

SETTING THE COURSE FOR FURTHER STRATEGIC PLANNING and ACTION:

Strategic Directions for the Conservation and Restoration of Kentucky's Stream and Wetlands

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC BARRIERS:

Most, if not all, Steering Committee members made some reference to the political and economic barriers facing the protection of Kentucky's streams and wetlands. Several mentioned that Kentucky is a "relatively poor state" and that this fact was being compounded by the current "economic downturn." With the economy and economic recovery taking "center stage" many advisory members believed that the protection of the environment and water resources was now of even "lower priority." Even the economic stimulus package was perceived as a serious challenge by one Steering Committee member: They speculated that stimulus monies would lead to increasing pressure to quickly approve permits in order to get "shovel ready" projects on the ground to create jobs and to stimulate the State's economy.

Along with major economic challenges, many advisory members mentioned the serious political constraints facing any concerted effort at streams and wetlands conservation and restoration. Some cited the definite barriers facing federal and state regulatory agencies. For some, the constant and continued "gutting" of various environmental agencies has left many of them at "1980s funding levels" and as a consequence, many regulators and outreach coordinators were working with "bear skins and knives." Several other advisory members mentioned that positions lost to retirement were not being replaced and that the "institutional knowledge" being lost to retirement was not being gained by new staff persons as few were being allotted outside professional development and training opportunities. Some SWCP Steering Committee members strongly believed that this persistent under funding and gutting of government environmental programs was, in itself, a "political tactic" by economic interests in that this allowed them to conduct business as usual without too much hindrance from federal and state regulators, as one advisory member warned, "in Kentucky, the subject of water is a politically loaded topic."

Stream protection and regulation should be taken to a higher level. I feel our waterway system should be elevated to a status as high as the highway transportation system.

-Write-in comment from survey respondent.

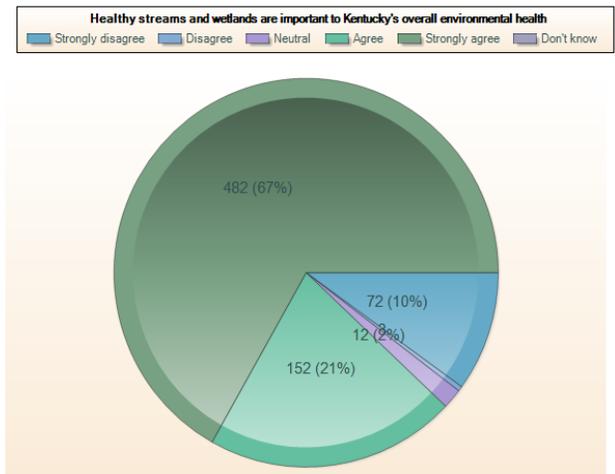


CHART 1: Most respondents (88%) either strongly agreed or agreed that "healthy streams and wetlands are important to Kentucky's overall environmental health."

SETTING STATEWIDE GOALS and PLANNING TO MEET THOSE GOALS

In prior sections of this planning document, Steering Committee members remarked that Kentucky seemed to be losing its streams and remaining wetlands at a relatively consistent rate. Current levels of decline, when combined with current economic and political trends, suggested to some advisory members that the loss of Kentucky's wetlands and streams may occur at even accelerated levels in the future. The rate of streams and wetlands loss, and the subsequent loss of the invaluable eco-system services and functions that they provide, was of major concern to Steering Committee members and other persons that we interviewed and surveyed. The vast majority of survey respondents, for example, recognized the critical role that our stream and wetland resources play in the State's "overall environmental health." As represented in the above chart (Chart 1), close to nine out of ten persons surveyed (88%) either strongly agreed (67%) or agreed (21%) that the State's wetland and stream resources were critically important.

Reversing trends of wetland and stream loss was at the crux of much of the critical advice that was provided during this initial planning process. Many spoke of the need for more stringent regulations, stricter enforcement, increased funding and/or better education of various sectors as well as the need for more research so as to offset disturbing declining trends in streams and wetlands. Yet, some Steering Committee members, spoke more long-term and even more strategically. For them, setting goals and then planning to better coordinate partnerships between agencies, universities and other entities was a central organizational strategy for long-term stream and wetland protection. With regard to setting goals and then planning to meet those goals, one advisory member offered this piece of critical advice:

- I would say, as this applies to Kentucky, try to envision what you want Kentucky’s streams and wetlands to look like in 50 years, and design your plan accordingly.

