

# Wetland Water Quality Standards Frequently Asked Questions

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The Oklahoma Water Resources Board (OWRB) in collaboration with the Oklahoma Wetlands Technical Work Group is developing wetland water quality standards (WQs). The wetland WQs will work to protect and sustain Oklahoma's wetlands. This frequently asked questions document is intended to provide some general information about wetland WQs. If you have specific questions or would like more information please contact OWRB Water Quality Standards staff.

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## **Why should wetlands be protected with specific water quality standards?**

Wetlands are a unique waterbody type that are extremely biologically productive, diverse, and provide rich habitat for fish, amphibians, and wildlife. Wetlands are often popular recreation areas for people to enjoy outdoor activities like hunting, fishing, and bird watching. Wetlands also serve an important role on the landscape in storing floodwater, preventing erosion, and filtering water.

Oklahoma has a variety of types of wetlands including riverine, depressional, and playa lakes. Oklahoma has lost 67% of historic wetland areas; it is important that the remaining 33 % be sustained.

Wetlands are the link between land and water and have distinguishing features including ponded surface water or water saturated soils and plants specifically adapted to survive in wet anoxic conditions. These unique wetland features present scientific challenges for protecting wetlands using traditional lakes and streams water quality standards. Therefore, water quality standards specifically designed for wetlands are needed to effectively protect wetlands resources.

## **How are wetlands protected with water quality standards now?**

Wetlands are a *water of the state* and are currently protected with the default WQs. However, the default standards were developed for lakes and streams and are often not suitable for wetlands; for example, applying the default standards to wetlands can erroneously identify healthy wetlands as wetlands in poor condition. Thus, there are both scientific and regulatory challenges with implementing the default standards for wetlands. This is why we are developing wetland specific water quality standards.

## **What are the components of the wetland WQs?**

All water quality standards have three components 1) beneficial uses, 2) criteria to protect beneficial uses, and 3) the state's antidegradation policy. The wetland WQs will include these three components specific for wetland waterbodies. In addition, OWRB plans to include a definition for wetlands in the definition section of the Standards document.

## **How are the draft wetland water quality standards being developed?**

The wetland WQs are being developed collaboratively between the OWRB and the Oklahoma Wetlands Technical Work Group. The OWRB is leading the effort as the state agency authorized to promulgate standards to protect Oklahoma's waterbodies. At the start of the standards development project five guiding principles were outlined.

1. Recognize wetlands as a unique waterbody type in the standards
2. Develop meaningful and workable standards for wetland protection
3. Ensure the standards are comprehensively rooted in wetland science
4. Ensure the standards are compatible with existing/future assessment methods
5. Provide clarity to regulatory programs

These principles inform the work of OWRB and the Oklahoma Wetlands Technical Work Group as the draft wetland WQS are developed.

## **What are the benefits of adopting wetland WQs?**

Wetland WQs will help improve and maintain the state's wetlands by providing a benchmark against which to assess condition, plan preservation, mitigation, and or restoration activities. Water quality standards specifically for wetlands will also provide a transparent and consistent foundation for policies and technical procedures related to activities that impact wetlands.

## **Is other information such as, mapping, classification, and assessment methods needed before wetland WQS?**

The 2013 -2018 Oklahoma Wetland Program Plan was jointly developed by the Oklahoma Conservation Commission and the Oklahoma Wetlands Technical Work Group. The Wetland Program Plan is the umbrella document that guides and coordinates wetland projects across the state; the plan is organized around five core elements 1) Monitoring and Assessment, 2) Regulation, 3) Voluntary Restoration and Protection, 4) Water Quality Standards, 5) Education and Outreach. The development of wetland WQs is just one element of the plan and various projects relating to different plan elements are being conducted in parallel. For example, projects addressing wetland mapping, assessment method development, determination of reference condition, and outreach efforts are all underway. All of these projects complement each other and do not have to be conducted in a specific order.

## **Once wetland water quality standards are adopted how will this change water quality programs?**

Water quality standards define the goals for a waterbody and wetland WQSs will support ongoing efforts to develop wetland monitoring and assessment programs and allow the state to track trends in wetland condition. Wetland WQSs will also provide a benchmark that can be used to assess the progress and or success of wetland restoration and protection efforts. Additionally as with all water quality standards, the wetland WQSs can be employed in various water quality programs to ensure that Oklahoma's aquatic resources are proactively protected.

## **Will the new standards expand the area under state jurisdiction for water quality programs?**

No. The extent of state jurisdiction over *waters of the state* will remain the same.

## **What happens if we don't adopt wetland WQS?**

If we don't adopt wetland WQSs, the default WQSs will still be in place and at best provide nonspecific protection for wetlands. Because the default WQSs are often not suitable for wetlands they have proven problematic to implement and as a result wetland protection is often overlooked or misapplied within our water quality programs.

## **How can I found out more information and get involved?**

Please contact OWRB Water Quality Standards staff for more information.

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OWRB is seeking participation and cooperation with all stakeholders through meetings with the Oklahoma Wetlands Work Group. OWRB encourages stakeholder engagement, if you have questions/comments or would like to request a meeting please contact OWRB Water Quality Standards staff.