

J. SCOTT CHRISTIANSON

Advisory council drafts goals for Missouri's wetlands



In 1990, the Missouri Department of Natural Resources was charged with the task of developing a statewide wetlands conservation plan in order to enhance and protect Missouri's remaining wetlands. In order to devise such a plan, the DNR formed a Wetlands Advisory Council composed of representatives from organizations and governmental agencies that had an interest in wetland conservation. This group was given the job of formulating goals and recommendations for a state wetlands conservation plan.

When the council was initially formed, "we had no preconceived notions, but we knew that wetlands were a controversial issue and didn't want to just come up with a plan in isolation," said Jane Epperson, chairwoman, of the Wetlands Advisory Council and a hydrologist for the Department of Natural Resources. "We wanted to hear all the pros and cons from all sides."

It took the council more than two years of meetings, public debates and research to put together a set of goals and recommendations for Missouri's wetlands.

The Wetlands Advisory Council set two wetland conservation goals. The short-term goal is to "achieve no overall net loss of the state's remaining wetland resource base by the year 1995." Because the term "no net loss" has been interpreted so differently, the council carefully defined "no net loss."

"No overall net loss means that the loss of Missouri wetlands will not exceed the gains, considering acreage, functions and values," states the council's report. "... This goal does not imply that individual wetland will, in every instance, be untouched. Rather, that the state's wetland resource base reach equilibrium, in the short term, between losses and gains."

The council recommended that Missouri adopt a long-term goal to "increase the quantity and quality of Missouri's wetland resource base considering acreage, functions and values by the year 2000."

Some of the council's recommendations for achieving the short- and long-term goals are:

- Establish a statewide planning committee through which options for implementation of the short-term goal may be discussed. Planning for the future of the state's wetland resource should be through a forum process, not by any one agency or interest group.
- Research, evaluate and report on the status of the wetland resource base including: past and current extent of the resource, causes of historic wetland losses, current threats faced by the resource and the effectiveness of the existing private and government programs in protecting the resource.
- Develop and implement a statewide wetland education program.
- Establish a wetland information clearing house for the purpose of providing Missouri citizens with a single point of contact for up-to-date, accurate information on wetlands.
- Support existing incentives that encourage local governments, industry and private wetland owners to protect their wetland resources.
- Provide public assistance in the form of detailed advice, assessment and technical assistance to those who are required by federal law to restore or create wetlands.
- Establish and coordinate a network of volunteers, organizations, and professionals who can advise, design and build wetland restoration and creation projects.

The council's recommendations emphasize education and not regulation. And its farsighted long-term goal of increasing the quality and quantity of wetlands in Missouri is probably one of the most progressive in the nation.

In July, the Izaak Walton League of America awarded its prestigious Honor Roll award to the DNR's Wetlands Advisory Council for setting these farsighted goals and recommendations and involving the public in policy planning.

"Sometimes the DNR gets criticized for not including the public in their policy development," said Epperson. "Here is a really good example where we have" involved the public, "on a very controversial issue, and it has worked."

The goals and recommendations for Missouri's wetlands issued by the Wetlands Advisory Council are sound, emphasize education and not regulation and are already supported by a large number of Missouri's citizenry. Alas, at this time, they are only words on paper. It is up to Gov. Mel Carnahan to turn these words into reality.

To obtain a copy of the Wetland Goals and Recommendations for the State of Missouri, write to Missouri Department of Natural Resources, Division of Geology and Land Survey, PO Box 250, Rolla, Mo., 65401. You can also request a copy of "Missouri Wetlands: A Vanishing Resource," which provides excellent information on Missouri's wetlands.

Next week: President Bill Clinton's new wetlands policy and Carnahan's views on the Wetlands Advisory Council's recommendations.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.