County Government Approaches to Protecting, Restoring and Managing Wetlands

Abstract

In the United States, counties use many formal and informal mechanisms to govern wetlands within their jurisdictions. This study focuses on the role of county government in the regulation of wetlands. We examine how counties use regulatory, non-regulatory, and market-based approaches to protect and restore wetlands. Our research is based on a survey of county officials in the Midwest United States.

Current Operations:

We wanted to understand what counties currently do. Figure 3 shows the results of these questions. 39 counties only regulate wetlands mandated under federal and state law. However, 31 counties also regulate isolated wetlands and 23 counties regulate wetlands under 2 acres and include those outside the 1989 SCA.

Discussion:

• The demographics are perhaps starting to show the skill from the baby boomer era to a new generation of managers.
• Many counties only regulate wetlands only required by state and federal law. However, many counties go beyond what is required.
• Many county staff may need additional training on how to delineate wetlands.
• In terms of mapping wetlands at the county level, there is much more work to be done. While we did not ask specifically, one of the barriers may be funding to more comprehensively map wetlands.
• Counties use a variety of regulatory tools to manage wetlands and use many non-regulatory approaches as well. This shows that while regulation is a necessary part of wetland management at the county level, many other approaches are necessary to protect and manage wetlands.

Next Steps:

Our next steps are to examine counties with a high amount of wetland acres manage their approaches to wetlands differently than counties with a lower amount of acres. It would be interesting to see if counties with a lower amount of wetlands are trying to preserve the remaining wetlands, or to see if their focus may be on other environmental concerns within their county. Counties that have a larger amount of wetlands pose a difficult decision moving forward as it pertains to development. As some counties continue to grow, it may be important to measure the amount of wetlands that could be lost to new construction for economic benefit.