

**CLEAN WATER NETWORK * DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE * FLORIDA
PIRG * SIERRA CLUB**

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With hurricanes getting fiercer and wetlands destruction at an all-time high, 47 environmental and civic groups sent a letter to Florida's Congressional delegation Wednesday urging lawmakers to vote against attempts by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to take over wetlands permitting from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

"We are at an all time high in terms of needing better wetlands protection. Recent hurricanes have given coastal communities and governments a reality check on the importance of wetlands in protecting property and natural resources," said Betsy Roberts, Conservation Chair for the Florida Chapter Sierra Club. "Yet developers are pushing the federal government to make wetlands destruction permits more 'streamlined' which is code for 'quicker and easier'."

While the Corps in Florida has denied only two permits in the last six years and has granted approximately 12,000 permits to destroy wetlands, the letter points out that some level of avoidance and minimization of wetland destruction occurs through the Corps' Section 404 permitting process. The Florida DEP, for example, has no authority to require avoidance and minimization. The Corps also considers cumulative and secondary impacts of wetland destruction, such as water quality degradation, and can require that an Environmental Assessment or Impact Statement be performed to evaluate the environmental impacts of wetland destruction.

The groups are also concerned about DEP's track record when it took over another federal permitting program – the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System, or NPDES – which regulates discharges from industrial sites, sewage plants, and other polluters.

"It has been well documented by state judges, special grand juries, environmental groups, and newspaper reporters that the Florida DEP is doing a dismal job of implementing this very important Clean Water Act program," said Linda Young, director of the Clean Water Network of Florida. "It would be adding insult to injury to Florida taxpayers to tell them they are losing yet another important Clean Water Act protection."

The proposed delegation would also require changes to the Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, and Rivers and Harbors Act in order to give this delegation to the state. "Florida has already lost over half of its wetlands," said Laurie MacDonald of the Florida Defenders of Wildlife. "At this point we need to look for ways to strengthen existing protective laws, not weaken them."