

Introduction



Photo courtesy of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources

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In 1972, the U.S. Congress enacted the landmark Clean Water Act (CWA) to protect the nation's vital water resources. A critical section of the CWA calls for periodic accounting to Congress and the American public on the success or failure of efforts to protect and restore the nation's waterbodies. In recent years, a number of groups reviewed the available data and concluded that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and state environmental agencies have been unable to provide Congress and the public with adequate information regarding the condition of the nation's waterbodies.

In 2000, the General Accounting Office issued a report noting that EPA and the states could not make statistically valid inferences about water quality and lacked data to support management decisions. A National Research Council report in 2001 found that a uniform, consistent approach to ambient monitoring and data collection

was necessary to support core water programs. In 2002, the National Academy of Public Administration and the H. John Heinz III Center for Science, Economics, and the Environment issued similar conclusions.

Following the 2002 release of the Heinz Center's report *The State of the Nation's Ecosystems*, the national newspaper USA Today published an editorial discussing the lack of environmental information available to the public. This editorial emphasized the failure of state and federal agencies to fund the collection of necessary environmental data despite very effective collection of comparable information on the U.S. economy, population, energy usage, human health issues, and crime rate. The editorial concluded that "without such information, the public doesn't know when to celebrate environmental successes, tackle new threats, or end efforts that throw money down a drain" (USA Today, September 21, 2002).



Little Washita River, OK, in the Southern Plains ecoregion (Photo courtesy of Monty Porter).

To bridge this information gap, EPA, other federal agencies, states, and tribes, are collaborating to provide the public with improved environmental information. This collaboration includes a new monitoring effort to assess the quality of the nation's waterbodies, an effort that has produced reports on three national water quality assessments during the past five years for coastal and estuarine waters (see *Highlight: National Report on Coastal Waters*). Similar efforts are planned for other water resource assessments in the future. The Wadeable Streams Assessment (WSA)—the first nationally consistent, statistically valid study of the nation's wadeable streams—marks the continuation of a commitment to produce statistically valid scientific assessments of the nation's fresh waters.

State water quality agencies, tribes, and other partners, with support from EPA, conducted the work for the WSA using standardized methods at all sites to ensure the comparability of results across the country. Beyond yielding scientifically credible information on the condition and health of the nation's wadeable streams, the WSA was designed to provide states with funding and expertise that enhances their ability to monitor and assess the quality of their waters.

EPA and its collaborating partners plan to conduct similar assessments of other types of waterbodies (e.g., lakes, rivers, and wetlands) in the future, with the goal of producing updated assessments for each type of waterbody every five years. These repeated studies will ensure that the public remains informed as to whether the collective efforts to protect and restore the nation's waters are meeting with success.



Photo courtesy of Gary Kramer, U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Highlight

National Reports on Coastal Waters

The National Coastal Assessment (NCA) surveys the condition of the nation's coastal resources, as well as state efforts to protect, manage, and restore coastal ecosystems. The results of these surveys are compiled periodically into the *National Coastal Condition Report* (NCCR) series. The states, EPA, and partner agencies, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), issued the *National Coastal Condition Report II* (NCCR II) in January 2005 as the second in this series of reports on environmental surveys of U.S. coastal waters. The NCCR II includes evaluations of 100% of the nation's estuaries in the conterminous 48 states and Puerto Rico. Federal, state, and local agencies collected more than 50,000 samples between 1997 and 2000 for the NCCR II, using nationally consistent methods and a probability-based design to assess five key indices of coastal water health: water quality, coastal habitat loss, sediment quality, benthic community condition, and fish tissue contaminants levels.

The *National Estuary Program Coastal Condition Report* (NEP CCR) focuses specifically on the condition of the 28 estuaries in the National Estuary Program (NEP) using data collected from 1997 through 2003 for EPA's NCA. The NEP CCR also presents monitoring data collected and analyzed by each individual NEP and its partners for a variety of estuarine quality indicators. The 28 NEPs are using these data to develop and implement sets of program-specific indicators of estuarine condition.

