

# The North Carolina Wetlands Restoration Program: An Overview of the Local Watershed Planning Initiative



## What is the North Carolina Wetlands Restoration Program?

The North Carolina Wetlands Restoration Program (NCWRP) was created by the NC General Assembly in 1996, for the purposes of restoring, creating, enhancing and preserving wetlands, streams and streamside buffers throughout the state. The NCWRP is a **nonregulatory** program housed in the Division of Water Quality, Department of Environment and Natural Resources. NCWRP goals include: improvement of water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, floodwater retention, pollution prevention, recreational resources and overall watershed functions within North Carolina's 17 major river basins.

## What is a Local Watershed Plan?

Local Watershed Plans (LWPs) identify all factors contributing to water quality degradation within a watershed and provide strategies to address nonpoint sources of pollution. One component of a LWP is the identification of sites for wetland, stream and streamside buffer restoration. However, this is just one piece of the water quality puzzle. In most watersheds, wetland, stream and streamside buffer restoration alone will not be sufficient to improve water quality. Other nonpoint sources of pollution, such as stormwater runoff and failing septic systems, must be located and addressed through other types of water quality improvement projects. Accordingly, the solutions identified in LWPs include not only wetland, stream and streamside buffer restoration projects, but a comprehensive package of initiatives needed to successfully improve and protect water quality in the long term.

## **Why Participate in Local Watershed Planning?**

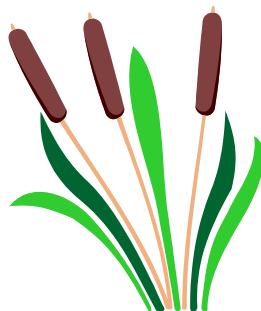
Local Watershed Plans (LWPs) are developed cooperatively with representatives of local governments, nonprofit organizations, and local communities. They provide an important opportunity for local stakeholders including residents, community groups, businesses, and industry to play a role in shaping the future of their watershed. Through the LWP planning process, these groups work cooperatively to identify issues, set priorities, develop strategies, secure funding, and implement protection and restoration projects within their communities. By encouraging stakeholders to participate in identifying solutions to address water quality, habitat, flooding, and recreational needs, the LWPs become blueprints for strategically implementing local projects through partnerships between local governments, citizens, non-profit organizations, and state and federal agencies.

## **Why Develop Local Watershed Plans?**

Although communities across the state face many of the same issues when dealing with water quality problems, each community has its own unique characteristics, concerns, and priorities. For this reason, it is important that communities take part in assessing the conditions of the resources in their watershed and developing a customized strategy to address their own goals and objectives. Most importantly, by developing LWPs and identifying solutions to meet local resource needs, community members have a greater interest in the implementation of the plan and the benefits implementation will provide. Some of the benefits of the planning process and the production of LWPs are outlined below.

### ***Benefits of the Planning Process***

- The process promotes locally-driven, interactive restoration planning that can address the specific watershed concerns of local communities.
- The process enables local knowledge to be combined with technical support and resources to identify specific sources of water quality degradation and develop appropriate solutions.
- The process enables local communities to guide implementation of strategies developed through the planning process cooperatively with the NCWRP.



### ***Benefits of the Plans***

- LWPs describe the conditions of local watersheds, issues of importance to local communities, objectives set by local plan participants, and the necessary measures needed to achieve those objectives.
- LWPs describe the tools to be utilized to address watershed issues. These tools are identified by local plan participants and may include voluntary landowner assistance programs, education and outreach, drinking water supply protection measures, stormwater best management practices, model ordinances, water quality improvement projects, and habitat protection plans.
- LWPs identify the funding sources needed to implement each component of the plan. Funding identification is made more effective by the cooperative nature of the process which brings together public and private organizations and local community members to work as a watershed team.

### **Steps to Developing a Local Watershed Plan**

The development of LWPs involves many steps needed to achieve three main goals: 1) the identification of the specific causes of water quality degradation in a watershed, 2) the development of a strategy for addressing water quality degradation that is supported by the local community, and 3) the implementation of restoration projects and other water quality initiatives identified in the plan. To ensure the success of LWPs and the planning process, it is important to gain the support, backing, and participation of local governments, community groups, and citizens. The steps outlined below are designed to provide the level of education and outreach necessary to develop and implement a LWP.

#### ***Phase I: Plan Development Steps***

1. Obtain stakeholder participation and involve the public.
2. Build a watershed planning team and identify a local watershed planning team leader.
3. Select and implement a kick-off project to generate interest in local watershed planning and restoration activities.
4. Identify watershed issues such as water quality, habitat, flooding, and recreational access.
5. Inventory and analyze existing natural resource information in GIS and other formats and identify information gaps.
6. Perform a watershed assessment to fill information gaps and determine sources of water quality problems.
7. Provide technical assistance to the local government and watershed team on interpreting assessment results and developing needed solutions.
8. Prioritize watershed issues and set goals and objectives.
9. Maintain support and interest in the planning process through education and outreach.

10. Categorize and prioritize actions to meet goals and objectives (including stream, wetland, and riparian buffer restoration).
11. Develop criteria for measuring success.
12. Develop cost estimates for each action and identify suitable funding sources.
13. Document the planning process.

***Phase II: Plan Implementation Steps***

1. Build Project Teams for project implementation.
  2. Pursue and obtain funding and technical assistance from available resource programs.
  3. Conduct outreach and education to sustain support and participation in the implementation of LWP.
  4. Implement projects.
- 81 Measure success and adjust strategies as needed.#  
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