



NERRA Policy Position

2/26/2006

LC-2. Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Policy

2.1 Preamble

An estimated 50 percent of the nation's population lives within 50 miles of the coast, and yet the coastal region represents only 10 percent of the land area of the contiguous United States. In addition, the coast is the fastest growing region in the country, with the coastal zone losing land to development at a pace faster than the rest of the country. This affects the quality of coastal watersheds and, as a result, the health of estuaries and the coast, and the character of coastal communities.

Coastal and estuarine areas provide vital nursery habitat for two-thirds of the commercial shellfish and finfish populations, habitat for nesting and foraging coastal birds, significant natural plant communities, and opportunities for people to recreate and to appreciate and learn about the natural environment. Coastal and estuarine areas are of great value to the economy, with over half of the nation's gross domestic product generated in coastal counties and adjacent waters, yielding \$2.5 trillion. These valuable coastal areas are threatened by coastal sprawl, which seriously degrades coastal water quality, reduces access to coastal waters, mars the aesthetic beauty, increases flood control costs, eliminates recreation opportunities, and alters estuaries.

2.2 The Role of the NERRS in Land Protection

Acquiring and protecting land along the nation's estuaries and coastline is a high priority for NERRA. The National Estuarine Research Reserve System (NERRS)—a network of 26 protected areas—is designed to promote informed coastal decisions through site-based estuarine research, education, and stewardship. Coastal states are responsible for management of Reserves, in cooperation with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Through this state-federal partnership codified in the Coastal Zone Management Act, the Reserve System has protected more than one million acres of estuarine land and water. The conservation of land by the Reserves, or in tandem with its many partners, is central to the mission of the NERRS, which is to promote the stewardship of estuaries and coastal watersheds through research and education programs using a system of protected areas. The ecological integrity of Reserves is dependent on protection of open space and natural habitats on lands in the surrounding watersheds. As more land is developed in the coastal zone and near Reserves, coastal ecosystems are altered, thus endangering rare plant and animal communities and reducing public access to the coast for recreation and enjoyment.

To counter these threats, the NERRS needs to actively conserve lands within their boundaries and work with other national, state, and local conservation partners to protect other important lands in the coastal zone. This will enable the Reserve System to continue to serve as stable platforms for scientific research and education, and to help conserve the ecological, historic, aesthetic, and recreational values that are an integral part of coastal communities.

2.3 The Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program

NOAA's Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program (CELCP) will lend vital support to the NERRS, Coastal Zone Management Programs, and other private, local, and state conservation partners to secure the long-term protection of lands from willing sellers that have significant conservation, recreation, historic, economic, and aesthetic values to the residents of coastal zone communities. Furthermore, protection of coastal and estuarine areas with CELCP funds will provide numerous public benefits, such as the improving public access, protecting water quality, conserving wildlife habitat, and sustaining recreational and commercial fisheries.

2.4 Authorize the Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program

NERRA urges Congress to pass legislation to authorize CELCP within NOAA's Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management.

2.4.1 CELCP Guidance. NOAA should establish criteria that meet the goals of individual states as expressed by state CELCP plans or National Estuarine Research Reserve acquisition plans, and that meets the national objective to protect lands that have ecological, recreational, historic, cultural, and aesthetic values.

2.4.2 Lands Eligible for CELCP Funds. NERRA believes that CELCP guidance criteria should remain flexible over time to enable coastal states and National Estuarine Research Reserves to adapt to changing priorities and conditions. However, CELCP funds should be primarily focused on lands that are in a state's NOAA-recognized coastal zone. In particular, priorities should be given to those lands located along waters influenced by the tides, or lands located within coastal watersheds that have a relationship to coastal and estuarine waters.

2.4.3 Reservation of Funds for National Estuarine Research Reserves. CELCP legislation and guidelines should ensure that at least 15 percent of the annual appropriation for CELCP is made available to meet the priorities of the NERRS. This will provide the NERRS with additional opportunities to meet their acquisition needs in the broader watershed areas that are outside the NOAA-designated Reserve boundaries.

2.4.4 Develop Diverse Partnerships. NERRA believes that for CELCP to be successful the coastal states and the NERRS need to leverage nonfederal funds and conservation opportunities. This can only be done through innovative partnerships with state, local, and private conservation organizations.

2.4.5 Match Requirements and Guidelines. The match requirements on CELCP funds should be at a Federal:Nonfederal rate of 50:50, similar to many of the other federal land acquisition programs. Permanently conserved lands held by conservation groups (either fee simple interest

or conservation easement) should be eligible to be used as match by an eligible organization for CELCP funds by the NERRS or other appropriate coastal state partners.

2.5 Provide Adequate Federal Funding

Funds should be appropriated for competitive grants that will be made available to coastal states and National Estuarine Research Reserves. The minimum available for funds for annual grants for coastal states and NERRS should be \$60 million.

2.6 Provide Adequate Funds to Administer CELCP

NERRA recognizes that there is a cost to NOAA's Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management to administer CELCP and to conduct a competitive grants award program. Therefore, NERRA urges that adequate federal funds be provided to NOAA/OCRM to administer CELCP.

*Time limited (effective March Meeting 2006-March Meeting 2007).
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