



N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources

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STATE, FEDERAL PARTNERS SIGN STREAM AND WETLANDS AGREEMENT

Ecosystem Enhancement Program Will Reshape the Environmental Mitigation Process

GREENSBORO — Officials with the state departments of Transportation and Environment and Natural Resources today entered into an agreement with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers creating a new multi-agency environmental initiative designed to enhance habitat, stream and water quality protection while reducing road construction delays.

Col. Charles Alexander of the Corps of Engineers joined Transportation Secretary Lyndo Tippet and DENR Secretary Bill Ross at Hillsdale Park, the site of an on-going innovative stream restoration project, to announce the formal creation of the Ecosystem Enhancement Program. The new program, the first of its kind in the nation, will reshape the way the state offsets or alleviates the unavoidable impacts of highway construction on streams and wetlands.

The benefits of the EEP include:

- Increased protection of North Carolina's natural resources;
- Creation of mitigation strategies that are tailored to the needs of each river basin;
- Additional protection of tens of thousands of acres of ecologically important areas;
- More effective collaboration with the private sector and conservation groups, and
- Reduced cost and improved delivery of transportation projects.

The participating agencies have created and started implementing a transition plan to manage compensatory mitigation during the next two years. Beginning July 2005, the EEP will handle transportation mitigation efforts.

"The goal is to protect and enhance North Carolina's ecosystem – that incredibly valuable asset upon which we all ultimately depend for our health, prosperity and happiness," DENR Secretary Bill Ross said. "The EEP will allow all agencies involved in the mitigation process to combine their efforts for the common good, which will have a substantial positive effect on our state's ecological health."

State transportation and environmental officials joined representatives from the Corps of Engineers in calling the innovative new mitigation approach a significant improvement over existing inefficient and ineffective approaches.

"The Hillsdale Park restoration project will provide mitigation credits for a much needed transportation project -- the Greensboro Outer Loop," said DOT Secretary Lyndo Tippet. "Through the Ecosystem Enhancement Program, the Hillsdale Park restoration project also will give citizens a restored, more natural watershed -- not to mention cleaner water in the Cape Fear River."

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"We believe that the Ecosystem Enhancement Program goes beyond what any other state has in place to ensure that development is carried out in a manner that takes great care of North Carolina's natural resources," Col. Alexander said. "The Wilmington District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is proud to be a part of this program and is hopeful it will become the national model for compensatory mitigation. Today's agreement solidifies an already strong partnership with the state and our commitment to environmental sustainment."

"Instead of performing 'foot-by-foot' stream mitigation and acre-by-acre wetland mitigation as we have done in the past, we'll be working with other agencies to develop comprehensive plans to improve water quality, habitat protection for entire river basins," Ross said. "Our objective will be to produce larger scale and accelerated ecosystem enhancement programs."

When Gov. Mike Easley took office in January 2001, he directed the leaders of the state's transportation and environmental departments to improve the agencies' working relationship and to review processes managed by the organizations.

In response to the governor's charge, the Department of Transportation and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources embarked on a partnership based upon mutual support for environmental stewardship and responsible and timely transportation decision making. EEP developed as a result of that partnership.

In April, DENR and DOT received a national award from the Federal Highway Administration for their unprecedented partnership to deliver transportation projects while improving North Carolina's environment. Presented by FHWA Administrator Mary Peters, the Environmental Leadership Award recognizes outstanding transportation projects, processes and people who incorporate environmental stewardship into their transportation programs.

DOT and DENR were specifically honored for their successful partnership based on mutual support for environmental stewardship and responsible and timely transportation decision-making. This partnership led to the creation of a senior leadership team made up of the secretaries and two deputy secretaries from each department, who meet monthly to discuss strategic issues about transportation and the environment.

This leadership team has overseen improvements in the environmental permit approval process, air quality programs and landmark wildlife conservation -- serving as a model for interagency partnerships for environmental stewardship and streamlining.

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