



Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council

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Governor's Plan to Give up Wetlands Protection Will Hurt Environment and Economy

The past few years have been tough for US wetlands and in Michigan, it's about to get worse.

Governor Granholm's State of the State Address is expected to signal a major change in how wetlands are protected in Michigan. Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council strongly opposes this ill-conceived plan, which calls for repealing the state's authority to administer the federal wetland protection program under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. The group asserts that this proposal jeopardizes not only Michigan's natural resources, but also economic redevelopment in the state.

Wetlands protected through this program preserve water quality, provide flood control, and create vital fish and wildlife habitat. "The ecological and economic future of Michigan is dependent upon maintaining the wetlands protection program in the state," said Jennifer McKay, Policy Specialist at the Watershed Council.

McKay noted that Lt. Governor Cherry recently unveiled the *MI-Great Lakes Plan*, with input from diverse economic stakeholders across the state. The plan highlights the importance of protecting and restoring wetlands in Michigan to protect water quality, which also benefits numerous economic drivers connected to water use in the state. She added, "Dissolving the state wetlands protection program will pose problems for the Lt. Governor, agencies, private businesses, and non-governmental organizations seeking to secure significant funding for Great Lakes restoration in Michigan. By allowing degradation of existing wetland systems, it makes it hard for Michigan to argue that we are a deserving recipient of billions to restore and protect these same vital systems."

"Applicants find state administration more timely and user-friendly," said Dr. Grenetta Thomassey, Policy Director at the Watershed Council. "The program is not perfect, but it is significant and implementation can be improved. Increased program efficiency is essential if Michigan hopes to attract new businesses to the state and encourage sensible economic redevelopment." Thomassey noted that issues such as floodplain management, storm water management, local or regional zoning, or land use plans are more likely to be fully integrated into the state permit review process.

“Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council understands that the legislature will have to step up and make tough decisions about this proposal. We stand ready to help them think this through, and we are willing to convene a series of stakeholder discussions to come up with creative alternatives. We cannot jeopardize our wetland resources any further.”

Other benefits to the state program were pointed out by McKay. Staff at the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) is often more familiar with local wetland resources and able to conduct more thorough ecological reviews, which result in better decisions for that area. The state program also has field offices with local staff, providing site visits and the ability to work locally with permit applicants to reduce adverse impacts to the resource. McKay said, “In Michigan, action must typically occur on permit applications within 90 days, but the average response time has been less – approximately 60 days. Permit reviews under the US Army Corps of Engineers can take much longer due to recent jurisdictional confusion and backlog.”

“The savings from this proposal are a drop in the bucket and are significantly outweighed by the benefits the program provides,” McKay noted. Funding for Michigan’s environmental programs have faced a continual onslaught of budget cuts in recent years from the Legislature. Since 2002, General Fund support for the DEQ has been cut over 68 percent. Shamefully, Michigan ranks 47th out of the 48 contiguous states for conservation and environmental protection efforts on a per capita spending basis, according to a report by the Land Policy Institute at Michigan State University. The state lost approximately 50 percent of its wetland resources since European settlement and the remaining wetlands are ecologically indispensable.

“For a state defined by its water resources, elected officials should be making an investment in Michigan’s wetlands and Great Lakes rather than continuing to decimate our environmental protections,” said Thomassey. “In Northern Michigan, we still have many healthy wetlands that make a crucial contribution to the high quality of our spectacular lakes and streams. We’d like to keep it that way because it’s a lot easier to protect healthy water resources than it is to save degraded lakes and streams from the brink of destruction.”

“Michigan has a proud tradition of being one of only two states to administer this program, which allows a good integration of wetland protection with other water resource programs,” said McKay. “The proposal is short-sighted and the Governor should focus on a solution that ensures protections of our greatest natural treasures – our water resources – as an investment in Michigan’s future.”

***About Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council:** Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council speaks for our members including full-time and seasonal residents, lake associations, and businesses. We work to maintain the environmental integrity and economic and aesthetic values of lakes, streams, wetlands, and ground water in Northern Michigan, as well as statewide and throughout the Great Lakes Basin. As the lead organization for water resources protection in Antrim, Charlevoix, Cheboygan, and Emmet Counties, the Watershed Council is working to preserve the heritage of Northern Michigan – a tradition built around our magnificent waters.*

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