

YOUR GUIDE TO SASKATCHEWAN WETLAND POLICY

Saskatchewan wetlands help protect the foundations of our agricultural and tourism industries by contributing to soil, water and wildlife habitat conservation. They help maintain our province's overall environmental health, and support thousands of jobs. Despite their critical roles in our lives, our province's wetlands continue to be converted to other uses.

The Government of Saskatchewan believes that wetlands should be conserved. To maintain wetland benefits, several provincial agencies worked in partnership with landowners and stakeholders to develop a wetland policy. The wetland policy will help raise awareness of wetland benefits and ensure Saskatchewan's land-use policies and programs include the conservation of these important areas. The provincial agencies that developed the policy are Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management, Saskatchewan Municipal Government, Sask Water, and the Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation.

Saskatchewan is not alone in developing a policy to conserve wetlands. The Federal Government and the governments of Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario have developed policies to conserve their wetlands.

This document explains wetland policy in Saskatchewan. For more information about the new policy, contact the Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation, 110 - 2151 Scarth Street, Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 3Z3.

Wetland Policy Statement

The Government of Saskatchewan believes in the sustainable management of wetlands to maintain the multiple benefits they provide, now and into the future.

This means the numbers, diversity and productive capacity of wetlands will be maintained to provide social, economic and environmental benefits to Saskatchewan people.

Objectives

1. To encourage sustainable management of wetlands on public and private lands to maintain their functions and benefits.
2. To conserve wetlands that are essential to maintain critical wetland species or wetland functions.
3. To restore or rehabilitate degraded wetland ecosystems where previous destruction or alteration has resulted in a significant Loss of wetland functions or benefits.

Wetland Policy Principles

The following principles will guide delivery of wetland policy.

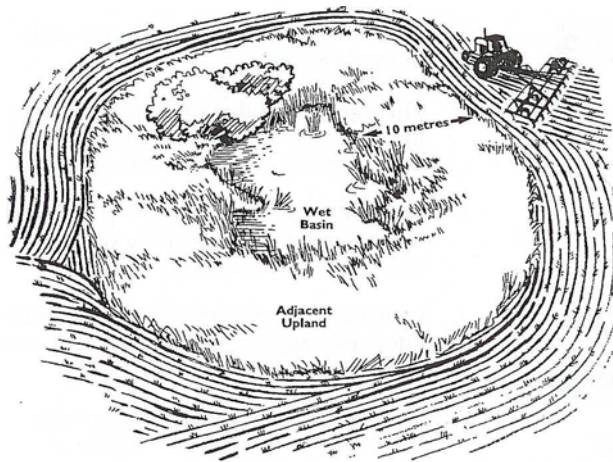
1. Wetlands are a valuable resource with multiple benefits.
2. The rights of landowners and their role in the stewardship of land are recognized and their ongoing involvement is assured.
3. The interest of aboriginal people in resource management will be respected and their involvement is assured.
4. Wetland conservation will be pursued in an integrated approach to land use planning and management.
5. Sustainable uses of wetlands are to be achieved through partnerships and co-operation with all levels of government and the public. The public will continue to be informed and involved in wetland management decisions through activities such as education and awareness programs and public consultations.
6. All government organizations involved with or affecting wetlands are to recognize and consider wetland functions in their policy and program development and decision making.
7. Wetlands are an intrinsic component of broad ecological processes and systems. Wetland management will be carried out using an ecosystems approach.

What Are Wetlands?

Wetlands are low-lying areas of land covered by water often enough to support aquatic plants and wildlife for part of their life cycle. They are saturated with water long enough that their soils become hydric, or gleyed. They include both the wet basin and an area of transitional lands between the waterbodies and adjacent upland.

Wetlands are dynamic ecosystems, and water levels and vegetation often fluctuate seasonally and annually. Open water may not be present and vegetation ranges from floating or submerged plants in open water to cattails, rushes, sedges, shrubs and willows at the water margin to grasses and trees in the transitional lands. The transitional lands are a minimum of 10 meters (33 feet) adjacent to the area covered by water at the waterbody's normal full supply level.

A Functional Wetland



Causes of Wetland Loss

Since settlement, 40 per cent of Saskatchewan's wetlands have been lost and half of those remaining are threatened by human activities. Saskatchewan wetlands are managed by landowners, businesses, interest groups, government departments, agencies and Crown corporations. Because of this diversity, there is a wide-range of opinions on how wetlands should best be managed.

Many factors affect wetlands: climate, water management, agricultural practices, urban use, transportation development and government policies and programs.

Climate

The number and area of wetlands increase with precipitation, and decrease when it is dry. Small, temporary wetlands are the most affected by dry conditions.

Water Management

Water control projects can improve or threaten wetlands. Large wetlands may be created while smaller, productive, more temporary wetlands may be lost. The cumulative benefits of many smaller wetlands may not be replaced by larger wetland complexes.

Agriculture

Wetlands are altered by draining and filling basins and by burning, tilling, grazing margins and other agricultural practices. Over 46 per cent of the province is used for agriculture. Protecting wetland resources requires changes to current land use.

Urban Use

Urban development, transportation corridors and other infrastructure can change wetlands by filling and draining wetlands, and changing drainage patterns.

Government Policies and Programs

Policies and programs of federal, provincial and municipal governments affect wetlands. Sometimes policies and programs that were put in place to achieve other purposes are not consistent with today's understanding of wetland values.

