



N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources

Release: Immediate
Date: March 16, 2005

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STATE INITIATIVE RECOGNIZED IN NATIONAL COMPETITION FOR INNOVATIVE APPROACH

North Carolina's efforts promoting environment, responsible growth earn top-50 designation

RALEIGH-- North Carolina is working creatively to protect the environment while promoting responsible economic development, and is receiving national recognition for its groundbreaking approach, state Department of Environment and Natural Resources Secretary Bill Ross said today.

The state's Ecosystem Enhancement Program (EEP) is one of 50 government initiatives nationwide chosen from more than 1,000 applicants to advance in the 2005 Innovations in American Government Awards, Ross announced. Sponsored by the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and the Council for Excellence in Government of Washington, D.C., the competition will award \$100,000 grants to replicate the six winning programs in other states.

"North Carolina's bold approach to challenges that affect every state has brought about this prestigious designation," said Ross. "EEP helps us to move forward on building roads and other critical economic development at the same time that we're restoring, enhancing and protecting our state's natural resources."

Under the leadership of Gov. Mike Easley, North Carolina began in 2001 to explore a new approach to meeting state and federal clean-water guidelines that dictate whether new transportation infrastructure and other economic development can go forward. The state had been losing ground since the late 1990s on its ability to compensate for unavoidable damage to wetlands and waterways.

EEP, launched by an agreement between the state and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in July 2003, combined an existing state wetlands-restoration initiative under NC DENR with efforts by the state Department of Transportation to offset unavoidable environmental impacts from transportation projects. The initiative, housed under NC DENR, employs existing funds allocated by the state Board of Transportation to offset the effects of economic development on the environment years in advance of when the compensation is needed. Since the program's beginning, no road project has been delayed in North Carolina because of mitigation problems. The initiative also has helped to preserve about 27,000 acres of natural areas for future generations, is carrying out about 400 stream- and wetland-restoration projects in partnership with private-sector contractors and has completed or is continuing progress on 22 local water plans with communities across the state.

"We knew that our ability to meet the environmental benchmarks required to enable vigorous economic development was not keeping up with our determination to grow responsibly," said Ross. "Our quality of life depended on our ability to deal with this challenge proactively, so we designed and carried out an innovative approach that has reversed the trends that were hampering our progress as a state."

The recognition qualifies EEP to advance to the next round of the awards process, from which 18 finalists will be chosen. Recently developed government initiatives in the competition are judged on the basis of creativity, effectiveness in achieving tangible results, significance in addressing important problems of public concern, and promise in inspiring successful replication in other states. More information on the 2005 Innovations in American Government Awards is available at www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu. EEP's Web site is located at www.nceep.net.

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