


VIRGINIA ASSOCIATION OF WETLAND PROFESSIONALS UPDATE

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Virginia Association of Wetland Professionals

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ADVANCING VAWP'S WETLAND CERTIFICATION GOAL

by Ann Jennings

VAWP's Wetland Delineator

= Echinochloa
article publication

...questionnaire, and preparing to launch a legislative effort to establish a Virginia Certification Program for Wetland Professionals. A cooperative effort with the Virginia Association of Professional Soil Scientists is being explored.

The following provides a summary of the wetland certification effort in Virginia and results of a certification questionnaire released in 1999. During 1992, the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and Virginia Institute of Marine Science

(VIMS) studied the need to establish a program to oversee the work of wetland professionals in Virginia. Interviews conducted by VIMS with state and federal regulatory agencies, environmental community representatives, environmental consulting firms, and planning districts documented an overwhelming consensus on the need for a certification program for wetland delineators. DEQ and VIMS recommended the implementation of a wetland certification program to the Virginia Council on the Environment. At the time, the Council, however, did not support development of a certification program through a governmental organization.

The need for formal training and certification of wetland delineators has also been recognized at the national level. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps), the agency with responsibility for the federal wetland regulatory program, initiated a Wetland Delineator Certification Program with three demonstration testing events in March, 1994. However, due to a lack of funding, this program has never been implemented nationwide.

Responding to these unsuccessful attempts to establish a wetland certification program, a group of scientists active in the wetland regulatory arena formed the Virginia Association of Wetland

implementation of the regulations and permits is also being developed to ensure consistent application of these new provisions. Finally, the legislation directs DEQ to seek a State Programmatic General Permit from the Corps of Engineers by July 2002. This delegated permit would lead to a tiered system for the review and issuance of permits for wetland impacts in the Commonwealth allowing for the best use of DEQ and Corps resources by authorizing DEQ to be responsible for almost all non-tidal wetlands permits in Virginia.

Correction of Indicator Status for *Echinochloa crusgalli* (Barnyard Grass)

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Echinochloa crusgalli (Barnyard Grass) is a coarse, weedy annual that is naturalized from Europe and now found commonly throughout Virginia, particularly in agricultural fields and wetland areas. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's publication "National List of Plant Species That Occur in Wetlands,"¹ *Echinochloa crusgalli* is rated "FACU" (facultative upland) in Region 1-

¹ Reed, Porter B., Jr. 1988. National list of plant species that occur in wetlands: national summary. U.S. Fish Wildlife Serv. Biol. Rep. 88 (24). 244pp.

Northeast which includes Virginia. "FACU" plants have a 67-99% probability to occur in nonwetlands and a 1-33% probability of occurrence in wetlands.

During my eight years as a wetland ecologist, performing numerous delineations and studying restored and constructed wetlands in Virginia and Maryland, *Echinochloa crusgalli* has never seemed to grow in the "right place" based on its FACU indicator status. It is frequently associated with much "wetter" species such as *Eleocharis obtusa* (Blunt Spikerush: OBL) and *Ludwigia palustris* (Marsh Seedbox: OBL) on the lowest, wettest portion of sites. "OBL" species occur with an estimated 99% probability in wetlands. I have observed that Barnyard Grass germinates at times of drawdown late in the growing season in formerly ponded locations. Its abundance seems to vary seasonally based on the extent of draw down. For example, at 12 restored non-tidal wetlands on the Eastern Shore of Maryland,² *Echinochloa crusgalli* was most abundant in 1994 and 1995, occurring in 39% and 43% of the permanent vegetation monitoring plots. During these two years, there was a pronounced draw down in the water elevation of the standing pools at the restored

² The following data are from the author's dissertation: Pepin, Antoinette L. 1998. The Relative Importance of Hydrology and Substrate in the Vegetation Dynamics of Restored Freshwater Wetlands, George Mason University.

wetlands and *Echinochloa crusgalli* germinated in the freshly exposed mudflats. In 1996, *Echinochloa crusgalli* was found in only 10% of the plots. Rainfall during the 1996-growing season was 48% above the 40-year average. As a result, there was little draw down of the standing pools and considerably less germination of *Echinochloa crusgalli*.

