

Past Presidents, EPA Administrators, and their views on wetlands

President Richard Nixon, 1964-74 (with EPA Administrator William D. Ruckelshaus, 1970-73):

“In recent years we have come to view our land as a limited and irreplaceable resource. No longer do we imagine that there will always be more of it over the horizon--more woodlands and shorelands and wetlands--if we neglect or overdevelop the land in view. A new maturity is giving rise to a land ethic which recognizes that improper land use affects the public interest and limits the choices that we and our descendants will have... The Nation’s coastal and estuarine wetlands are vital to the survival of a wide variety of fish and wildlife; they have an important function in controlling floods and tidal forces; and they contain some of the most beautiful areas left on the continent... My National Land Use Policy Act would direct State attention to these important areas by defining wetlands among the "environmentally critical areas" which it singles out for special protection, and by giving priority attention to the coastal zones. I propose to supplement these safeguards with new economic disincentives to further discourage unnecessary wetlands development.” (President Nixon, *February 8, 1972*, 51 - Special Message to the Congress Outlining the 1972 Environmental Program. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=3731>)

Gerald Ford, 1974-77 (with EPA Administrator Russell E. Train, 1973-77):

“I have today approved H.R. 5608, a bill which provides for the continued authorization of funds with which to purchase wetlands for the protection of migratory waterfowl.” (President Ford, *February 17, 1976*, 106 - *Statement on Signing the Wetlands Loan Extension Act of 1976*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=5558>)

“It is becoming increasingly apparent that the recently proposed regulations and guidelines published by the Corps of Engineers and EPA governing the implementation of section 404 of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act are being misunderstood by the public and by Congress. Most of this confusion and misunderstanding is directly attributable to the seriously inaccurate and misleading press release issued by the Corps at the time the regulations were published. Because of the extreme importance of section 404 as the primary mechanism to protect America's valuable wetland resources, I consider it imperative that the Corps of Engineers take steps to remedy these impressions. ... Both EPA and the Corps have issued policy statements recognizing the need to protect wetland areas. It would be unfortunate indeed if, on the basis of these recent misconceptions, legislative changes were made to return the statutory definition of jurisdiction to traditional concepts of navigability. Such a change would leave vast areas of valuable wetlands without the protection of this regulatory mechanism and possibly subject them to uncontrolled development.”

(May 16, 1975 letter from Russell E. Train to General Gribble, Chief of Engineers, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers)

<http://abacus.bates.edu/muskie-archives/ajcr/1975/Water%20Pollution%20Control.shtml>

Jimmy Carter, 1977-81 (with EPA Administrator Douglas M. Costle ,1977-81)

“The Nation's coastal and inland wetlands are vital natural resources of critical importance to the people of this country. Wetlands are areas of great natural productivity, hydrological utility, and environmental diversity, providing natural flood control, improved water quality, recharge of aquifers, flow stabilization of streams and rivers, and habitat for fish and wildlife resources. Wetlands contribute to the production of agricultural products and timber, and provide recreational, scientific, and aesthetic resources of national interest. The unwise use and development of wetlands will destroy many of their special qualities and important natural functions. Recent estimates indicate that the United States has already lost over 40 percent of our 120 million acres of wetlands inventoried in the 1950's. This piecemeal alteration and destruction of wetlands through draining, dredging, filling, and other means has had an adverse cumulative impact on our natural resources and on the quality of human life. The problem of loss of wetlands arises mainly from unwise land use practices. The Federal Government can be responsible for or can influence these practices in the construction of projects, in the management of its own properties, and in the provisions of financial or technical assistance. In order to avoid to the extent possible the long and short term adverse impacts associated with the destruction or modification of wetlands and to avoid direct or indirect support of new construction in wetlands wherever there is a practicable alternative, I have issued an Executive order on the protection of wetlands.”

(President Carter, statement issued in conjunction with Executive Order 11990; <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7579>)

Ronald Reagan, 1981-89 (with EPA Administrators Anne M. Gorsuch, 1981-83; William D. Ruckelshaus, 1983-85; and Lee M. Thomas, 1985-89)

“The Convention is the result of a broad international recognition of the economic, cultural, scientific, ecological, and recreational value of wetlands, coupled with rising concern over the progressive worldwide loss and degradation of these habitats and their dependent resources... International efforts directed toward wetlands conservation are vital to the preservation of United States migratory bird populations, which are affected by the loss of wetland habitats to the south.” (President Reagan, Message to the Senate Transmitting the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, June 23, 1986; <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=37508>)

“The protection of America's endangered wetlands resources is one of my top priorities at EPA. As a measure of my commitment to a strong and visible program, I am today announcing the creation of a new EPA Office of Wetlands Protection... We must improve our scientific understanding of wetlands ecosystems...expedite the achievement of consensus on the value and uses of wetlands...redouble efforts to identify, protect and restore wetlands, strongly stressing the early identification of particularly valuable and vulnerable wetlands.” (Administrator Thomas, press release October 6, 1986, “Endangered Wetlands and New EPA Office of Wetlands Protection;” <https://archive.epa.gov/epa/aboutepa/endangered-wetlands-and-new-epa-office-wetlands-protection.html>).

