



US Army Corps
Of Engineers
Wilmington District

PUBLIC NOTICE

Issue Date: May 21, 2007
Comment Deadline: August 24, 2007

The Wilmington District, Corps of Engineers (Corps) announces the proposed adoption of the North Carolina Wetlands Assessment Method (NC WAM) along with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (in North Carolina), and the N.C. Divisions of Water Quality and Coastal Management for use in undertaking wetland functional assessments in North Carolina.

NC WAM is designed to be a rapid, reference-based wetland function assessment methodology and was developed by an interagency team under the auspices of the N.C. Ecosystem Enhancement Program. The goal of the team was to develop an accurate, consistent, rapid, observational, and scientifically-based field method to determine the level of function of a wetland relative to reference condition (where appropriate) for each of 16 major North Carolina general wetland types. The Team defined "rapid" as taking no more than 15 additional minutes for a trained observer to evaluate a wetland within an assessment area.

The method presents a dichotomous key to wetlands, narrative descriptions of the 16 general wetland types as well as functional ratings for each wetland type in comparison to a reference wetland (where appropriate). Three major functions are recognized with 11 sub-functions as outlined in the draft manual. The sub-functions are reported both with and without respect to wetland opportunity to allow use of opportunity as appropriate. A computer program was developed based on an iterative, Boolean logic process and then field tested across the state at various sites. A "Tool Box" of previously evaluated reference and non-reference sites is available to help calibrate the evaluator for nearby sites. This Tool Box will eventually be available to the public via the internet. The manual also describes each of the 22 metrics to be determined in the field evaluation of NC WAM and also includes an extensive glossary.

The agencies propose to adopt NC WAM as the standard wetland evaluation methodology in North Carolina. This adoption would not preclude use of other wetland evaluation methods in North Carolina where appropriate on a case-by-case basis. The agencies believe that this method will be useful for project planning, alternatives analysis, compliance/enforcement, compensatory mitigation planning, and tracking functional replacement in the State. The implementation details of how NC WAM will be used will be developed by the regulatory agencies and will receive separate public notice and comment before adoption at a later date.

For the Federal agencies, use of this method is consistent with the recommendations of the Memorandum of Agreement between the Environmental Protection Agency and the

Department of the Army Concerning the Determination of Mitigation under the Clean Water Act Section 404(b)(1) Guidelines (February 6, 1990), and the 2002 Regulatory Guidance Letter 02-2 from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Guidance on Compensatory Mitigation Projects for Aquatic Resource Impacts). For the Division of Water Quality, rules concerning Wetland Evaluation methods (15A NCAC 2B .0103 (c)), 401 Water Quality Certification (15A NCAC 2H .0500) and Isolated Wetland permitting (15A NCAC 2H .1300) provide explicit reference to wetland function with respect to permitting and mitigation.

NOTE: One particular issue that the agencies request comments on is whether the evaluation of the functions of Riverine Swamp Forests should consider whether a stream should be required to be present in order to have a highly functional Riverine Swamp Forest. The current version of the rating system for the Riverine Swamp Forest requires the presence of a stream to be highly functional. The Team specifically requests comments on whether this is a reasonable assumption and if not, what type of weight should be given to the presence of a stream channel in this type of wetland.

Comments should be sent in written form to the following individuals no later than 5 p.m. on August 24, 2007. These comments will be considered in the development of the final version of the NC Wetland Assessment Methodology.

1. N.C. Division of Water Quality contact person: John Dorney, N.C. Division of Water Quality, Wetlands Program Development Unit, 2321 Crabtree Blvd., Raleigh, North Carolina 27604.
2. N.C. Division Coastal Management contact person: Steve Sollod, NC Division of Coastal Management, 1638 Mail Service Center Raleigh, NC 27699-1638.
3. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers contact person: David Lekson, Washington Regulatory Field Office, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Post Office Box 1000, Washington, North Carolina 27889-1000.
4. US Environmental Protection Agency contact person: Kathy Matthews, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, USEPA - Region 4 Wetlands Section, 109 T.W. Alexander Dr., Durham, North Carolina 27711, MAIL CODE: E143-04.

This information is presented in an ongoing attempt to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Corps of Engineers', U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's and N.C. Division of Water Quality's wetland permitting programs, mainly the 404/401 program, but also for the Division of Water Quality's isolated wetland permitting program. Once adopted, N.C. WAM will replace the N.C. Wetlands Rating System for the Division of Water Quality. Use by the N.C. Division of Coastal Management will be limited to Coastal Consistency rather than CAMA permitting. Hard copies of these items can be obtained by calling Marion Davis at 919-733-1786 and requesting them.