

For Immediate Release

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Summit: Water Policies Hurt Wildlife, Sporting in Arizona

The Bush administration's direction to federal agencies not to enforce the Clean Water Act on millions of acres of wetlands, lakes, ponds and streams will negatively affect hunting and fishing in Arizona, according to wildlife experts at a recent Hunter/Angler Summit on Clean Water in Santa Fe.

"The waters affected include some of the most important habitats for ducks and other waterfowl, and the headwaters of many of our favorite fishing spots," Larry Schweiger, president of the National Wildlife Federation and an avid hunter and angler, told the summit. "The non-enforcement of the Clean Water act on so-called isolated waters is a major threat to the hunting and fishing lifestyle in Arizona," he said.

The summit, held July 16 and 17, brought together hunting and fishing groups from several Southwestern states, including a delegation from the Arizona Wildlife Federation, Arizona's oldest conservation organization, whose mission is to protect and restore wildlife and wildlife habitat. The event featured wildlife and policy experts discussing the far-reaching impacts of the Bush administration's water policies on fish and wildlife resources.

"It's alarming that citizens of Arizona stand to lose Clean Water Act protections for an estimated 95% of our waterways, because of this policy," said Mary Jo Forman Miller, President of the Arizona Wildlife Federation, who attended the summit. "If the administration is serious about supporting hunting and fishing, it must enforce the Clean Water Act fully in Arizona and across the country."

Passed in 1972, the Clean Water Act seeks to broadly protect the nation's waters from pollution, destruction and degradation. A January 2001 U.S. Supreme Court ruling created a minor gap in Clean Water Act coverage by removing certain intrastate, "isolated" waters that are not navigable from protection if their only connection to other waters is through use by migratory birds. Yet, in January 2003, the administration announced its intention to significantly narrow the rules that govern which waters are covered under the Act, potentially abandoning protection for a large proportion of the nation's wetlands, ponds and streams. After an outcry from hunters, anglers, 39 states and many others who simply did not want to see the scope of the Act narrowed, the administration withdrew its plans.

However, the administration has refused to withdraw a guidance memorandum it issued to federal agencies in January 2003, that goes well beyond the Supreme Court's narrow ruling and directs agencies to turn a blind eye to activities that pollute or destroy an estimated 20 million acres of wetlands, as well as many ponds, lakes and streams. The policy requires field staff to seek approval from their headquarters' offices prior to extending protections to any water that might possibly be considered "isolated."

"In Arizona, waters that are being deemed "isolated," such as intermittent or ephemeral streams, make up more than 95% of our waterways. These waterways are critical parts of the ecosystem, offering crucial habitat to birds, fish and many other species," said Don Farmer, Federal Agency Liaison for the Arizona Wildlife Federation, who also attended the summit. "Protecting this habitat is in the interest of every citizen of Arizona who cares about wildlife."

Half of the nation's duck population depends on "prairie potholes," a wetlands type now frequently being considered "isolated" and outside the scope of the Clean Water Act by the administration.

The Southwest abounds with “isolated” basins – valleys surrounded by higher ground where water only escapes through groundwater or evaporation. The Army Corps of Engineers is frequently reading the administration’s guidance to mean that these basins are no longer protected by the Clean Water Act, with potentially staggering consequences. Without federal protection, these areas would largely be left open to unregulated pollution.

On a national basis, by the administration’s own estimates, not enforcing the Clean Water Act on “isolated” waters could lead to the loss of up to 20 million acres of wetlands – one fifth of what remains in the lower 48 states.

“It’s absolutely critical that the public understands exactly what Arizona has to lose with the administration’s policy,” said Larry Schweiger. “When you weaken protection for Arizona’s water, you affect wildlife, you affect hunting and fishing, you affect people.”

“We urge all the citizens of Arizona who care about wildlife to contact the President immediately and urge him to withdraw the 2003 guidance memorandum and reinstate Clean Water Act protections for the waterways of Arizona, before it’s too late,” said Mary Jo Forman Miller.