Wetland Policy Issues

This new report from the Council for Agricultrual Science and Technology (CAST), Ames, Iowa, discusses the basis for the ongoing controversy surrounding wetland regulation. The task force synthesized, sifted and summarized the voluminous data, divergent perspectives and existing philosophies into this single manuscript. Several suggestions, conclusions and implications for the various entities in the wetland issues are offered.

Suggestions

Wetland scientists should

- recognize the legitimate bounds of their disciplines and the proper role of science in policymaking,
- interact with agricultural and ecological interests and the public to support the development of public policy and
- devote more attention to the relative values of nonwetland landscapes.

Wetland policymakers/regulators should

- recognize that not all wetlands are equal,
- resolve the property rights issue,
- define wetland more clearly,
- recognize that nonwetland landscapes have value too, and
- recognize that wetland can be valuable for more than its natural functions.

The agricultural community should

- know that the world is changing, especially with respect to the assignment of "rights,"
- appreciate the other side(s) of the wetland issues, and
- recognize that trade-offs are necessary in a world of increasing scarcity.

The environmental community should

- recognize that government is anthropocentric (like it or not),
- acknowledge that money is the common denominator for exchange,
- recognize that trade-offs are necessary in a world of increasing scarcity,
- appreciate the other side(s) of the wetland issue, and
- encourage efforts to identify values of nonwetland landscapes to the degree of effort expended on wetlands.

The public should

- not rely on science or public officials to determine what they want protected; they should become informed and get involved.

Conclusions/Implications

- Debates over the use and allocation of wetlands continue.
- Although approximately half of the lower-48's wetlands have been converted to other uses, that alone is not justification for preserving all of the remaining half.
- There is scarce middle ground in the discussion of wetlands—or at least few are willing to occupy it. Those informed and interested enough in the subject to take a position usually end up at one or the other extreme in the debate.
- While wetlands perform numerous useful functions, quantification, elaboration and enumeration of wetland values in the absolute are of little use; what is needed are estimates of the relative values of wetlands and all other landscapes or alternative uses, which may have to be given up to protect wetland. Unless similar evaluations of forest land, agricultural land, grassland and urban land are available, no meaningful relative basis exists on which to suggest land management or allocation policies.
- The public is largely oblivious to wetlands and the wetland debate. The combination of distance from the public's everday focus and the technical nature of wetland issues contributes to confusion about the real problems that exist.
- One of the principal constraints to resolving wetland debates is agreeing on what constitutes a wetland. Science alone cannot decide for society what is and is not wetland. Wetland is as much a social construct as a topographic feature; therefore the public policy arena rather than the academic laboratory is the proper focus for defining wetland.
- Existing wetland legislation leads to confusion because many of the terms (e.g., mitigation, restoration, creation or no-net-loss) are not defined clearly.
- Wetlands are dynamic components of the landscape and dynamic in the way society perceives them.
- Social value, an appropriate common denominator for social decisionmaking, frequently is confused with ecological value and function of wetlands. For there to be social value, wetland function must lead to some potential perceptible change in human well-being.
- There are many well informed, rational people who place higher values on alternative uses of wetland than on "natural" wetland.
- All wetland regulations affect the economic decisions of individuals, firms and the public. Regulation also affects the distribution of income among present generations and between the present and future generations.
- Science will not, and should not, be the last word on wetland issues.
- Science has made contributions toward resolving the issues, but, despite decades of excellent wetland science, the issue remains largely
  - an issue of philosophical and ethical value differences,
  - a political-legal issue of explicitly assigning property rights,
  - a social-technical issue of defining exactly what a *wetland* is,
  - a largely regional-local issue most often discussed at the national level, and
  - a matter of having to make decisions today in spite of not resolving the above four points.

Wetland Policy Issues was written by four scientists and two technical assistants chaired by Jay A. Leitch of the Department of Agricultural Economics, North Dakota State University, Fargo.