



June 24, 2020

Task Force on Climate Change
Land Use and Conservation Subcommittee
Comments Submitted Electronically

Dear Members of the Task Force on Climate Change:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the challenges posed by climate change and opportunities to build resilience. The Wisconsin Wetlands Association is a non-partisan, science-based organization dedicated to the protection and restoration of wetlands throughout the state. We collaborate with policy makers, private landowners, farmers, municipalities, businesses, and others to accomplish this mission.

At the Wisconsin Wetlands Association, we have long appreciated the benefits of wetlands for biodiversity, healthy hydrology, and recreation. However, in recent years, the ability of wetlands to solve problems on our landscape, particularly those related to water, has garnered intense interest and encouraged diverse partnerships.

Changing precipitation patterns associated with climate change are presenting urgent problems for our communities. Urban and rural areas alike are struggling to protect public safety, transportation infrastructure, businesses, homes, and farms from frequent and occasionally catastrophic floods. In other cases, groundwater depletion, low flows, and decreased lake levels disrupt farming, drinking water supplies, recreational opportunities, and more. These problems have costly economic and ecologic consequences for local governments and landowners. Wetland and floodplain restoration can help communities strengthen their response to the threats that climate change brings.

Our comments focus on upper watershed wetland and floodplain features because fixing downstream problems requires looking upstream. In a healthy watershed, upper watershed wetlands capture, store and slowly release water, allowing it to soak into the ground or slowly move down the watershed. Floodplains along the banks of rivers and streams give those waterways area to swell, spread out, and further slow down. Collectively, upper watershed wetlands and floodplains reduce erosion and flood peaks downstream, provide groundwater recharge, filter impurities, and provide other ecological benefits.

As it currently stands, the wetlands and waterways of Wisconsin are severely degraded, disrupting the capacity of our hydrologic systems to manage water. Millions of acres of upper watershed wetlands have been ditched and drained; thousands of miles of streams have been diverted, straightened, or armored; and many of our rivers are disconnected from adjacent floodplains along major stretches. These degraded conditions amplify flooding, runoff, and erosion. When the natural infrastructure can no longer hold water in place, erosive features (ie: gullies, headcuts, incised channels, etc.) are carved into the landscape,

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overwhelming our water corridors and sending water rushing downstream. More frequent, extreme storms and changing precipitation patterns produced by climate change make these conditions worse.

Wisconsin needs watersheds with abundant, healthy, upper watershed wetlands and well-connected floodplains to hold water and slow its movement through our landscape. However, the policies and programs are not currently in place to incentivize and support the restoration work needed.

To move toward the goal of restoring the land's capacity to manage water and address climate-related water challenges, we are asking that this task force include in their recommendations the need for a statewide strategy to:

- Assess current hydrologic conditions of our watersheds to identify where and how loss of wetland storage and disconnected floodplains increase vulnerabilities.
- Restore upper watershed wetlands and reconnect streams to adjacent floodplains in order to increase storage, infiltration, and baseflow, reduce runoff and erosion, and maintain or reestablish conditions necessary for the persistence and enhancement of native fish, wildlife, and plant communities.

Whether our objectives are to protect infrastructure, to buffer farms from the effects of drought or floods, to preserve native fish, wildlife, and plant communities, or all of these, we cannot build resilience to climate change if we do not gain better control of the movement of water across our landscapes. Restoring wetlands and floodplains are essential to this task.

WWA's work in the Marengo and Little Plover River Watersheds provide examples of the types of watershed-scale hydrologic assessment and restoration projects needed across the state. The Marengo project is focused on protecting vulnerable infrastructure and fisheries from the effects of climate-induced severe storms. The Little Plover River project is more focused on maintaining water supply, stream flow, and healthy stream conditions. Common threads include restoring wetland and stream hydrology to help solve problems, strong public investments, and strong, locally-led collaborations.

Wisconsin Wetlands Association appreciates the time that this task force is taking to research and make recommendations to improve our state's resilience and we are available to collaborate on solutions. Please feel free to contact me if you have questions or if we can be of assistance at:

Policy1@wisconsinwetlands.org.

Sincerely,

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