Northern Delaware Wetlands Rehabilitation Program

Project Area Description
The Northern Delaware Wetlands Rehabilitation Program is focused on an area that includes 10,000 acres of tidal freshwater and brackish wetlands. The project is located along the urban corridor of the Christina and Delaware Rivers in New Castle County. The ecosystem is dominated by wetland vegetation including red maple and cattail. Federally-listed threatened and endangered species include the bald eagle and short-nosed sturgeon. Land usage is dominated by residential, urban, and industrial development.

Ecosystem Stresses
The wetlands in this area have been subject to a long history of impoundment for farming purposes, starting as early as the 1600s. Many dikes have been maintained for 300 years. As a result, the marshes have been excluded from tidal exchange and cut off from the natural system. Many wetlands in the area have also been drained and filled for a variety of reasons, including agriculture, landfills, and industrial development. Degradation of wetlands was lessened with the passage of state and federal wetland acts. Superfund sites, resulting from a large port in the area serving the chemical industry, continue to threaten the wetlands. Non-point source pollution and the nuisance species Phragmites are also current stresses.

Project Description
The Northern Delaware Wetlands Rehabilitation Program is a regional, non-regulatory restoration program. The program was initiated by the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, in conjunction with civic and business leaders, scientists, resource managers, and property owners. An inventory of wetlands was conducted and 31 wetland sites have been identified as needing rehabilitation. A two-tiered organizational approach was established with a Steering Committee and an Adjunct Committee. A multi-agency approach is encouraged, thus replacing the traditional individual agency approach. In order to increase public awareness to better ensure long-term stewardship, the community is actively involved in management of the site.

Wetland rehabilitation plans are developed for each site, constructed around scientifically-based biological inventories and ecological evaluations of the site area. The rehabilitation plans call for site-specific goals and action steps with measurable evaluative criteria. Goals include reestablishing tidal exchange and Phragmites control plans. A systematic management procedure was developed, which provides a framework to apply across numerous sites. This planning document is expected to serve as a model for future coastal and wetland restoration programs.

Present Status & Outlook
Currently, the project is in the restoration phase on a site-by-site basis; 11 of the wetland sites have made significant progress towards rehabilitation.

Factors Facilitating Progress
The responsiveness of the wetlands to rehabilitation efforts has been a factor that has facilitated the project’s progress. A high level of cooperation from landowners and support from the com-
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munity have been crucial.

Obstacles to Progress
Several marshes, initially expected to be easy to rehabilitate, turned out to be more complex as Superfund-class contaminants were found on-site. A second obstacle was the logistics of organizing and maintaining communication channels between many groups. Site-specific operation, maintenance, and monitoring plans are also required for each site. Ensuring future funding for these efforts has been a challenge.

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