

Developing a State Wetlands Conservation Plan for Texas

Julie Anderson
State Wetlands Planner
Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, in cooperation with numerous entities, has been developing the State Wetlands Conservation Plan (SWCP) for Texas since April, 1994. The SWCP focuses on non-regulatory, voluntary approaches to conserving wetlands. Its primary contribution to wetlands conservation include:

- Enhancing the ability of the landowner to use existing incentive programs and other land use options through education and assistance;
- Developing and encouraging the use of land management options that provide an economic incentive for conserving existing wetlands or restoring former ones; and,
- Coordinating regional wetlands conservation efforts.

The planning process was initiated in September, 1994, with a Statewide Scoping Meeting for the State Wetlands Conservation Plan. Participants represented a broad spectrum of wetlands interests, including landowners, state and federal agencies, conservation, agriculture, forestry, and business. The scoping meeting provided participants with an opportunity to apply their expertise to Plan development.

Participants overwhelmingly supported landowner involvement during all stages of Plan development. Participants identified three principal needs:

- Information transfer to each other and to agency representatives;
- New private lands incentives that would encourage landowners to conserve wetlands on their lands; and,
- Increased monitoring of wetlands projects and research on conservation options such as new conservation funding sources and mitigation banking.

In January, 1995, the Statewide Coordination Group, formed by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, began developing the Plan. The Statewide Coordination Group consists of public and private sector representatives who have a statewide interest in the Plan. This group was responsible for:

- Providing feedback and support to guide the direction of the SWCP;
- Receiving and responding to information and updates from regional advisory groups on plan development;
- Providing a vehicle to convey information received from landowners and regional interests to agency heads; and,
- Facilitating coordination, communication and cooperation among Texas resource agencies and private groups on wetlands conservation efforts.

Due to the extensive size and physiography of Texas, a "regional" approach was used to identify wetlands issues and strategies, and to encompass the diverse wetlands needs and resources of Texas. The Statewide Coordination Group worked in cooperation with three Regional Advisory Groups - one each in East Texas, the Panhandle, and the Gulf Coast. These regions were selected because each represents large wetland complexes, and because of their distinct socioeconomic structure and specific land uses. The advisory groups identified sixteen regional or statewide issues associated with conserving Texas wetlands and developed recommendations and proposals for action to address those issues. These results from the core of the Texas Wetlands Conservation Plan.

The Regional Advisory Groups met over the course of one year to discuss solutions to five general categories of wetlands issues that they identified:

- education,
- economic incentives,
- conservation,
- private ownership, and
- governmental relations.

Information from the three groups was combined into a single plan. The final draft, completed in November, 1996, was available for public review. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department currently is seeking approval for the Plan by the Parks and Wildlife Commission, the Texas Legislature and the Governor. The final Plan is expected in May, 1997. For more information on the Texas Wetlands Conservation Plan, contact Julie Anderson, TPWD, at (512) 389-4328.