

Michael F. Easley
Governor



State of North Carolina Office of the Governor

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Twice monthly, the governor or one of his cabinet secretaries publishes an informational column related to ongoing state programs and initiatives.

INNOVATIVE PROGRAM CONSERVES NATURAL ENVIRONMENT WHILE PROVIDING JOBS AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

**By Secretary William G. Ross Jr.
N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources**

North Carolina is a leader in finding innovative ways to both conserve our environment and provide good economic opportunities for our citizens.

The N.C. Ecosystem Enhancement Program, developed under Gov. Mike Easley's leadership, is a clear example of this approach. EEP is designed to help maintain and upgrade our state's transportation infrastructure while still protecting North Carolina's outstanding natural resources. This helps boost our strong business climate and helps make the state an attractive place for job development.

Launched in 2003, the program's mission is to compensate for the unavoidable affects of highway construction and other development to streams and wetlands. Compensation projects typically include actions to restore, enhance or preserve streams or wetlands reasonably near the construction site.

Although for years federal law had required such compensation across the nation, a variety of problems often caused the mitigation requirement to be cited as the main source of expense and delay in permitting road projects and as ineffective in protecting streams and wetlands. EEP addresses each of these challenges through a unique blend of partnerships, innovation and teamwork. The program saves time and money by making the planning and delivery process for transportation projects more efficient and effective.

The key partners under this program are the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources, state Department of Transportation and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The three agencies work closely together to streamline the permitting and mitigation processes for these projects.

In its first year, EEP worked with various additional partners in both the private and public sectors to protect more than 19,000 acres of high-quality natural assets, about 70 miles of streams and more than

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600 acres of wetlands. Another 38 miles of streams and 4,600 acres of wetlands are under option or awaiting final acquisition.

Again, the key words here are partnerships, innovation and teamwork. For instance, the program has forged an innovative alliance with the Conservation Trust of North Carolina to bring to bear the expertise of 23 land trust organizations across the state in identifying and preserving open space through acquisition from willing owners.

EEP also continues existing initiatives and partnerships to restore and enhance our state's wetlands and waterways. Through contracts with biological, engineering and management firms, the EEP outsources the vast majority of the program needs to the private sector.

The N.C. Ecosystem Enhancement Program stands as a valuable component of Gov. Easley's conservation initiative, One North Carolina Naturally. By using partnerships, innovation and teamwork, we are helping to conserve our state's natural resources for years to come and enhancing our economic opportunities.

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