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New Report Shows Loss of Coastal Wetlands in Eastern U.S.

While the nation as a whole gained freshwater wetlands from 1998 to 2004, a new report by NOAA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service documents a continuing loss of coastal wetlands in the eastern United States.

The new report, *Status and Trends of Wetlands in the Coastal Watersheds of the Eastern United States*, shows a loss of 59,000 acres each year in the coastal watersheds of the Great Lakes, Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico from 1998 to 2004.

"This report shows the nation's need to expand the effort to conserve and rebuild valuable coastal wetlands," said Jim Balsiger, acting NOAA assistant administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. "Coastal wetlands are nurseries for important commercial and recreational fish and are vital to many threatened and endangered species. They also provide natural protection to coastal communities from the most damaging effects of hurricanes and storm surges."

One reason wetland loss is concentrated in coastal watersheds is that with large numbers of people living here – more than half of the nation's population lives in coastal counties in densities five times greater than inland counties – the building of roads, homes and businesses have accelerated wetlands loss, particularly along the Gulf of Mexico. Wetland restoration is also more difficult in coastal areas where land values are high and factors such as storms and large expanses of soft muddy ground hamper restoration efforts.

The report contains a case study from Florida's St. Vincent Island that illustrates the challenges of restoring coastal wetlands, but also shows the enormous benefits including opening up areas for public recreation as well as habitat for fish, turtles, shorebirds and other wildlife.

"We are concerned by the findings of this report because coastal wetlands provide essential habitat for many migratory bird, fish, and endangered species," said Rowan Gould, acting director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "The high rate of coastal wetlands losses is even more alarming when we consider the anticipated stresses that climate change will bring to our coasts in the future. We look forward to working with federal and non-federal partners to stop this trend and achieve no net loss of coastal wetlands."

NOAA and FWS are discussing with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and other interested groups how to best respond to the alarming loss of coastal wetlands outlined in the new report. "Our coastal wetlands are ecological treasures that help protect shorelines and infrastructure in areas where more than half of Americans live," said Michael Shapiro, acting assistant administrator for water at EPA. "This report emphasizes the need for action to protect these valuable resources."

Status and Trends of Wetlands in the Coastal Watersheds of the Eastern United States, 1998 to 2004 is available online at <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/habitat>. The next national five-year study on wetlands will include the Pacific coast as well as the eastern United States.

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