The Corps of Engineers' Public Interest Review Under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act: Broad Discretion Leaves Wetlands Vulnerable to Unnecessary Destruction

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THE CORPS OF ENGINEERS' PUBLIC INTEREST REVIEW UNDER SECTION 404 OF THE CLEAN WATER ACT: BROAD DISCRETION LEAVES WETLANDS VULNERABLE TO UNNECESSARY DESTRUCTION

I. INTRODUCTION

Landowners in the United States fill wetlands at the alarming rate of over 300,000 acres every year.¹ Wetlands are of considerable impor-

¹ Office of Technology Assessment, Congressional Board of the 98th Congress, Wetlands: Their Use and Regulation (1984) [hereinafter cited as OTA Report]. Unregulated conversions destroy approximately 250,000 acres of inland wetlands each year for agricultural use, while the Clean Water Act and state regulatory programs allow the destruction of an additional 50,000 acres. Id. at 11.


Wetlands cover about 5% of the contiguous United States and about 60% of Alaska. OTA Report, supra, at 3. The United States originally had 215 million acres of wetlands from coast to coast. At present, this figure has decreased 54% to only 99 million acres. Wetlands Status, supra, at 28-29. Although wetlands are subject to natural destruction due to subsidence, droughts, hurricanes, and erosion, human activities caused 95% of wetland losses during the last 25 years. OTA Report, supra, at 3.
tance because they provide an essential breeding ground for fish and wildlife\(^2\) and perform other functions, such as flood control and water purification.\(^3\) Although wetlands are a vital ecosystem for man, animals, and fish, land developers view these waters as obstacles to building industrial, residential, or recreational areas.\(^4\) To allow for both economic growth and the preservation of wetlands, Congress enacted the Clean Water Act (CWA),\(^5\) which prevents developers from altering wetlands without a permit. Under the CWA, the Army Corps of Engineers issues permits only to those applicants whose proposed activities

\(^2\) See Wetlands Status, supra note 1, at 1. More than twelve million ducks breed annually in our Nation's wetlands. On a larger scale, approximately two-thirds of the major U.S. commercial fish depend on wetlands for nursing and spawning grounds. Id. at 13. Shellfish, birds, furbearers, and other wildlife, such as turtles, reptiles, and amphibians, similarly depend upon wetlands for their habitat. Id.

See Note, Wetlands Protection and the Neglected Child of the Clean Water Act: A Proposal for Shared Custody of Section 404, 5 VA. J. NAT. RESOURCES L. 227 (1985) [hereinafter cited as Note, Wetlands Protection] (more than one-third of nation's endangered species depends on wetlands to survive); American Enterprise Institute (AEI) Legislative Analyses, Reauthorization of the Clean Water Act (1983) [hereinafter cited as CWA Reauthorization] (wetlands are one of the most biologically active areas in the nation as spawning grounds for fish, shellfish, and major food sources for wildlife and fish).

\(^3\) Wetlands Status, supra note 1, at 18. Wetlands act as a filter by removing sediment from the waters. This is important because sediment often carries with it pesticides, heavy metals, and other toxins which would otherwise pollute the water. Id. In addition, scientists have shown that destroying wetlands is partially responsible for recent major flood disasters. Id. at 21.

\(^4\) Ninety-five percent of wetlands in the contiguous United States are located in inland, freshwater areas. The remaining 5% of the wetlands are located in coastal, saltwater areas. OTA Report, supra note 1, at 3. From the mid-1950's to the mid-1970's, landowners destroyed inland wetlands primarily for agricultural reasons, through drainage, clearing, land leveling, ground water pumping, and surface water division. Id. at 7. With respect to coastal wetlands, over half of the wetland conversions resulted from dredging for marinas, canals, and port development. Other major sources of coastal wetland destruction were urbanization, disposal of dredged material, and the creation of beaches. Id. Wetlands are a major area for boating and bird watching for millions of Americans. Saving Our Wetlands, supra note 1, at 3. Wetlands contribute between twenty and forty billion dollars per year to the national economy in flood and erosion control, water supply, and harvest functions. Id.

