

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release December 16, 1980

David Klinger 202/343-5634

## HUMANS AND WILDLIFE BENEFIT FROM NEW WETLANDS CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has developed a new wetlands classification system that it hopes will be adopted for use by other Federal and State agencies concerned with the protection of these vital areas.

Once thought of as wastelands, wetland areas today are recognized for their value in maintaining groundwater supplies, purifying water, preventing shoreline and bank erosion, and temporarily storing floodwaters. In addition, biologists have long realized the critical importance of this habitat to the continued existence of fish and wildlife species.

A standardized system of classifying wetlands will enable improved resource management decisions by the public agencies that are responsible for their protection. Such a new system is profiled in a recent publication by the Fish and Wildlife Service entitled Classification of Wetlands and Deepwater Habitats of the United States, developed in conjunction with the U.S. Geological Survey, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the University of Rhode Island.

In defining the biological boundaries of wetlands, the new system allows Federal and State agencies, as well as the private sector, to describe and categorize these types of habitat. This information is essential in the early planning stages of any project and may prevent costly and unexpected delays during the construction stage.

Once a developer contemplates a project within or adjacent to a wetland, the classification system provides the information necessary to gauge the habitats' characteristics. The appropriate local, State, or Federal agencies can then advise whether it may fall under their jurisdiction and determine what, if any, regulations might apply to modifications of that area. In the design of this system, however, there is no attempt to establish the boundaries of the regulatory programs of local, State, and Federal agencies.

over

Wetlands are recognized as the most biologically productive type of ecosystem in the world. They include a variety of diverse types, among them marine (open ocean and associated coastlines), estuarine (salt marshes and brackish tidal waters), riverine (rivers, creeks, and streams), lacustrine (lakes and deep ponds), and palustrine (small ponds, prairie potholes, marshes, swamps, and bogs).

Wetlands are economically important -- two-thirds of the commercially important fish and shellfish harvested along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts depend on coastal estuaries and wetlands for food, spawning grounds, or nurseries for their young; for the Pacific coast, that figure is nearly one-half.

The Service's new classification system replaces an earlier one, in use since 1954, whose original purpose was to assess the amount of waterfowl habitat on the basis of 20 different types of wetlands. Presented in a document known as Circular 39, this had been one of the most commonly used systems in the effort to preserve valuable, but diminishing, wetlands throughout the United States. The new classification scheme is broader and more inclusive in the types of information it presents.

"The classification system we've developed now gives a lot more attention to wetlands that have other values, not just wetlands that have value as waterfowl habitat," says Lynn Greenwalt, director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. "Such factors as dominant animal and plant life, soil type, and water chemistry are all now incorporated in the way we look at, define, and group wetlands."

The new system is designed to meet four main objectives:

- To describe areas that have similar natural attributes;
- To arrange these areas in a system that will enable better resource management decisions to be made;
- To convert these areas into a format for inventory and mapping; and
- To provide a uniform classification system and terminology.

Already the State of Michigan has adopted the Service's new classification system as its method of classifying wetlands, and the new system is being used by the Fish and Wildlife Service as the basis for its National Wetlands Inventory.

Classification of Wetlands and Deepwater Habitats of the United States is available for \$4.25 from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402 (stock no. 024-010-00524-6).