the rate of three thousand to four thousand people a week. And a full 90 percent of California's population lives within an hour's drive of the coast. With the human throng come evidences of modern living: cars, chemicals, and condos.

Waste treatment needs for these people will put tremendous pressures on our near coastal resource. Already, publicly owned treatment works in coastal counties are discharging more than 9.5 billion gallons of effluent a day. In addition, 160 thousand coastal commercial facilities are discharging 3.2 billion gallons of wastewater a day.

What do men find when they go to the sea?

On the one hand, they find tremendous aquatic productivity---productivity that translates into 85 percent of all marine fisheries being dependent on the near coastal waters for replenishment. On the other hand, they find close to 75 percent of our population living along the shore---75 percent crashing into 85 percent.

That's not even the whole story. Our estuaries and near coastal waters act as sinks for
wastes that are pumped into streams and rivers far inland. Once wastes get to the sea, they can't be flushed any further down stream. With no place to go, they accumulate until they degrade. But degradation goes at a much slower pace than accumulation.

The real question is, can the 85 percent withstand the onslaught of the 75 percent plus the sink effect? Unless we change something, the answer will be "no."

Toxic chemicals are showing up in our shellfish, fish and birds, giving them cancer and making them unfit for human consumption. Large areas of shellfish beds have been closed to harvesting because they are contaminated with pathogenic bacteria and viruses. The National Shellfish Register this year found that several coastal states have lost from one thousand to 200 thousand acres of productive shellfish beds.

We are also finding extensive and pervasive eutrophication. As you may know, this is the scientific term to characterize a suffocating water body. As a result we are witnessing a depletion of once abundant fish. East coast commercial harvests of striped bass, for instance, dropped from 14.7 million pounds in 1973 to 1.7 million pounds just ten years later.

These realities about our near coastal waters have already stirred us to action. In fact, these realities were at least partially responsible for the creation of the Office of Marine and Estuarine Protection in 1984. Let me report to you some of what we have accomplished.

For the past year, we have been carrying out a Near Coastal Waters Strategic Planning Initiative. Simply put, the initiative requires us to maintain and where possible, enhance the environmental quality of near coastal waters. The goal may not be easily attained, but once we're there, it will have been worth it. Several activities have already been initiated.

For instance, at the Federal level we are redirecting our pollution control activities to focus more on the near coastal waters. We will be focusing greater attention on developing criteria for estuarine waters and sediments. Then we will use that information in making regulatory and policy decisions that affect inland activities.

We are also reviewing permitting priorities to ensure that our management systems reflect the special value of near coastal waters. Similarly, we are working on developing appropriate regulation for storm water run off, a major polluter of coastal wetlands and near coastal waters. Storm water comes in a variety of flavors, from regular municipal run off to combined sewer overflows, and we hope to address each in a specially tailored way. Whenever we can, we will involve interested groups, as we have in the development of regulations for separate storm sewers. WPCF has been actively involved in this effort.

On another front, we will be revising our five-year research plan. We want to find out a number of things: what are the ecological risks from toxics, and the long-term effects of destroying or changing the habitat that our fish and birds depend on? We want to know the sources of the bacteria and viruses that are contaminating our shellfish and beaches. And we want to know the causes and the effects of pervasive low oxygen levels in the coastal ecosystem.

We are also addressing the diverse non-point pollution threats to our near coastal waters. In this regard, the Chesapeake Bay program is a showcase. We are hopeful that the experience and knowledge gained in the Chesapeake will help us understand the effectiveness and the capacity of various non-point controls. Armed with that kind of information, we hope we will be able to effectively guide other non point source programs at other estuaries around the country.
So far, six estuaries in addition to the Chesapeake Bay have been singled out for special help--Buzzards Bay, Narragansett Bay, Long Island Sound, Puget Sound, Albemarle-Pamlico Sound and San Francisco Bay. Right now we are characterizing each of these estuaries and identifying their specific environmental problems. And task forces of Federal, state and local agencies; coastal users, scientists and citizens are developing plans to control both point and non-point pollution, to protect the living resources and their habitats, and to manage freshwater inflow.

And finally, we will begin to better track the state of our estuaries and near coastal waters. Beginning in our 1989 report to Congress, we will include a special state of the estuaries assessment to our partners on Capitol Hill. This should help us track our efforts and should also serve to direct future Agency priorities.

But EPA can't do it all alone. There are 21 Federal programs with jurisdiction over near coastal waters and many more at the State and local levels. More importantly, the locally diffuse sources of coastal pollution will be most effectively dealt with on a regional, state, local and individual level. This is where those pollution problems originate. This is where they can be controlled.

I am pleased that several states are already taking up the challenge. For example, the state of Maryland passed a law that created a commission that developed criteria to manage land use in a one-thousand foot "Critical Area" around the tidal portions of Chesapeake Bay. In this critical area, farmers have to use less fertilizer and pesticides, landowners can only cut certain trees, and developers can not construct as many buildings. The "Critical Area" legislation works hand in hand with EPA's Chesapeake Bay Program, initiated nearly a decade ago. I tip my hat to Maryland and to the other states that have taken similar steps to control coastal degradation.

I hope that my remarks today have convinced you that we at EPA are intent on looking beyond the pipe and the cup to the new challenges found in ecological and environmental protection. Yes, I am pleased to announce the formation of a new Office of Wetlands Protection. It will do much toward strengthening our ability to be wise stewards over this unique and vital resource.

But I have not meant to suggest that the bureaucratic act of creating an office can, by itself, have any positive impact on our environment.

When all is said and done, the greatest environmental good will come from millions of concerned people making millions of environmentally prudent choices in millions of unique situations every day.

Someone has said that "No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible." Well, I ask you today to feel responsible, to work with me, to preserve our wetlands and near coastal waters. I am committed to the effort. I am sure that you are too. We must show that commitment in our work, in our homes and yards, and in our discussions with our friends and neighbors. That is the ultimate challenge.