Wetlands can be destroyed both directly and indirectly. Dredging, filling, and draining wetlands cause an immediate effect on these waters. "Construction that takes place near wetlands, e.g., channelization, can indirectly destroy the plants and fish by creating turbidity, which impedes light penetration necessary for photosynthesis, or by filling marshes with suspended sediments which literally suffocate fish by clogging their gills." Council on Environmental Quality, Our Nation's Wetlands 43 (1978).

meet certain environmental standards.\textsuperscript{6}

To determine whether the applicant satisfies these environmental standards, the Corps closely examines the applicant's proposed activity.\textsuperscript{7} The Corps analyzes the proposed activity in accordance with a number of environmental guidelines and procedures.\textsuperscript{8} In addition, before issuing a dredge and fill permit, the Corps considers the views of other concerned state and federal agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).\textsuperscript{9} Ultimately, under section 404 of the Clean Water Act,\textsuperscript{10} the Corps conducts a public interest review and weighs various environmental, economic, and social concerns before deciding whether to grant the permit.\textsuperscript{11} The decision process, which provides checks and balances, is theoretically a good means of protecting the environment, because it allows both governmental agencies and the public to play a role.\textsuperscript{12} On the other hand, the permit process has some serious down-

\textsuperscript{6} See 40 C.F.R. pt. 230 (1987). Part 230 is also known as the "EPA Guidelines." The fundamental policy underlying the EPA's Guidelines is to prohibit the discharge of dredge or fill material into the waters of the United States unless:

\begin{itemize}
\item it can be demonstrated that such a discharge will not have an unacceptable adverse impact either individually or in combination with known and/or probable impacts of other activities affecting the ecosystems of concern.
\end{itemize}


\textsuperscript{7} See 33 C.F.R. § 320.4 (1987).


\textsuperscript{9} See infra notes 71-72 and accompanying text for a discussion of the agencies that the Corps works with to reach a permit decision.

\textsuperscript{10} 33 U.S.C. § 1344 (1982).

\textsuperscript{11} See generally 33 C.F.R. § 320.4 (1987) (Corps must balance all factors in light of the public interest). The Corps is responsible for making decisions based on competing concerns of the applicant, environmental groups, statutory standards, and public policy. See infra notes 79-85 and accompanying text for a discussion of the public interest review.

\textsuperscript{12} See infra notes 67-72 for a discussion of the roles that the Corps, governmental agencies, and the public play in the public interest review. See Blumm, \textit{Wetlands Preservation, Fish and Wildlife Protection, and 404 Regulation: A Response}, 18 LAND & WATER L. REV. 469 (1983) [hereinafter cited as Blumm, \textit{Wetlands Preservation}] (open, pluralistic review process is advantageous). In a 1971 Senate debate, however, Senator Muskie argued that the Army Corps of Engineer's mission is to protect navigation, not environmental values. \textit{SENATE COMM. ON PUBLIC WORKS}, 93D CONG., 1ST SESS., A
falls. The Corps is overloaded with permit applications and decides whether to grant permits based upon a statute which affords the Corps a great deal of discretion.

This Note will address the multi-faceted permit process and the method by which the Corps issues dredge and fill permits under the Clean Water Act. Part II summarizes the history of the Clean Water Act. Part III explains the procedural aspects of issuing a dredge and fill permit. Part IV examines the scope of the Corps’ public interest review under section 404 of the Clean Water Act. Part V analyzes the weaknesses of the public interest review and suggests some improvements and additional methods to achieve wetland preservation. This Note concludes that the public interest review grants the Corps excessive discretion and fails to adequately protect our Nation’s wetlands from unnecessary destruction.