Benefits of Saskatchewan Wetlands

Canada holds one-quarter of the world's wetland resource; Saskatchewan has about 1.5 million wetlands, or 17 per cent of Canada's wetlands.

Saskatchewan wetlands provide five key benefits:

1. A vital part of the water cycle.

Wetlands play an integral part in the water cycle of evaporation and condensation. They slow runoff and reduce local and downstream erosion, and flooding. Wetlands allow surface water to percolate into the ground to help maintain water table levels.

Wetlands can also act as natural filters by capturing sediments, neutralizing contaminants and purifying water. They can provide a low-cost facility for water treatment as the tertiary component in municipal sewage treatment systems.

2. A resource for agriculture.

Ninety per cent of farms in Saskatchewan use wells for part of their water supply. Wetlands recharge the groundwater source for these wells. Surface water stored in wetlands is also used for irrigation, livestock and crop spraying.

Plants surrounding wetlands provide a source of hay, help control the spread of salts into cropland, reduce erosion and trap snow in the winter.

3. A home for plants and wildlife.

Many species of plants, some of which are used in modern medicine, find their home in wetlands. The vegetation also provides a habitat for invertebrate food sources for birds and other wildlife, and a spawning area for fish.

Saskatchewan wetlands are home to a wide variety of wildlife. Several species rely almost wholly on our wetlands for their survival. Threatened and endangered birds such as piping plovers, whooping cranes and trumpeter swans all find refuge in wetlands.

4. A place for business, tourism and recreation.

In Saskatchewan, outdoor recreation is a multimillion dollar industry that employs thousands of people. Wetlands are an essential part of this activity, providing support for fishing, trapping, guiding, hunting and gathering. They also provide sites for tourism, particularly the rapidly growing ecotourism industry, which relies on natural areas for wildlife watching and photography.

Saskatchewan wetlands provide opportunities to enjoy hiking, wildlife watching, touring and water sports. School children, agrologists, biologists and other researchers use wetlands as educational resources.

5. A part of our heritage.

Early settlements and communities located near wetlands and other water resources. Water is

necessary for survival, and rivers were early transportation routes. Today, wetlands are seen as part of our heritage and a quiet place to get away from a hectic world. Municipal planners frequently include man-made wetlands in new residential and commercial sub-divisions.

The Next Steps

Pursuit of the wetland policy objectives will include a number of activities. These activities will include the participation and advice of stakeholders.

1. Increase awareness of the benefits of wetlands.

The Saskatchewan government will encourage and promote awareness and understanding of the functions and benefits of our wetland resources.

2. Increase wetland monitoring.

The Saskatchewan government will encourage the gathering of additional information about our wetland resources in order to make informed decisions.

3. Co-ordinate government policies and programs to improve wetland management.

Saskatchewan government departments consult with each other when developing strategies; where applicable, departments will consider wetland conservation in the strategies.

4. Develop land-use planning guidelines for wetland management.

The Saskatchewan government will encourage developing integrated land use plans for wetlands, and will seek local advice to develop local priorities.

5. Encourage landowners to maintain wetlands.

The Saskatchewan government will work toward ensuring policies and programs encourage the maintenance of our remaining wetlands, and will encourage opportunities to enable landowners to capture some economic benefits of wetlands.

Questions about Saskatchewan's Wetland Policy

1. What is a wetland?

A wetland is a low-lying area of land saturated by water often enough to support aquatic plants and wildlife, and which cause the soils to gley. Wetlands include a wet basin and an area of land between the basin and the adjacent upland. Saskatchewan has seasonal, semi-permanent, and permanent wetlands.

2. What is the wetland policy?

The wetland policy is the Province of Saskatchewan's commitment to the conservation of wetlands and the first component of a provincial water strategy. It is not a regulatory document or a law.

3. Why do we need a wetland policy?

Wetland loss in Saskatchewan is significant. Since settlement, 40 per cent of our province's wetlands have been converted to other uses and half of those remaining are threatened. With the loss of wetlands comes a loss of the benefits they provide our society. The policy promotes wetland benefits and helps ensure a consistent provincial approach to land-use policies and programs that impact wetlands.

4. What wetlands will be affected by the wetland policy?

The intent of wetland policy is to conserve wetlands in Saskatchewan. Low-lying areas predominantly under cultivation are not considered wetlands, as they have been converted to other uses.

5. What programs are offered to help maintain or restore wetlands?

Technical advice and funding for wetland restoration or management may be available. Contact your nearest Rural Service Centre, Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management regional or district office, Community Planners, Sask Water, the Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation, or Ducks Unlimited Canada for programs which may apply to your area.

6. Who is responsible for implementing and managing the wetland policy?

Provincial government departments and agencies that deliver land-use programs and policies developed the wetland policy, and they will continue to guide policy implementation.

This includes the Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation, Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management, Saskatchewan Municipal Government and Sask Water. The Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation will continue to lead policy implementation.

7. Will landowners be able to manage wetlands on their lands?

Yes, landowners can manage wetlands on their own lands. Under The Water Corporation Act landowners are required to obtain approval to construct ditches or other works that cause water to leave their land.

8. Where can I get more information about the new wetland policy?

Additional information about the new wetland policy can be obtained from the Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation, Rural Service Centres, Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management regional or district offices, Community Planners or Sask Water.

The Water Cycle

