



RECOGNIZING WETLANDS

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U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

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What's a wetland? Wetlands come in many forms, such as swamps, marshes, bogs, and prairie potholes. These unique ecosystems are found across the United States and play a vital role in our environment. Under the Clean Water Act (CWA), wetlands are identified based on three main characteristics: special soils (called hydric soils), plants that thrive in wet conditions, and the presence of water (wetland hydrology). Wetlands are identified and mapped using the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) 1987 Wetland Delineation Manual and the applicable regional supplement (See: https://www.usace.army.mil/Missions/Civil-Works/Regulatory-Program-and-Permits/reg_supp/).

Wetlands Legal Definition

Those areas that are inundated or saturated by surface or groundwater at a frequency and duration sufficient to support, and that under normal circumstances do support, a prevalence of vegetation typically adapted for life in saturated soil conditions. Wetlands generally include swamps, marshes, bogs and similar areas. 33 CFR 328.3(c)(1).

How can I tell if an area is a wetland? Some wetlands are easy to spot, like swamps with standing water. Others can be harder to recognize because they may be dry for part of the year. Here are some tips to help you identify wetlands, even when water isn't visible. Tips that may help you identify a wetland even when water is not visually present due to drought or dry seasons or when vegetation is managed or removed.

Tip 1. Ask your local USACE office. If you think there might be wetlands on your property, your local USACE Regulatory office is a great place to start (See: <https://regulatory.ops.usace.army.mil/offices/>). USACE has been delineating wetlands across the United States for more than 45 years. Local USACE staff may already have knowledge about the area in question. You may also choose to hire a wetland delineation professional, who can work with your local USACE Regulatory office to determine if any areas on your site are or may be subject to regulation under USACE authorities.

How long does water need to be present?

In most cases, water must be present long enough to impact the other two key factors (soils and vegetation). Puddles and rainwater alone are typically not present long enough.

Tip 2. Look for areas where water collects. When looking at an area for potential wetlands, look not only for standing water, but also for areas where water collects. Focus on lower areas, drainageways, floodplains, or flat areas. When walking these areas, notice if the ground feels "soft" or "sticky" from waterlogged soil. Even when no water is visible, look for clues that water was recently present: water staining on tress, rocks, or fence posts, debris piled against objects; or debris deposited in a line (like at the edge of a lake). Timing Matters. The best time to look for indicators of water in places with distinct wet and dry seasons is often after the middle of the wet season or after several heavy rains. In areas with wet, cold winters, the early growing season is ideal for identification of wetland conditions—when spring plants sprout, and trees begin budding.

Tip 3. Look for wetland plants. Walk the site during the wet portion of the growing season and look for wetland plants. In general, wetland plants are plants that thrive or survive better than other plants in wet conditions. Wetland plants vary from region to region. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) maintains a website (<https://plants.usda.gov/>) which includes descriptions of thousands of plant species, and includes helpful information such as pictures, location maps, and labels that indicate whether a particular species is more commonly found in upland vs. wetland environments. A list of wetland plant species for each region of the United States can be found at: wetland-plants.usace.army.mil.



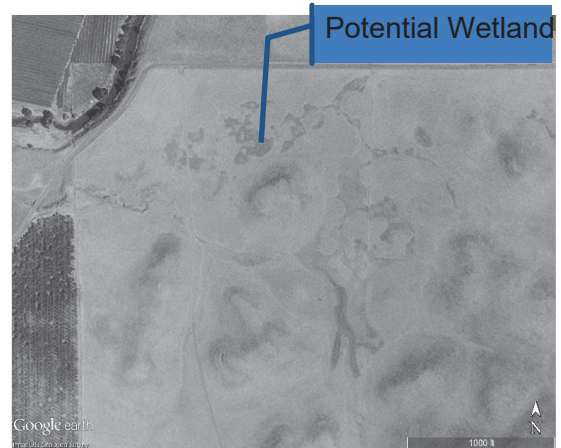
Vernal pool wetlands at Jepson Prairie, California. Photographed by James Robb, 2017.

The USACE Engineer Research and Development Center has created an 'All Things Wetland Plants Series' that provides helpful visual guides (See: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCI-wASW82yGEgMNHQqKnLYq>). If you see plant species that are commonly associated with wet areas, such as cattails, bulrushes, smartweeds, cypress, willows, mangroves, sedges, rushes, etc., consultation with a wetland delineation professional is advised prior to making any alterations.

Tip 4. Look at a soil map. Soil maps from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) can help you identify hydric soils, which are often found in wetlands. Visit the Web Soil Survey (websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov) and check the 'Land Classification' section for hydric soil ratings. If hydric soils are mapped on or near your area of interest, then it may be a wetland. Note that a lack of mapped hydric soils does not necessarily mean that a wetland is not present.

Tip 5. Look at the National Wetland Inventory (NWI). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) mapped wetlands throughout the country (fws.gov/program/national-wetlands-inventory). There are limitations to these data as much of the mapping is old and wetlands or other mapped features may have changed since the mapping was completed. In addition, many wetlands are not mapped due to technology/information limitations at the time of mapping. The NWI mapping does not include all potential wetlands and may include areas that do not meet USACE's legal definition of wetland. If the NWI shows a mapped wetland on or nearby to your property, consultation with a wetland delineation professional or your local USACE Regulatory office is recommended prior to conducting any alterations to potential wetland areas.

Tip 6. Look at aerial photos. Wetlands often show on aerial photographs as distinctly different colors (often darker or lighter) than the surrounding landscape. Aerial imagery can help identify darker areas of standing water or saturated soils, abrupt changes in plants (greener areas, plant community changes, etc.), drowned out crops, or other indicators that water has influenced the area. You can find aerial photography from a variety of sources. In rural areas, your county Farm Service Agency (USDA) offices are a great place to start. Other options include Google Earth (earth.google.com/web/), and U.S. Geological Survey's Earth Explorer (earthexplorer.usgs.gov), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Coast Watch (coastwatch.noaa.gov).



Wetlands show up darker than the surrounding land in this 1998 USGS Aerial Image

Who are wetland delineation professionals and what do they do? Wetland delineation professionals are experts who identify and map wetlands. USACE has trained staff who can help, and private environmental consultants are also available who provide wetland delineation services and can engage with USACE for verification. Your local USACE office can provide a list of professionals in your area. The NRCS also has wetland delineation professionals who can help farmers, ranchers, and other similar landowners regarding programs under the Food Security Act; however, USACE may not be able to rely solely on wetland determinations made by the NRCS.

Do I Have to Hire a Private Consultant? No. USACE will delineate wetlands on your property if requested. However, due to limited resources that can result in a delay in the process. Hiring a private delineation professional is entirely up to you, but such professional can, in many cases, provide data necessary to delineate wetlands which generally speeds up the process.