“Our desire for progress, productivity, development, and convenience has placed our wetlands resource in jeopardy. Many of us have thought of wetlands as wastelands. We felt that the faster we could drain them, the better. For most people, words like marsh, swamp, bog, and fen did little more than conjure up visions of dampness, disease, difficulty and danger...At one time there were 215 million acres of wetlands in the lower 48 states. Today there are only 95 million left. Between 1950 and 1980 over 11 million acres were lost. And that doesn't include the wetlands that were degraded by pollution. We are losing 300 thousand acres of freshwater wetlands every year. In the heart of the Nation, conversion of wetlands to farm lands has destroyed 99 percent of Iowa's marshes and 80 percent of Minnesota's prairie potholes. The bottomland hardwood forests in the Mississippi Valley decreased over 50 percent in the years between 1950 and 1977. Today that loss continues at a rate of 167 thousand acres a year. The sheer magnitude of these numbers is staggering. But summarizing statistics on wetlands losses doesn't begin to capture the real reasons that we should be concerned. Wetlands are habitat for myriad living things. Consequently, their destruction puts pressure on countless components of the life chain. We are finding that as wetlands disappear, so does the wildlife that is dependent on them...Far from being wastelands, they are among the most fertile and productive ecosystems on the earth...wetlands continue to serve man dutifully. They are useful in controlling floods. They act as screens, filtering out all sorts of pollution before it gets into our lakes, streams, rivers and estuaries. They aid in purifying the water, provide nutrients for the early growth of animals and plants found on our dinner tables, give us recreation, and buffer us from some of nature's natural tempests. No wonder that some have begun to call wetlands our "waterlogged wealth." The evidence is hard to dispute. Wetlands must join the list of resources vital to man. Just as importantly, they must be considered as part of our ecological heritage. These are the reasons that wetlands are worthy of our increased attention and protection.” (Lawrence J. Jensen, Assistant Administrator for Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, at the Water Pollution Control Federation Meeting, Opening Ceremonies, October 6, 1986; Id.).

George H. W. Bush, 1989-93 (with EPA Administrator William K. Reilly, 1989-93)

"I am pleased today to sign into law... the "North American Wetlands Conservation Act"... Over the years, we have witnessed a steadily declining duck population and a pattern of wetland losses throughout North America. These disturbing trends have been exacerbated by drought in recent years. In 1988, the fall flight of ducks was estimated at only 66 million, second only to the 1985 all-time low of 62 million. This dwindling duck population is largely attributable to the steady loss of wetland areas we have experienced. Currently, the United States is losing nearly 400,000 acres of wetlands annually...In signing this legislation today, we continue the legacy begun during the first decade of this century by one of our greatest Presidents. It was Theodore Roosevelt who first took up the grand cause of conservation, who recognized man's obligation to preserve and protect our precious natural heritage. Today, on the threshold of this century's last decade, we can be proud that, with the approval of [this bill], we are renewing that noble commitment to improve environmental quality for all our people.

(President Bush, Statement on Signing the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, December 13, 1989,

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=17944>)

"The second great need is to restore and protect the natural systems of the United States--the wetlands and groundwater, the bays and sounds and lakes, the soils and fish, the biotic platform on which all activity, including economic activity, depends. Just as in the past, our successes in this effort will be a beacon to the whole world, which is so desperately in need of examples of success.

(Administrator Reilly, EPA speech, December 3, 1990,

<https://archive.epa.gov/epa/aboutepa/epa-twenty-years-young.html>)

President Bill Clinton, 1993-2001 (with EPA Administrator Carol M. Browner, 1993-2001)

"Tonight, I ask you to join me in launching a new Clean Water Initiative, a far-reaching effort to clean our rivers, our lakes, our coastal waters for our children." The Action Plan reduces annual wetland losses by roughly 75 percent and strives for a net increase of 100,000 acres per year. (President Clinton, State of the Union Address, January 27, 1998; <https://archive.epa.gov/epa/aboutepa/president-clinton-announces-clean-water-action-plan.html>).

"The Nation's wetlands perform many functions that are important to society, such as improving water quality, recharging groundwater, providing natural flood control, and supporting a wide variety of fish, wildlife and plants. The economic importance of wetlands to commercial fisheries and recreational uses is also enormous. The Nation has lost nearly half of the wetland acreage that existed in the lower 48 States prior to European settlement. The Nation's wetlands continue to be lost at a rate of hundreds of thousands of acres per year due to both human activity and natural processes. This continued loss occurs at great cost to society"

("Protecting America's Wetlands:A Fair, Flexible, And Effective Approach," White House Office On Environmental Policy, August 24th, 1993).

