

■ CONSERVATION

New Policy For Wetlands

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Sacramento

After two years of meetings and debates, the Fish and Game Commission has finally adopted a controversial wetlands policy.

The document includes provisions to protect, improve and expand wetlands and to discourage development in these areas. Its objective is to increase the state's wetlands 50 percent by the year 2000, mainly by encouraging private landowners to adopt measures for wetland preservation and expansion.

Fish and Game biologists contend that California's wetlands support 55 percent of all threatened and endangered animals in this state.

The state has been losing wetlands at a rapid pace. Historically the Central Valley, for example, was a series of lakes and swamps that supported millions of waterfowl and marsh animals. Today 94 percent of the original wetlands are gone and the remnants have taken on extreme importance.

Commissioners have been haggling over the definition of a wetland for some

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months, but finally came to an agreement on the language.

Essentially, the commission adopted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service definition, in use for eight years nationwide. It says a marsh must have wet soil, wetland vegetation and water.

The new policy lacks the enforcement of law, but public and private groups that testified at a hearing in Sacramento last Thursday say that it is a start.

Dan Chapin, a vice-president of the California Waterfowl Association, hailed the commission action as "tremendously positive. It's the first step in securing our remaining wetlands."

Although the policy seemed generally accepted by conservationists and builders, there were still some reservations about how it might be applied. B. Demar Hooper, an attorney for several landowners, said, "A marsh in the city can be a health hazard and nuisance with mosquitoes and other aquatic insects."

"Definitions are not clear," said William Geyer, who represents a consortium of Southern California landowners. "For instance, if a landowner creates a marsh, like a duck

club, would this mean it would remain marsh forever? If so, this would work against the policy objectives and few owners would risk their lands."

Other speakers, however, seemed satisfied.

Ellen Johnck of the Bay Planning Coalition, a landowner group,

said her organization's focus was to achieve balance between landowners and environmental groups, and she feels this was accomplished.

And, commented Dana Koku-bun of the Sierra Club: "Good wetlands management will allow better recreation, better air quality and more open spaces."

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