

## We Can Help Save Illinois Wetlands

By *Barbara McKasson*

Tens of thousands of Illinois wetlands — about 1/3 of our remaining wetlands — are unprotected because of a U.S. Supreme Court decision in 2000. Illinois has no state-level wetland protection program, leaving critical wetlands at risk from harmful development.

The Illinois Wetlands Protection Act (Illinois House Bill 422) is an attempt to restore vital protections to wetlands. It will work by requiring a permit from the state before anyone can destroy a designated Illinois wetland. If the applicant can demonstrate that there will be no reasonable alternatives to destroying the wetland, and that it will not result in a loss of flood control, wildlife habitat, or water purification functions, then a permit would be issued by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. The IDNR, which includes the state's experts on wildlife and flood control, would consult with the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency to determine if the proposed activity will violate Illinois' water quality standards.

The Illinois Wetlands Protection Act was passed by the Illinois House in 2003 and will be voted on in the Senate during the January 13 — 15 session. The bill will extend protection to 1/3 of Illinois' remaining wetlands. The Act uses the same definition of wetland, and the same method for delineating wetlands, that the previous federal program used. Therefore, an area will not be considered a wetland unless it has wetland plants, wetland soils, and wetland hydrology. There has been widespread consensus across the country on using this definition of wetlands. A detailed description of the many types of wetlands in Illinois can be found at the Illinois Department of Natural Resources website: <http://dnr.state.il.us/wetlands/>

Illinois has already lost 85 to 90 percent of its original wetland acreage. These areas protected our Communities from flood damage by absorbing rainwater, filtering pollutants out of our water supplies, and providing critical habitat for many species of wildlife. Illinois has 57 rare animal and 11 rare plant species that are dependent upon wetlands for at least part of their lives. Also, wetlands provide required habitat for many popular game species of waterfowl and fish.

Realtors, developers, and those who want to make it easy to convert wetlands into strip malls and sprawling subdivisions are expected to continue their full-court press on state senators to defeat HB 422. Not only do these interests oppose HB 422, but they also want to roll back the local wetland protection programs that Lake, Kane, and DuPage counties have implemented.

For further information about HB 422 please visit: <http://illinois.sierraclub.org> — Click on "Take Action"

**WHAT YOU CAN DO?** Call or write your State Senator by January 13, and ask that she or he co-sponsor HB 422, the Illinois Wetlands Protection Bill. The bill's main sponsor is Senator Terry Link. Please consider using this sample letter to send to the following Illinois senators:

Senator Dave Leuchtefeld: (618) 243-9013; (217) 782-8137; 103B Statehouse, Springfield, IL, 62706  
Senator Gary Forby: (618) 439-2504; (217) 782-5509; M115 Statehouse, Springfield, IL, 62706

**Dear Senator \_\_\_\_\_:**

**I strongly urge you to support and co-sponsor H.B. 422, the Illinois Wetlands Protection Act. We have lost over 85% of the wetlands in our state, so it is critical that we protect our remaining wetlands that have lost federal protection because of the Federal Supreme Court decision. Our wetlands perform many irreplaceable functions, such as flood prevention, filtering pollutants out of water, and providing important habitat for wildlife.**

**This bill already has compromises in it that would exempt current farms and mines from the permit requirements. The reasonable fees in H.B. 422 make the program "revenue neutral", so it will not affect the strained state budget. Also, because wetlands harbor many mosquito predators, wetlands reduce the threat of mosquito borne illnesses.**

**We need a permit system in place to make sure that new development does not cause flooding of adjacent property, does not destroy high quality wildlife habitat, and does not cause increased pollution of our waterways. Please restore the safeguards that were in place to protect these wetlands before 2000. Please become a co-sponsor and support H.B. 422, and oppose any amendments that would weaken HB 422.**

**Sincerely,**