

World Wetland Day and Ramsar Wetlands in the USA—Uncertainty for the Future

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I gave a presentation with a similar title in Ft. Myers, Florida on February 2, 2018, to celebrate World Wetlands Day, which is always on February 2. The panel I was a part of at a regional water resources conference was designed to celebrate the Ramsar Wetland Convention and describe the USA's and other countries' roles. The full presentation is posted at https://www.swfwrc.org/docs/presentations/Mitsch_180202.pdf

For a primer on the Convention on Wetlands, called the Ramsar Convention, go to www.ramsar.org.

At the end of my presentation, I described recent signs that predict a sad future for the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in the USA and especially for ever increasing our meager number of Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance in the USA. The USA has 38 such “wetland gems” (Figures 1 and 2, Table 1) nominated and approved through a properly arduous procedure of ecological review and political approval over the last 30 years, but no new ones have been approved for the last two years. By comparison, the United Kingdom has 174 Ramsar-listed Wetlands of International Importance, Mexico has 142, and little Denmark, the size of Ohio, has 43. The USA should have 380 Ramsar sites, for goodness sake.

I concluded my presentation by summarizing a few recent situations regarding Ramsar wetlands in Florida and the USA:

1. Nationally, mostly nothing new or positive has happened with Ramsar in the USA since the new Federal administration came in place in January 2017 and in Florida a few years before that.
2. In 2016, the State of Florida blocked the nomination of Charlotte Harbor Estuary as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance that was years in develop-

ment by The Nature Conservancy. Reasons for this veto were never explicitly clarified. Reconsideration was recently announced, only to run into a recent Federal blockade (see #3 below).

3. Future USA Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance being discussed for many locations around the country, some for years, (see Figure 2 and bottom of Table 1) have been blocked by a ban on new sites imposed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in Falls Church, VA. Sites being discussed in the U.S. National Ramsar Committee (an NGO organization that supports Ramsar activities in the USA but is independent from government agencies) included the Fakahatchee Strand, Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge, Chasahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge, and Lake Wales Restoration Wetland, all in Florida, Cedar Bog in Ohio, the Lower Wisconsin Riverway in Wisconsin, several wetland sites in Puerto Rico (which sadly has no Ramsar wetland sites), the New York Niagara River Corridor (a collaboration with Canada), Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma, Pocosin Lakes in North Carolina, and New Jersey's Pinelands.

FIGURE 1. Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary that became a Ramsar wetland in March 2009 (photo by W.J. Mitsch).



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4. The Florida Everglades remains on the Montreux List, a relatively short list of Ramsar wetlands that are seriously threatened by human or other impacts and “where changes in ecological character have occurred, are occurring or are likely to occur.” It is the only USA wetland on that list. There was some discussion earlier of petitioning for the removal of the Florida Everglades from this “bad wetlands” list, but that would probably result in gigantic public opposition in south Florida, given the lack of many tangible Everglades restoration results in the last 20 years and some indications that things have gotten worse in those 20 years and might continue to unravel with sea level rise and more frequent hurricanes and coastal storms.
5. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently withdrew from any participation with the U.S. National Ramsar Committee, thereby prohibiting the USNRC from proposing any new Ramsar sites in the USA for at least four years and possibly eight. The USNRC, managed by unpaid volunteers who belong because of their love

of wetlands, for its part, has made some progress in tighten its ship in the past few years and focusing on new members and few but strategic activities.

I conclude that the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, one of the most brilliant and inclusive international efforts in conservation of important ecosystems in the world, is in trouble in the USA. It is perhaps a result of our nation’s recent attempts to return to the 1950s when we were indeed on top of the democratic world and efforts to remold agencies in the Department of Interior to refrain from any international designations of our landscape that might jeopardize future economic development of fossil fuels, housing, and agricultural expansion. While the USA has already been removed from UNESCO, it is essential that we remain a player in the world’s most important convention related to conservation of our waters and wildlife—the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. ■

FIGURE 2. Location of current Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance (green dots) and sites that were being discussed by the USNRC as potential Ramsar wetlands (red dots) in the USA. See Table 1 for the names of the sites.

