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Governor Evers Signs Bill Encouraging More Wetland and Floodplain Restoration

Governor Tony Evers put his final approval on Senate Bill 91 (now 2021 Act 77) which focuses on restoring the natural capacity of wetlands to manage water. The legislation calls for the creation of a hydrologic restoration general permit for simple, voluntary projects that repair hydrology, often involving upper watershed wetland restoration and floodplain reconnection.

Instead of needing multiple permits, certain restoration projects may qualify for a single general permit that will be developed by the Department of Natural Resources. To be eligible, the projects must improve wetland and stream health by improving hydrologic connections, conditions, and functions. As more Wisconsin communities grapple with water-related problems, 2021 Act 77 will create an efficient review process for hydrologic restoration projects.

"Especially here in Wisconsin, wetlands are key to healthy, resilient watersheds," said Wisconsin Wetlands Association Executive Director Tracy Hames. "Wisconsin has lost nearly half of its original 10 million acres of wetlands, so we need to facilitate restoration to improve storage and slow the flow of water across our landscape."

Wisconsin communities are facing more water-related problems each year and need more tools to confront these costly and destructive problems. Flooding damages homes, businesses, farms, roads, and wildlife habitat, impacting the economy and overwhelming the budgets of local governments. These same storms also intensify water quality problems by unleashing sediment and runoff into the surface water of lakes and rivers.

"No single action will solve all the problems we face, but restoring healthy hydrology must be part of our overall strategy to build resilience," said Hames. "This permit will encourage more consideration of wetland solutions to problems like flooding, erosion, sedimentation, run-off, and water quality."

This legislation was introduced by Representatives Oldenburg (Viroqua) and Steineke (Kaukauna), and Senators Cowles (Allouez) and Bewley (Mason). It received bipartisan support of 40 unique cosponsors over the last two legislative sessions. A diverse array of organizations also supported the bill, including conservation, sporting heritage, local government, and real estate affiliated groups.

Senate Bill 91 (2021 Act 77) builds upon 2019 Act 157, which appropriated \$150,000 to Ashland County to demonstrate simple wetland restoration practices that can be used to manage runoff and reduce downstream flood risks.

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