DEVELOPING AN ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORK TO MEET GOALS and IMPLEMENT PLANS

The current advisory framework, which emerged from this initial planning process, could potentially serve as a framework from which to start to establish statewide goals and strategic directions. The majority of Steering Committee members have already expressed some interest in staying involved through perhaps, later stages of strategic planning. As described at the outset of this document, the SWCP Steering Committee is comprised of persons in key regulatory, outreach and research positions from across the state. For them to have the opportunity to further discuss how to best coordinate, collaborate and better share resources and information would, in itself, mark a significant step in increasing the State’s capacity to conserve and restore its wetland and stream resources.

Establishing a Statewide Council:

In addressing long-term capacity building for stream and wetlands protection, the Montana State Wetlands Office was consulted due to the fact that their own conservation plan was particularly impressive and that their Wetlands Office works regularly with a statewide council to coordinate and implement various aspects of its own strategic plan.¹ The prospect of developing a similar statewide council for Kentucky was explored through following survey question :

- Some states have statewide councils of interested citizens involved in stream and wetland related issues. If Kentucky were to develop such a network or forum, would you be interested in being part of such?

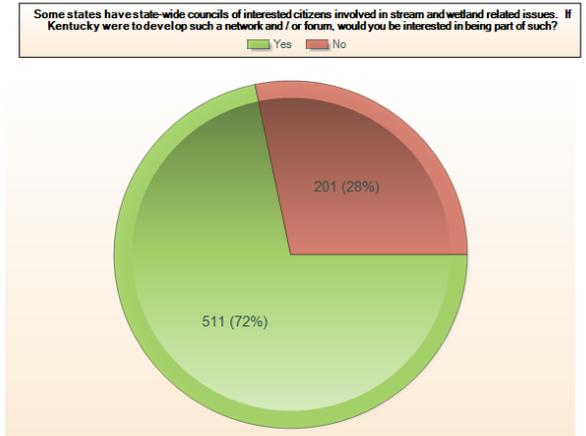


CHART 2: Most respondents (511) would be interested in the development of a statewide network or council of interested citizens involved in stream or wetland related issues.

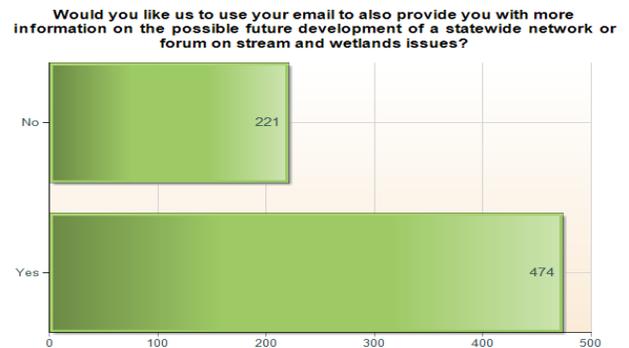


CHART 3: A large number of respondents (474) provided their email for more information on the possible development of a statewide network or forum on streams and wetland issues.

Of the 712 persons who answered the question, 511 (72%) said “yes” that they would be interested in the development of a statewide stream and wetlands council. In fact, persons went so far as to provide their email in order to receive further information “on the possible development of a statewide network or forum on stream and wetland issues.”

To close, many who participated in this initial planning process, expressed frustration over the political and economic barriers facing streams and wetlands protection within the state. These frustrations are standard as economic growth often takes precedent over environmental protection and thus, other states face similar daunting concerns and constraints. Yet, many states have developed strategic plans and have organized statewide taskforces and networks of interested citizens in order to increase their capacity to tackle these challenges. The same organizational and planning strategies are recommended for Kentucky. Through planning and organization, the state should be better poised to conserve and restore its vital stream and wetland resources well into the future.

1. See: Montana’s Wetland Strategy: *Priceless Resources: A Strategic Framework for Wetland and Riparian Area Conservation and Restoration in Montana 2008-2012*. <http://www.deq.mt.gov/wqinfo/Wetlands/StrategicPlan08-12.pdf>
See also: “Montana’s New Wetlands Strategic Plan”
<http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/mar2008/2008-03-0210-096.asp>