



White River Alliance
1052 Woodlawn Ave.
Indianapolis, IN 46203
www.thewhiteriveralliance.org

January 21, 2021

Senator Mark Messmer, Chairman
Senate Environmental Affairs Committee

RE: Senate Bill 389

Dear Chairman Messmer and Committee Members:

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The management of wetlands has been and will continue to be paramount to several of the most pressing challenges facing society today, namely:

- providing a resilient means to economically manage stormwater and flood risks (a distressingly expensive undertaking),
- combating the alarming loss of species diversity that provides the ecological stability of our own physical environment and economy, and
- cleaning up the pollutant loads key to protecting drinking water supplies and high-value recreational assets

These are just three critical functions that must be recognized and given priority in our land use planning and related legislation.

Make no mistake: wetlands are invaluable to our quality of life... they are key to a sustainable, safe future. This bill is a direct and dangerous threat to both our current and future safety.

REPRESENTED INTERESTS

As regional, 16-county, multi-stakeholder organization, we are committed to fostering forward-thinking, solution-oriented conversations. We support legislation that balances the many needs of a community as opposed to bills that are intended to benefit a single industry. This proposed bill does not meet that threshold.

For the last three years, our organization has convened the statewide, apolitical Indiana Water Summit. We've done this, specifically, to begin the critical work of advancing policies, innovative best management practices, and cooperation across industries and layers of government that will provide a sustainable, shared water future for all users.

Protecting and restoring wetlands has been repeatedly recognized by the hundreds of Indiana Water Summit participants and diverse community leaders as a critical strategy for protecting our water supplies.

IMPORTANT SCIENTIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

Flooding

Wetlands once comprised about 24% of the Indiana landscape. Since settlement began, more than 85% of those wetlands acres have been lost. What hasn't been lost is the water that was once stored on that landscape. Wetlands can store up to 1.5 million gallons of stormwater per acre, so it is easy to see how quickly stormwater turns to floodwater once these important sponges are removed from the landscape.

- **This bill would remove protections for more than 700,000 of acres of wetlands, thus removing the ability to store over 1 TRILLION gallons of floodwater and pollution mitigation from our landscapes.**
- **These actions will likely require development-related regulatory changes at all levels within the state in order to deal with these impacts.**
- **The staggering loss of water storage would cost billions in infrastructure to construct and manage.**
- **These costs will be spread to the taxpayers and rate payers across the state.**

The Purdue Climate Change Research Center has shown that the state is already experiencing an annual increase in rainfall of up to nearly 7" since pre-industrial times. That trend is expected to continue, meaning more stormwater—and potential floodwater—to manage. Removing protections for wetlands now would be like sending the army home when the enemy arrives at the gate.

Indeed, continuing existing wetland protections should be considered the bare minimum to protect our communities. To more proactively manage our water challenges, we should be working hard to restore wetlands already lost. This bill is a step in the exact wrong direction.

Biodiversity & Pollution Abatement

Our human communities are not the only beneficiaries of wetlands. Wetlands are home to 1100 species of plants, half of all North American bird species, and *43% of endangered plants and animals*. The biological diversity found in wetlands is so profound that they support 30+% of plant species while comprising only about 5% of the land surface in the continental U.S. These aren't mere feel-good resources—they are the basis of life on earth. These biological resources are tightly woven together to create the ecological stability we depend upon for our food supply. At a time when we are losing species such as pollinator insects beneficial and critical to agricultural economies, this action will not only perpetuate these losses, but accelerate them.

Also key to our own wellbeing, wetlands can trap up to 90% of sediment carried by stormwater runoff that would otherwise degrade waterways. They filter harmful nutrients, chemicals (agricultural and urban), and bacteria, preventing this pollution from reaching the streams, rivers, and reservoirs we use for fishing, boating, and even drinking. Continued loss of these resources will potentially require communities and counties to invest more in water treatment and management infrastructure to abate the impacts caused by this bill.

Finally, wetlands play a critical role in recharging our underground aquifers - over 70% of Indiana residents rely on ground water for part or all of their drinking water needs. Reducing wetland

protection means reducing drinking water quality protection for the citizens of this state. This is especially important for areas of the state where there is high groundwater vulnerability.

This bill will not save money: it will cost money—a lot of money. It will force communities and counties to spend more for health and safety protection of both those living in rural and urban areas.

SUGGESTED ACTION

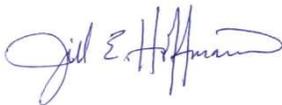
The State has an essential role to play in wetlands protection. The benefits of our remaining wetlands are not confined to any one property or local jurisdiction. The harms caused by the further degradation or disappearance of our remaining wetlands will also not be confined to any one property or local jurisdiction. Wetlands regulation and protection is an appropriate function of state government in Indiana as elsewhere.

Our Alliance prides itself on being well-versed in the practicalities and realities of water management, so we understand why some industries, which are well represented in the legislature, want an easier path for their activity. Senate Bill 389 is a short-sighted and dangerous acquiescence to those industries and not in the best interest of a resource that requires shared and thoughtful management, our water.

We ask you to join us in taking a more holistic approach to water management and not dismantle or weaken state wetland protections.

Thank you for your consideration of these concerns and suggested actions. Our diverse 16-county, multi-stakeholder watershed alliance stands ready to participate in discussions concerning these issues and how we may realize our shared end goal of a safe and reliable water future.

Sincerely,



Jill Hoffmann, Executive Director
jill@thewhiteriveralliance.org