

Value of Wetlands in Alberta



Wetlands are the Key!

Wetlands may well be the most important part of our landscapes. For example, they play important roles as “sponges”, storing and slowly releasing water and reducing the damaging effects of flooding and drought. They act as nature’s “kidneys” by purifying runoff and helping to keep our lakes and rivers clean. In addition to recharging groundwater and providing diverse habitats for plants and animals, they offer a host of other benefits to people who live near and far. No other landscape component provides all of these functions and benefits. Together, these functions and benefits equate to the value of wetlands.

In the past, the value of wetlands has frequently been overlooked. It is estimated that Alberta has lost between 60 to 70% of wetlands in the settled areas. Thankfully, wetlands are now seen as something we need to retain and even enhance as they are recognized as a key component to maintaining healthy farms, acreages and communities. The Alberta Wetland Policy plays an important part in both recognizing the relative value of wetlands and retaining them on our landscapes.

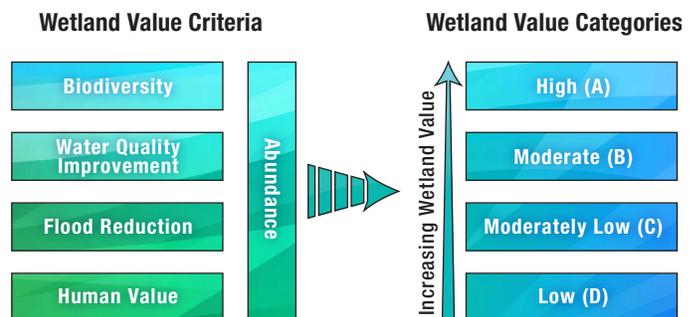
Relative Wetland Value

The Alberta Wetland Policy, requires the determining of relative wetland value as a first step in the Wetland Management System. The primary intent of the Policy is that wetlands of the highest value are protected for the long-term benefit of Albertans and that wetlands and their benefits are conserved or restored where losses have been high.

The Policy recognizes that not all wetlands are equal. Some provide more value than others in terms of how

they impact water quality, water quantity, biodiversity and human uses. The relative wetland value approach ranks individual wetlands based on five key criteria to determine if they rate low (D), moderately low (C), moderate (B) or high (A) value. The five criteria examined are:

1. Biodiversity
2. Water Quality Improvement
3. Flood Reduction
4. Human Uses
5. Abundance



Wetland assessments for regulatory purposes are undertaken by Qualified Wetland Science Practitioners (QWSPs) using newly developed tools. The QWSP is required to identify a wetland and determine its class using the Alberta Wetland Classification System (AWCS), delineate wetland boundaries using the Alberta Wetland Identification and Delineation Directive, and assess their wetland relative value using the Alberta Wetland Rapid Evaluation Tool Actual (ABWRET-A).

All the information collected in a wetland assessment forms the basis of any application submitted to regulatory agencies for consideration of activities in or near a wetland.

Importance of Relative Wetland Value

The relative wetland value approach will ensure informed and strategic wetland management by taking into account the many characteristics of a wetland. It considers:

- ▶ the wetland within the broader regional context, including the landscape upon which the wetland is found,
- ▶ the environmental functions it performs, and
- ▶ the social and economic benefits associated with the wetland.

This allows the importance of individual wetlands to be acknowledged, their contribution to the ecosystem to be better understood, and informed wetland management decisions to be made.

Relative Wetland Abundance

In this comprehensive approach to wetland management, the “relative abundance” component of the systems considers current abundance/density and historical loss in the value assessment. For example, in areas of low current abundance and high historical loss, the approach will place greater value on existing wetlands and promote both conservation and restoration as priorities.

How are wetland impacts mitigated?

The assessment of wetlands as a foundation for the Policy’s Wetland Management System, helps ensure that land use planners, managers and developers are better informed and able to consider impacts earlier in the planning process. This knowledge and understanding reinforces the need for decisions that will avoid or minimize negative wetland impacts, replacing wetlands only where necessary.



To learn more visit: AEP.Alberta.ca and search for ‘Wetlands’ or visit www.wetlandsalberta.ca