

Wetland Identification on Private Property

What are Wetlands?

Wetlands are areas characterized by the presence of water at a frequency and duration sufficient to support, and that under normal circumstances does support wetland vegetation or aquatic life.

Wetlands have three basic characteristics: hydrophytic vegetation (the presence of plants adapted for living in water-saturated soils), wetland hydrology (the presence of water at or near the surface), and hydric soils (distinctive soil types which develop under saturated conditions).

In Michigan there are three major types of wetlands: marshes, swamps, and northern peatlands. Wetlands are highly productive ecosystems with a diversity of plant and animal life. They are valuable for fish and wildlife habitat, water quality maintenance, flood storage and runoff delay, recreation, and aesthetic appeal.

Wetland Regulation in Michigan

Michigan's Wetland Protection Act (Part 303 of Act 451 of 1994), requires a permit from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) for dredging, filling, constructing, or draining in regulated wetlands. In northern lower Michigan, regulated wetlands are primarily those which are contiguous to lakes and streams.

In addition, the Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) administers federal wetland regulations on navigable waters of the U.S. In Michigan these include wetlands in and adjacent to the Great Lakes, their connecting water bodies, major navigable rivers, and the mouths of major tributaries of navigable rivers.

If you own property and think some of it may be a wetland, you should have a wetland determination performed before planning or beginning any construction projects in the area.

Do I Have A Wetland On My Property?

Many property owners are confused about the technical definitions of wetlands. This is understandable given the variety of wetlands in Michigan and the fact that many wetland types look different than our traditional conception of a wetlands (which is typically a cattail marsh). Below are a few questions that you can ask yourself about your land. A "yes" answer to any of the questions may indicate that you have a wetland on your property.

- Is the ground soggy underfoot in the spring?
- Are there depressions where water pools on the ground surface during the spring?
- Do you avoid the area with heavy equipment for fear of getting stuck?
- Would you need to ditch the site to dry it out?
- Is the site in a depression that has a different vegetation community than the higher ground around it?

- Are there ground water seeps or springs present?
- Are fallen leaves black or very darkly stained and contain sediment deposits on their surfaces?
- Dig a hole. Is the soil gray, or does it contain bright mottles (red or orange) against a gray background?
- If farmed, is there crop stress due to excessive water?
- Does the National Wetland Inventory map, U.S.G.S. topographical map, or locally produced wetland inventory map show a wetland on your property?
- Does the NRCS Soil Survey for your county show the soil on your property to be hydric, poorly, or very poorly drained?

Wetland Identification

It is recommended that property owners have property investigated for wetlands, and have wetlands delineated if present, prior to applying for a permit. For those wishing timely information about the presence, nature, or extent of wetlands on a property parcel, the Watershed Council offers a Wetland Identification Service.

Our service ranges from simply identifying the presence of wetlands on a parcel to detailed characterization of the site. Identification is based on qualitative field procedures that identify the presence or absence of the three wetland characteristics. Vegetation is identified and evaluated for a predominance of wetland-tolerant species. The hydrology of a site is assessed by examining for indications of seasonal water saturation at or near the surface. Soils are examined for criteria that identify them as being hydric soils.

A report describing the basis for, and the results of, the identification can be provided. Maps of the site approximating areas of wetlands are available. However, maps with the high degree of accuracy necessary for site and construction plans should be provided by a qualified engineer or surveyor based on a flagged field boundary.

If desired, upland/wetland transition zones will be marked at frequent intervals with bright flagging. The report and maps are suitable for submission to regulatory agencies as part of their permit review and decision-making process.