

Percent Potentially Restorable Wetlands

This EnviroAtlas national map depicts the percent potentially restorable wetlands within each subwatershed (12-digit HUC) in the U.S. Potentially restorable wetlands are defined as agricultural areas that naturally accumulate water and contain some proportion of poorly-drained soils. The EnviroAtlas Team produced this dataset by combining three data layers—land cover, digital elevation, and soil drainage information.

Why are potentially restorable wetlands important?

EnviroAtlas provides information about the benefits provided by wetland ecosystems for clean and plentiful water. Though wetlands contain intrinsic and aesthetic values, they also offer more tangible ecosystem services such as wildlife habitat, biological diversity, soil loss reduction, [groundwater recharge](#), nutrient and toxics filtration, [carbon sequestration](#), and flood water storage.¹

Major regional wetland losses have occurred across the conterminous U.S. over the last 200+ years with expanding coastal development, agricultural land conversion, and urbanization. For example, California and the five top agricultural Midwestern states have lost over 80% of their historical wetland area.² In the past, wetland mitigation programs have not been able to significantly offset or reverse continued wetland losses.^{2,3} Recent efforts focus on comprehensive restoration efforts, promoting and coordinating research to quantify the benefits of wetlands and wetland restoration. For example, a model developed to simulate wetland water storage in a sub-basin of the Red River in Minnesota (a system that floods frequently) showed that restoring 25% of drained wetlands would increase water storage by 27–32% basin-wide to help alleviate flooding.⁴

Wetlands also have the ability to store atmospheric carbon (carbon sequestration). Potentially restorable wetlands, by banking additional stored carbon, can make a significant contribution to [climate change](#) mitigation. Cultivated wetlands lose their stored soil organic carbon to the atmosphere, but soil organic carbon is rapidly restored when wetland function is restored.⁵ A study in the Prairie Pothole region estimated that the 12.2 million acres of potentially restorable wetlands in that area have the potential to sequester 122.6 million tons of soil organic carbon over a 10-year period.⁵ These studies reveal the



Photo: Farm wetland, NRCS

range of what is possible; it is the job of local land managers to locate the areas with the greatest potential to restore wetland benefits in a cost-effective manner.

How can I use this information?

This national EnviroAtlas map, Percent Potentially Restorable Wetlands, estimates the percent land area of 12-digit HUCs covered by potentially restorable wetlands. It is a companion map to Potentially Restorable Wetlands, a Supplemental data layer that identifies agricultural lands in the US with wetland restoration potential.

This map gives a national overview of HUCs with the heaviest concentrations of potentially restorable wetlands and allows comparison among them. This map and the Potentially Restorable Wetlands map may be overlaid with other data such as National Wetland Inventory ([NWI](#)) or Protected Areas ([PADUS](#)) data. Information on wetland distribution and protection is useful to compare with areas of high wetland conversions in planning for optimal areas for restoration. The potentially restorable wetland layer overlaid with EPA impaired waters data may assist in planning to maximize wetland filtration capabilities when implementing Total Maximum Daily Loads in streams. Wetlands restored alongside or upstream of impaired stream segments may help reduce sediment and nutrient loads to streams.

Multiple wetland functions may be ranked by local needs for water quality improvement, wildlife habitat, flood protection, nutrient filtration, or groundwater recharge. Once high-ranking areas of potentially restorable wetlands

are identified, detailed site analysis may be planned for restoring individual wetlands.

How were the data for this map created?

To map potentially restorable wetlands, 2006 National Land Cover Data (NLCD) classes *pasture/hay* and *cultivated crops* were reclassified as potentially suitable and all other landcover classes as unsuitable. Poorly- and very poorly drained soils were identified using Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) [Soil Survey](#) information mainly from the higher resolution Soil Survey Geographic (SSURGO) Database. The two poorly drained soil classes, expressed as percentage of a polygon in the soil survey, were combined to create a raster layer. A wetness index or Composite Topographic Index (CTI) was developed to identify areas wet enough to create wetlands. The wetness index grid, calculated from National Elevation Data (NED), relates upstream contributing area and slope to overland flow. Results from previous studies suggested that CTI values ≥ 550 captured the majority of wetlands.

The three layers, when combined, resulted in four classes: unsuitable, low, moderate, and high wetland restoration potential. Areas with high potential for restorable wetlands have suitable landcover (crop/pasture), CTI values ≥ 550 , and 80–100% poorly- or very poorly drained soils (PVP). Areas with moderate potential have suitable landcover, CTI values ≥ 550 , and 1–79% PVP. Areas with low potential meet the landcover and 80–100% PVP criteria, but do not have CTI values ≥ 550 to corroborate wetness. All other areas were classed as unsuitable. The percentage of total land within each 12-digit HUC that is covered by potentially restorable wetlands was estimated and displayed in five classes for this map.

Selected Publications

1. Natural Resources Conservation Service. 2012. [Restoring America's wetlands: A private lands conservation success story](#). Natural Resources Conservation Service, Washington, DC. 16 p.
2. Zedler, J. B. 2004. [Compensating for wetland losses in the United States](#). *Ibis* 146: 92–100.
3. Turner, R.E., A.M. Redmond, and J.B. Zedler. 2001. [Count it by acre or function—mitigation adds up to net loss of wetlands](#). *National Wetlands Newsletter* 23(6):1–16.
4. Gleason, R.A., B.A. Tangen, M.K. Laubhan, K.E. Kermes, and N.H. Euliss, Jr. 2007. [Estimating water storage capacity of existing and potentially restorable wetland depressions in a subbasin of the Red River of the North](#). USGS Open File Report 2007-1159, U.S. Geological Survey, Reston, Virginia. 36 p.
5. Gleason, R.A., N.H. Euliss, Jr., R.L. McDougal, K.E. Kermes, E.N. Steadman, and J.A. Harju. 2005. [Potential of restored prairie wetlands in the glaciated North American prairie to sequester atmospheric carbon](#). Paper 92, U.S. Geological Survey, Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, Jamestown, North Dakota.

What are the limitations of these data?

EnviroAtlas uses the best data available, but there are still limitations associated with these data: 1) the landcover classes found in NLCD are created through the classification of satellite imagery. Human classification of different landcover types that have a similar spectral signature can result in classification errors; 2) the poorly-drained soils data were transformed from a proportion of a polygon to a raster data structure, which affected their location; and 3) CTI tended to overestimate wet areas, in part because it does not consider precipitation and evaporation water balances. However, the final map, derived through data transformation and spatial analysis, is not meant to be a recreation of reality but a model of potentially restorable wetlands in the U.S. that can serve as a useful planning and screening tool.

How can I access these data?

EnviroAtlas data can be viewed in the interactive map, accessed through web services, or downloaded.

Where can I get more information?

A selection of references relating to potentially restorable wetlands is listed below. Information about the base data layers can be found at the websites linked throughout the text. To ask specific questions about this data layer, please contact the [EnviroAtlas Team](#).

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