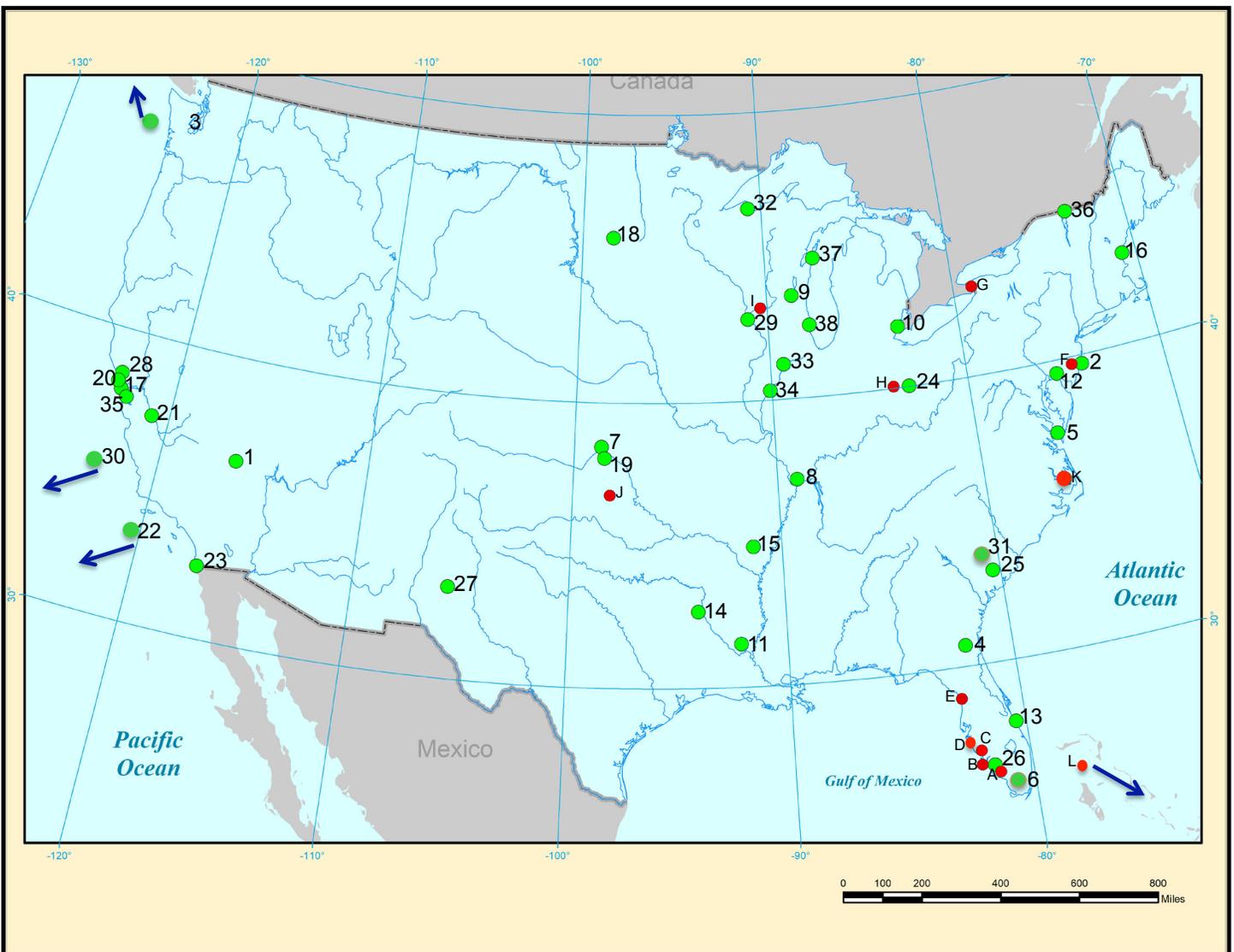


TABLE 1. List of current Ramsar sites in the USA (numbers at green dots in Figure 2) and sites that were being discussed by the USNRC as potential Ramsar wetlands (letters at red dots in Figure 2).