Recently, my co-workers and I noticed that the National List rates *Echinochloa crusgalli* as "FACW" (facultative wetland) (or FACW-) in all other regions of the continental U.S. "FACW" species are estimated to have a 67-99% probability of occurrence in wetlands. Therefore, I contacted Mr. Bill Sipple of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to inquire about the ecological basis for the disparate indicator statuses and somewhat heretically inquired whether the FACU status in the Northeast Region might be a "typo". Mr. Sipple referred my query to Mr. Porter Reed of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).

In an email dated October 31, 2000, Mr. Reed indicated that the FACU status for *Echinochloa crusgalli* in the Northeast Region is a transcription error. According to his records, the Northeast Panel assigned a FACW-indicator to *Echinochloa crusgalli* in 1985 (based on the panel's ranking of 4 FACW and 5 FAC). The negative sign indicates that this species is found somewhat less frequently in wetlands than a FACW species. Mr. Porter has no record of any change for this FACW- assignment.

It appears that this transcription error may be with us for the foreseeable future. Unfortunately, the transcription error reported in the 1986 National List was also reported in the 1988 National List and again in the currently unreleased 1998 National List. The 1998 National List remains in final draft form pending approval by cooperating agencies and the White House Working Group. In his email correspondence, Mr. Reed commented that a change to the indicator status for this species would require approval of the Northeast Panel and could potentially trigger many other changes to the list that need to be made (including much needed taxonomic revisions). Yet it seems the FWS is reluctant to proceed with such revisions at this time on a document that is not yet published unless a new updated list involving all Regional Panels is created. Mr. Reed indicated that his supervisor does not presently support the official issuance of Regional Panel supplements on an "as needed basis." In congratulating the staff at Wetland Studies and Solutions, Inc. "for catching this unfortunate transcription error that has been perpetuated for 15 years," Mr. Reed indicated that it may be 5 years after the eventual publication of the 1998 National List before the wetland indicator for *Echinochloa crusgalli* can be corrected.

In the interim, both Mr. Reed and Mr. Sipple agreed that we should use the "correct" indicator status of FACW- for *Echinochloa crusgalli*. Mr. Sipple suggested that we add a note on wetland delineation data sheets mentioning consultation with Mr. Porter B. Reed, FWS who has acknowledged that there is an error in the database.

This indicator status error can affect both mitigation monitoring results and wetland delineation decisions. For example, I recently used this correction (along with an explanatory note) in evaluating the establishment of hydrophytic vegetation in a wetland constructed for mitigation. With a FACU- indicator status for *Echinochloa crusgalli*, four (4) of the permanent monitoring plots did not have a predominance of hydrophytic vegetation (i.e., more than 50% of the dominant (i.e., most abundant) species rated facultative (FAC) or wetter). Using the "correct" FACW- indicator, these permanent plots had hydrophytic vegetation. The four "changed" plots were located in either shallowly ponded areas adjacent to the main standing water body or in micro-topographic lows in higher tiers. The presence of wetland hydrology was strongly supported at all four of the plots, using the 1987 Manual wetland hydrology criterion and based on adjacent monitoring wells. The other dominants in these plots were *Agrostis alba* (Redtop: FACW) and *Cyperus strigosus* (Straw-color Flat-sedge: FACW). It will be interesting to see how frequently this correction of indicator status for *Echinochloa crusgalli* will affect future wetland delineations.

Regional Workshops and Conferences

Wetland ID & Delineation based on the USACOE Reg. IV Program

Date: December 11- 15, 2000
Location: Fort Lauderdale, FL
Sponsored by: Everglades Environmental Laboratory

International Symposium on Integrated Decision-making for Watershed Management

Date: January 7-9, 2001
Location: Chevy Chase, Maryland
Website: <http://www.conted.vt.edu/watershed.htm>

Nationwide Permits

Date: February 5-6, 2001
Location: Orlando, Florida
Sponsored by: Wetland Training Institute
Register at: <http://www.wetlandtraining.com/reg.html>

12th Annual Environment Virginia Symposium

Date: April 4-5, 2001
Location: Lexington, Virginia
Sponsored by: Virginia Military Institute
Register at: www.vmi.edu/ev

Association of Southeastern Biologists 62nd Annual Meeting

Date: April 4-7, 2001
Location: New Orleans
Website: <http://www.lovno.edu/~asb/copyreg.html>

4th National Mitigation Banking Conference

Date: April 18- 20, 2001
Location: Ft. Lauderdale, FL.
Contact: Carlene Bahler, phone: 703-548-5473 or email: cbahler@erols.com