"I am very disappointed today by the Supreme Court's split decision. It weakens America's ability to protect its wetlands, which are among this country's most valuable natural resources...The need to safeguard wetlands is also why I am taking additional action today under the Clean Water Act. That action will close a loophole in existing law to help ensure greater protection for America's remaining wetlands. The importance of wetlands goes beyond their ability to support birds and wildlife. They provide flood control and act as natural filters to clean water supplies and therefore, help protect human health." (Statement By U.S. EPA Administrator Carol M. Browner Regarding Supreme Court Decision On Wetlands, January 9, 2001, https://archive.epa.gov/epapages/newsroom_archive/newsreleases/ac1a63b17d652130852569cf00751a65.html)

President George W. Bush, 2001-09 (with EPA Administrators Christine Todd Whitman, 2001-03; Michael O. Leavitt, 2003-05; and Stephen L. Johnson, 2005-09)

"Today, we're taking important action to conserve North America's wetlands, which will help keep our water clean and help provide habitat for hundreds of species of wildlife. Through this legislation, the federal government will continue its partnership with landowners, conservation groups, and states to save and improve millions of acres of wetlands. The North American Wetlands Conservation Reauthorization Act shows our concern for the environment and our respect for future generations of Americans." (President Bush, Statement when signing Wetland Conservation Act, December 2, 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/12/20021202-1.html>)

"Wetlands provide numerous ecological and economic services: they help to improve water quality; recharge water supplies; reduce flood risks; provide fish and wildlife habitat; offer sites for research and education; and support valuable fishing and shellfish industries." (Testimony of Stephen L. Johnson, Administrator, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Before The House Appropriations Committee on February 26, 2008; https://archive.epa.gov/ocir/hearings/testimony/110_2007_2008/web/pdf/2008_0226_slj.pdf)

President Barack Obama, 2009-2017 (with EPA Administrators Lisa P. Jackson, 2009-13; and Gina McCarthy, 2013-17)

"For more than 40 years, American families and businesses across the country have counted on the Clean Water Act to protect the streams and wetlands we rely on for our way of life – from recreation to public health to a growing economy...Today, after extensive input from the American public, they're doing just that – finalizing the Clean Water Rule to restore protection for the streams

and wetlands that form the foundation of our nation's water resources, without getting in the way of farming, ranching, or forestry.” (President Obama, May 27, 2015, https://archive.epa.gov/epa/sites/production/files/2015-05/documents/statements_clean_water_rule.pdf)

“The first front in this fight for survival has to be the urgent protection and restoration of our wetlands...flooding was so destructive because our marshes and wetlands – the area's natural and most effective defenses – were rapidly disappearing...The wetlands are more than just a storm buffer – they are the beating heart of [New Orleans].” (Administrator Jackson 2010, Remarks at the Fighting for Survival Conference in New Orleans, August 26, 2010; https://archive.epa.gov/epapages/newsroom_archive/speeches/d8e6e3f59b1208d08525778b0070caf8.html)

“These streams and wetlands filter pollution, reduce flooding, and recharge groundwater supplies. And we know our iconic waters, like Boston Harbor, the Chesapeake Bay, and the Colorado River, won't be clean unless the streams and wetlands that feed them are clean, too.” (Administrator McCarthy 2014, Remarks at Water Environment Federation, September 29, 2014; https://archive.epa.gov/epapages/newsroom_archive/speeches/b5657cd6aa9301cd85257d620051f770.html)

President Donald J. Trump, 2017 – present (with EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt, 2017 to present)

“EPA's so-called Waters of the United States Rule is one of the worst examples of federal regulation and it has truly run amok and is one of the rules most strongly opposed by farmers, ranchers and agricultural workers all across our land. It's prohibiting them from being allowed to do what they're supposed to be doing. It's been a disaster. The Clean Waters Act says that the EPA can regulate navigable waters, meaning waters that truly affect interstate commerce. But a few years ago, the EPA decided that navigable waters can mean nearly every puddle or every ditch on a farmer's land or anyplace else that they decide. Right? It was a massive power grab. The EPA's regulators were putting people out of jobs by the hundreds of thousands and regulations and permits started treating our wonderful small farmers and small businesses as if they were a major industrial polluter. They treated them horribly. Horribly.”

(President Trump, remarks upon signing executive order to roll back the Clean Water Rule of 2015, February 28, 2017; <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/28/remarks-president-trump-signing-waters-united-states-wotus-executive>).

“...with respect to our re-defining what a water of the United States is under the Clean Water Act...we're trying to fix the challenges from the 2015 rule, where the Obama Administration...defined a water of the United States as being a puddle, a dry creek bed and ephemeral drainage ditches.” (Administrator Pruitt,

National Cattleman's Beef Association promotional video, August 16, 2017;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTVd54WyhDQ>)

(NOTE: What the 2015 Clean Water Rule actually says about puddles: "The proposed rule did not explicitly exclude puddles because the agencies have never considered puddles to meet the minimum standard for being a 'water of the United States,' and it is an inexact term. A puddle is commonly considered a very small, shallow, and highly transitory pool of water that forms on pavement or uplands during or immediately after a rainstorm or similar precipitation event. However, numerous commenters asked that the agencies expressly exclude them in a rule. The final rule does so."