
Report: Wetlands in Texas, NM in danger
By ALICIA A. CALDWELL / Associated Press
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More than 3 million acres of Texas wetlands are in danger of being polluted or destroyed, according to a report from the National Wildlife Federation.

The risk, according to the report released Thursday, is posed by a series of federal policy changes that leave almost no protection for many wetlands and isolated waters, including shallow lakes that often only have water during rainy periods and streams or river headwaters that don't always flow.

If the situation isn't changed soon, Texas could see coastal wetlands dredged and developed with no oversight, said **Janice Bezanson**, of the **Texas Conservation Alliance**. And in far West Texas, where water is often among the most valuable resources and upward of 75 percent of identified wetlands are considered isolated, the policy change could mean the loss of vital fresh water sources.

"This is a major thing," **Bezanson** said. "If they (federal officials) don't restore the previous protections there is going to be a continued and steady loss and degradation of coastal and isolated wetlands."

In the case of the coastal areas, **Bezanson** said, barrier islands that protect both ocean waters from mainland pollution and the mainland from coastal surges could be so degraded that they no longer serve their natural roles.

For drought-ridden areas of West Texas, the loss could ultimately mean that aquifers relied on for fresh drinking water could dry up sooner than anticipated.

Rollin MacRae, a wetland program leader for the Texas

Parks and Wildlife Department, said the report's estimates of endangered wetlands is "probably an extreme guess."

But if the policy changes limiting oversight continue, groundwater supplies in Texas and other states will be in danger in the future, he said.

MacRae said "simple science" shows that the now unprotected channels feed water into

aquifers that can span multiple states and should be protected to ensure clean drinking water.

In neighboring New Mexico, which also struggles with water issues, several closed basins that serve as freshwater sources are also endangered, according to the report. Closed basins don't connect with larger rivers or the ocean.

About 14 percent of the state's wetlands, covering massive swaths of central and southern New Mexico, are vulnerable to unrestricted development, according to the report.

In a conference call with reporters Thursday morning, Jeremy Vesbach, the executive director of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, said with 90 percent of the state's drinking water coming from quickly eroding ground water supplies, the situation is critical.

"We're taking water from the Rio Grande right now," Vesbach said. "It's more critical than ever to get clean surface water."

The rule changes that once protected wetlands and isolated streams could also spell disaster for wildlife and environmental tourism in the Southwest.

Bezanson said Texas garners nearly \$8 billion a year from hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching. In New Mexico, hunting, fishing and wildlife watching brings in more than \$800 million.

If the habitats around now unprotected waters disappear, so will that money, Bezanson said.

Jim Murphy, of the National Wildlife Federation, said environmentalists and conservationists are hopeful that the policy changes will be reversed by Congress.

The Clean Water Restoration Act, which would restore all previous protections, is working its way through both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate.