



Wetland Program Plans Handbook: An Updated Resource for Wetlands Protection

**Donna Downing
National Association of Wetland Managers
June 2026**

Overview of Presentation

Introduction to Wetland Program Plans (WPPs)

The Updated WPP Handbook

- Why a new and updated Handbook?
- Key themes and highlights by chapter:
 - Core Elements;
 - Additional WPP elements;
 - Cross-cutting wetland program considerations; and
 - Handbook appendices

Plans for Handbook completion and distribution.

Context: The “Enhancing State and Tribal Programs” (ESTP) Initiative

EPA launched its ESTP Initiative in 2007, with a goal to accelerate wetland program development on a national scale.

Under the ESTP, in 2008 EPA worked with a state and tribal workgroup to establish the Core Elements Framework (CEF).

- The CEF identifies four core elements for a comprehensive wetland program.
- EPA’s Wetland Program Development Grants align with these four core elements.

In 2023, EPA reorganized and updated the CEF to reflect current policies and recent experiences.

Four Core Elements

Monitoring and Assessment – gathering data to understand the health and extent of wetlands;

Regulatory Activities – using regulatory programs to protect wetlands, such as federal Clean Water Act programs and comparable state and tribal laws;

Voluntary Restoration and Protection – implementing programs that encourage voluntary actions for wetland protection and conservation; and

Water Quality Standards for Wetlands – setting designated uses and scientific criteria to establish standards to protect the quality of wetlands.

Wetland Program Plans (WPPs)

WPPs are developed by states and Tribes, articulating wetland program goals and providing a blueprint for achieving those goals.

WPPs:

- Should be tailored to the unique opportunities and challenges that occur within a particular state or Tribe;
- Include both broad-based and specific actions, with timeframes;
- Reflect EPA's CEF to varying degrees;
- Are encouraged but not required by EPA; and
- Should be updated at least every six years.

Minimum Components of a Focused and Sustainable Wetland Program and WPP

A 2009 EPA memorandum identifies five minimum components for a wetland program's WPP, including:

- Overall goal statement for the program;
- Clear timeframes for period covered by the WPP;
- List of actions consistent with the CEF that the program intends to carry out in the WPP period that will help meet overall plan goals;
- Intended schedule for each action; and
- Listing of more specific activities to be accomplished under each action.

Benefits of a WPP

A WPP provides a roadmap that explains the goals of the wetland program and specific steps needed to get there.

WPPs developed through a collaborative process often result in numerous benefits, such as:

- Greater confidence when identifying priority actions;
- New and stronger partnerships enhanced by a collaborative planning process; and
- Additional support for wetland programs.

Projects included in a WPP make an application for Wetlands Program Development Grants eligible for consideration as part of the first tier of grant applications.

Why an Updated WPP Handbook?

Since the 2013 Handbook, many states and Tribes have developed and implemented WPPs with many “lessons learned.” In addition, EPA updated the CEF in 2023.

The Updated Handbook:

- Reflects states’ experience developing and implementing WPPs, including how WPPs have been tailored to local wetland goals and circumstances;
- Highlights some of the challenges and approaches to developing a WPP;
- Includes many explicit examples from states’ practice;
- Incorporates EPA’s revised CEF; and
- Updates available tools and other resources.

Updated WPP Handbook Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview of Wetland Program Plans

Chapter 2: Core Elements of a Wetland Program

Introduction: Begin Anywhere

Core Element: Monitoring and Assessment

Core Element: Regulatory Activities

Core Element: Voluntary Restoration and Protection

Core Element: Water Quality Standards for Wetlands

Chapter 3: Additional Wetland Program Components

Chapter 4: Cross-Cutting Wetland Program Considerations

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Appendices: Additional Resources, Illustrative Examples of Core Element Activities in WPPs

Chapter 2: Core Elements of a Wetland Program

The CEF is very flexible.

State WPPs can incorporate all or a subset of core elements, with some adding additional elements that are key to local needs.

There's no single starting point when developing state wetland programs. begin anywhere!

Core Element: Monitoring and Assessment

A well-designed monitoring and assessment program can be an important component of virtually all wetland program core elements.

Three levels of monitoring:

Level 1: landscape assessment

Level 2: rapid wetland assessment

Level 3: intensive site assessment

Handbook discusses design considerations; common issues and challenges; potential actions a state might consider when developing and implementing a monitoring and assessment program; and regional and national monitoring workgroups.



Core Element: Regulatory Activities

States differ in the extent their wetland programs incorporate regulatory approaches.

Can range from 401 certification through a statewide wetlands regulatory program or 404 assumption.

Handbook discusses pros and cons of state regulatory programs; considerations in designing a regulatory program; options for scope of regulatory programs (extent of resource protection; level of state responsibility); and techniques for leveraging protection through cooperation with other programs.

Core Element: Voluntary Restoration and Protection

Voluntary restoration and protection can include those activities undertaken by individuals and organizations on a voluntary basis to restore, enlarge, or improve wetlands.

Handbook discusses approaches states have taken to identify potential state roles and activities in voluntary restoration and protection; common issues and challenges; techniques for creating coalitions of partners and interest groups; effective technical assistance; and evaluation and reporting results.



Core Element: Water Quality Standards for Wetlands

Wetland water quality standards describe wetland goals in terms specific enough to guide program decisionmaking.

Handbook discusses the five key steps EPA has identified for developing wetland standards; approaches in state WPPs for wetland-specific designated uses, narrative and numeric criteria to support those wetland uses; common issues and challenges; and ways to incorporate wetland standards into decisionmaking.



Chapter 3: Additional WPP Components

Many state WPPs incorporate all or most of the four Core Elements. Some WPPs include additional elements to address a state's individual needs.

Handbook discusses additional elements in some WPPs, including: issues such as public education and outreach; sustainable financing; cultural knowledge and wetland programs; and changing environmental conditions.

Chapter 4: Cross-Cutting Wetland Program Considerations

Some considerations when developing a WPP cut across the four Core Elements. These considerations can represent an overarching strategy to help ensure the WPP as a whole is an effective management tool.

Handbook discusses: integrating wetland programs with other state initiatives; developing partnerships; long-term planning including training new staff; and updating a WPP.

Handbook Appendices

The updated Handbook discussion is rich with references and links to potentially useful resources and examples.

Appendix A: Additional Resources. Organized by issue, with live links to documents.

Appendix B: Illustrative Examples of Core Element Activities in State Wetland Program Plans.



Next Steps for the Updated Handbook

NAWM will finish editing and formatting by the end of June 2026.

The Handbook will be available free on NAWM's website (NAWM.org) in .pdf form.



Donna Downing, Senior Legal Policy Advisor
National Association of Wetland Managers
(207) 892-3399
donna@nawm.org