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For release: June 19, 2015

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Wetlands 101: What to Know Before You Work

St. Paul, Minn. – Minnesota’s landscape includes roughly 10.6 million acres of wetlands. While many people think of wetlands as swampy, marshy areas with standing water and cattails, the reality is wetlands take on many forms. In addition to swampy, marshy areas, wetlands can vary from grassy meadows, to forested wetlands covered in trees and shrubs, to wet areas of cultivated farm fields. Many wetlands are actually dry for most of the year, with no standing water.

Why Wetlands Matter

Before European settlement, studies estimate Minnesota had over 20 million acres of wetland. Today that number has been cut in half. Wetlands are important ecosystems. They hold water, providing for natural water quality improvements by filtering nutrients and sediment that might otherwise pollute and clog waterways. They provide flood protection and shoreline erosion control. Wetlands are also home to many species of fish and wildlife.

Wetlands Regulation

Most wetlands in Minnesota are protected by State and/or Federal law, and in some cases by local ordinances. Minnesota’s primary wetland protection law is the Wetland Conservation Act. The law is implemented by local governments, the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources provides assistance and oversight, and the Department of Natural Resources provides enforcement.

- The State law applies to all wetlands, including those on private property, to achieve “no net loss” of wetlands.
- In general, wetland protection laws regulate activities in or near wetlands that can negatively affect the wetland through draining, filling, or excavating.
- There are some exemptions contained within State law for certain activities.

What You Should Know

It can be very difficult to identify wetlands and wetland regulations can be quite complex. Some examples of projects that could potentially affect wetlands include:

- Filling a low area of a residential lot for a building or lawn
- Tiling wet areas of cultivated fields
- Digging a pond in a low area
- Cleaning out an old ditch or improving an existing ditch
- Adding fill for a crossing of a stream or wet swale

Requirements

If there is the potential for your project to impact a wetland, before you start it is important to contact your local WCA regulatory authority to:

- Find out if the land you intend to alter is a wetland. Remember, an area can be a wetland even if it does not appear wet on the surface.
- Determine if the proposed activity has impacts to a wetland area.
- Assure that any impact to wetlands can be avoided if possible, and properly replaced if not.

If you don't know where to start, your local Soil and Water Conservation District can help you determine which agency is your local contact.

Cooperation is a key component of successful conservation. Local, state, and federal wetland regulatory agencies work in partnership with landowners to help them achieve the best possible results on their private land.

For more information about wetlands in Minnesota, see the Board of Water and Soil Resources website at <http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/wetlands/index.html>, or the Department of Natural Resources website at: <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/wetlands/index.html>