

Report: Net increase in U.S. wetlands

Interior Secretary Gale A. Norton and Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns said for the first time since 1954, there is a net increase in U.S. wetlands.

The Fish and Wildlife Service report, released Thursday, said wetlands acreage, measured largely by aerial surveys, totaled 107 million acres at the end of 2004, up by 191,800 acres from 1998, The New York Times reported Friday.

"I'm pleased to complete my term as secretary of interior by announcing some good news, said Norton, who stepped down from her job Friday.

Although some 523,500 acres of swamps and tidal marshes had been lost, the government measured gains of 715,300 acres of shallow-water wetlands or ponds.

However, critics of the report say the increase in wetlands has also included ornamental ponds in new developments and mine reclamation ponds.

Wetlands are ecologically important areas because they prevent flooding, filter and purify surface water and provide habitat for wildlife.

"The country is losing diversity and the administration tells us it's OK because we've increased the number of ponds," said Julie Sibbing of the National Wildlife Federation.

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