Number/Letter on Figure 2	Site Name	U.S. state(s)	Date of Ramsar site designation
1	Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge	Nevada	18-Dec-1986
2	Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge	New Jersey	18-Dec-1986
3	Izembek Lagoon National Wildlife Refuge	Alaska	18-Dec-1986
4	Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge	Georgia, Florida	18-Dec-1986
5	Chesapeake Bay Estuarine Complex	Virginia	6-Apr-1987
6	Everglades National Park MR	Florida	6-Apr-1987
7	Cheyenne Bottoms	Kansas	19-Oct-1988
8	Cache River and Cypress Creek Wetlands	Illinois	21-Nov-1989
9	Horicon Marsh	Wisconsin	12-Apr-1990
10	Humbug Marsh	Michigan	4-Dec-1990
11	Catahoula Lake	Louisiana	18-Jun-1991
12	Delaware Bay Estuary	Delaware, New Jersey	20-May-1992
13	Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge	Florida	14-Mar-1993
14	Caddo Lake	Texas, Louisiana	23-Oct-1993
15	Cache - Lower White Rivers	Arkansas	11-Jan-1994
16	Connecticut River Estuary and Tidal River	Connecticut	14-Oct-1994
17	Bolinas Lagoon	California	9-Jan-1998
18	Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge	South Dakota	8-Mar-1998
19	Quivira National Wildlife Refuge	Kansas	12-Feb-2002
20	Tomales Bay	California	21-Oct-2002
21	Grassland Ecological Area (GEA)	California	2-Feb-2005
22	Kawainui and Hamakua Marsh Complex	Hawaiï	2-Feb-2005
23	Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve	California	2-Feb-2005
24	Wilma H. Schiermeier Olentangy River Wetland Research Park	Ohio	18-Apr-2008
25	Francis Beidler Forest	South Carolina	30-May-2008
26	Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary	Florida	23-Mar-2009
27	Roswell Artesian Wetlands	New Mexico	20-Jan-2010
28	Laguna de Santa Rosa Wetland Complex	California	16-Apr-2010
29	Upper Mississippi River Floodplain Wetlands	Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois	1-May-2010
30	Palmyra Atoll National Wildlife Refuge	Pacific Region	1-Apr-2011
31	Congaree National Park	South Carolina	2-Feb-2012
32	Kakagon and Bad River Sloughs	Wisconsin	2-Feb-2012
33	Sue and Wes Dixon Waterfowl Refuge at Hennepin & Hopper Lakes	Illinois	2-Feb-2012
34	The Emiquon Complex	Illinois	2-Feb-2012
35	San Francisco Bay/Estuary (SFBE)	California	2-Feb-2013
36	Missisquoi Delta and Bay Wetlands	Vermont	20-Nov-2013
37	Door Peninsula Coastal Wetlands	Wisconsin	6-Oct-2014
38	Chiwaukee Illinois Beach Lake Plain	Wisconsin and Illinois	25-Sep-2015
Proposed Sites			
A	Fakahatchee Strand	Florida	
B	Charlotte Harbor Estuary	Florida	
C	Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge	Florida	
D	Lake Wales Restoration Wetland	Florida	
E	Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge	Florida	
F	Pinelands	New Jersey	
G	Niagara River Corridor	New York/Canada	
H	Cedar Bog	Ohio	
I	Lower Wisconsin Riverway	Wisconsin	
J	Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge	Oklahoma	
K	Pocosin Lakes	North Carolina	
L	Several wetland sites	Puerto Rico	