
Frequently Asked Questions About Local Wetlands Inventories

Your city has just begun a local wetlands inventory (LWI) as the first step in a required wetland planning process. The city has hired a wetland consulting firm to conduct the technical parts of the LWI. City staff, citizens, and wetland scientists from the consulting firm and the Department of State Lands (DSL) will all have a role in the inventory process. This fact sheet will help answer questions you might have about this process, the products and their uses.

What is a Local Wetlands Inventory?

A LWI is a systematic survey of an area (usually a city) to locate, map and describe the wetlands. The inventory is prepared using information sources such as aerial photos and soils maps and by conducting field observations. Where needed and where property access is permitted, the wetland scientists collect data on the vegetation and soils to confirm that an area is or is not a wetland. The final LWI consists of a set of maps that show the location of wetlands and streams, and descriptive information about the wetlands and the main functions they provide. Functions that are evaluated include wildlife habitat quality, contribution to fish habitat or water quality improvement, and floodwater retention capability.

Why is the LWI being conducted?

The main reason is that cities are required by the statewide land use planning law to include protection for “significant wetlands” in their comprehensive plan. The LWI and functional assessment of wetlands is the information-gathering step needed as the foundation for the remaining wetland planning steps. Once the LWI is completed, the city will identify the significant wetlands and work with citizens to develop appropriate ordinances that apply to those wetlands.

How will the community benefit from the LWI?

The LWI provides the information the city needs to incorporate wetlands and streams into the comprehensive plan for the community. For example, the LWI helps the city incorporate wetlands into planning for parks and greenbelts. It also provides information on each wetland’s ability to improve water quality or reduce flooding—both of which are important to stormwater management planning. These wetland functions would be difficult and expensive to replace by other means. Also, advance knowledge about wetland locations helps reduce costs and conflicts when planning new infrastructure such as streets and water and sewer lines.

What about landowners? Is there any benefit for them?

Problems frequently occur when a landowner or developer is unaware that a parcel contains wetlands. When the LWI is completed, the city will notify all landowners who have wetlands mapped on their property. Information about the presence of wetlands reduces the uncertainty that can slow down real estate transactions and development plans. A person wishing to develop a site that contains a mapped wetland will know in advance to design the project to avoid the wetland and to allow sufficient time to obtain any necessary wetland fill permits.

If I don’t allow property access, will my land be left off the wetlands map?

The entire planning area will be covered by the LWI. If you choose to deny property access to the wetland consultants, they will not go on your property. For those areas where access is denied, the wetland information will be compiled from the aerial photos, soils maps and observations from nearby roads. This information is generally adequate, but may be less accurate than for field-verified sites.

If a wetland is missed by the LWI is it still regulated?

Yes, the state and federal regulations apply to all wetlands regardless of whether or not they are mapped on the LWI. The consultants will attempt to include all wetlands on the LWI.

Can I comment on the wetland map before it is adopted by the city?

Local knowledge is important to making the LWI as accurate as possible, so public comment is encouraged. The city will host a public meeting when the draft LWI is ready for review. Watch your local newspaper for an announcement or contact the planning department to be sure you are notified of the meeting date.

How accurate is the LWI map?

The LWI is developed according to standards adopted by DSL. The standards help to ensure accurate and complete maps, but perfection is not possible. Every attempt is made to map wetlands correctly on parcels and to map wetland boundaries to an accuracy of at least 5 meters. There may be areas where the boundary is less accurate, especially on large tracts with few geographic reference points, and areas where property access was denied. Keep in mind that the primary purposes of the LWI are to provide information for long-range planning by the city and to alert landowners to the probable wetlands on their property.

I heard that I might still need to hire a wetland consultant to delineate the wetland on my property before I can develop the site. Why?

Because the LWI maps the approximate wetland boundary and may miss small wetlands, much more detailed field work is usually needed prior to site development. It's important to know and mark on the ground the precise wetland boundary of areas subject to state and federal permit requirements prior to site alteration. The wetland consultant will not only provide the detailed delineation, but can assist in preparing a fill permit application and mitigation plan for any wetland impacts that cannot be avoided.

What exactly is a wetland?

Wetlands mapped on the LWI meet state and federal wetland criteria. In general terms, wetlands are areas that are subject to long periods of inundation or saturation that create an oxygen deficit in the soil. As a result, they are characterized by plant species called "hydrophytes" that are adapted to these saturated soil conditions. Most wetlands are seasonal—they are very wet for several months but dry out in the summer and fall. Also, some wetlands are disturbed in a way that obscures one or more of the wetland criteria. For example, some wetlands are regularly farmed or grazed and may be planted to species that tolerate wet conditions (like ryegrass) or "worked" later in the Spring than adjacent non-wetland fields. If not maintained, wetland vegetation will return.

Are wetlands the same as floodplains?

No. Many wetlands do occur in floodplains but they are not the same. A floodplain can be expected to flood following heavy rains and snowmelt. However, many floodplain areas are not flooded long enough or often enough to meet the wetland criteria described above.

What about riparian areas?

Riparian areas are the vegetated corridors along streams. Although they perform many of the same functions as wetlands, they do not necessarily meet wetland criteria. Many riparian areas have coarse, well drained soils that do not remain saturated for prolonged time periods. Because riparian areas are so important to the health of streams, to fish and to water quality, cities are required to map and provide protection for riparian areas as well as for wetlands. Frequently, the riparian inventory is conducted at the same time as the wetland inventory.