II. HISTORY OF THE CLEAN WATER ACT

Congress established our Nation’s first permit program regulating the discharge of dredge and fill material into wetlands under section

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**Legislative History of the Water Pollution Control Act Amendments of 1972, 1389 (Comm. Print 1972).**


Efforts to expedite the Corps’ permit processing have led to heated debate. The Corps is inefficient and prone to unnecessary delay. However, the purpose of the § 404 permit program is not to issue permits as fast as possible, but to save the wetlands. *See* Section 404 of the Clean Water Act: *Hearings Before the Subcomm. on Environmental Pollution of the Senate Comm. on Environment and Public Works*, 97th Cong., 2d Sess. 416 (1982) (Sen. Chafee’s remarks to Robert Dawson, Deputy Asst. Secretary of the Army for Civil Works). *Cf.* CWA REAUTHORIZATION, *supra* note 2, at 15 (too many minor activities are subject to intense review under current regulations).

14. “Dredged material” is material that is excavated or dredged from waters. 33 C.F.R. § 323.2(i) (1987). “Fill material” is any material used for the primary purpose
404 of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act (FWPCA) Amendments of 1972. In 1977, Congress further amended the FWPCA by expanding the section 404 program. The 1977 Amendments to the section 404 program are commonly referred to as the Clean Water Act. Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (CWA) substantially closed the gaps in environmental legislation that previously left wetlands completely unprotected from destruction.

Under section 10 of the Rivers and Harbors Act of 1899, the Corps was responsible for maintaining the navigable waters of the United States. The Corps had the authority to issue permits to builders or to applicants wanting to dredge or fill waters, provided such projects did not obstruct the navigable capacity of the waterways. The purpose of the Rivers and Harbors Act, therefore, was to protect navigation, not to preserve the wetlands.

Courts soon recognized the shortcomings of the statute. In Zabel v. Tabb, decided in 1970, two landowners sought a dredge and fill permit to build a trailer park on their property in the Boca Ciega Bay in St. Petersburg, Florida. The landowners argued that as long as their proposed work did not hinder navigation, the Corps lacked authority under the Rivers and Harbors Act to deny the permit for non-navigational reasons. The Fifth Circuit held that pursuant to the Rivers and Harbors Act the Corps may deny a permit on conservation of replacing an aquatic area with dry land or of changing the bottom elevation of a waterbody. 33 C.F.R. § 323.2(k) (1987).

20. Id.
22. 430 F.2d at 203. The landowners acknowledged that their proposed dredge and fill activity would damage the ecology and marine life in the bay, but they argued that the court should interpret the Rivers and Harbors Act narrowly or only apply the Act to questions of navigability. Id.
grounds alone.\(^\text{23}\) After enacting the FWPCA in 1972, Congress continued to give the Corps primary responsibility over the dredge and fill permit program because the Corps had experience with a permit system under the Rivers and Harbors Act.\(^\text{24}\) To insure that the Corps would enforce environmental considerations, the section 404 program empowered the EPA to veto the Corps' permit decision\(^\text{25}\) if the proposed activity would have "an unacceptable adverse effect" on the water and fish life.\(^\text{26}\) Furthermore, the section 404 program mandated that the Corps follow EPA guidelines in making a permit decision.\(^\text{27}\)

Section 402 of the FWPCA created the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES),\(^\text{28}\) which established a permit system to regulate the discharge of pollutants into navigable waters from "point sources."\(^\text{29}\) The FWPCA authorized the EPA to administer section 402.\(^\text{30}\) The EPA, in turn, could delegate this responsibility to the states.\(^\text{31}\) Nevertheless, section 402 of the FWPCA, like section 10 of the Rivers and Harbors Act, failed to restrict the discharge of dredge and fill materials in wetlands.\(^\text{32}\) Section 402 lacked such restric-

\(^{23}\) Id. at 214. The court further held that the Corps had an affirmative duty to consult with and evaluate the recommendations of other agencies regarding environmental factors involved in a permit decision. Id. at 213. The Zabel court relied on the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969. Id. at 211-13. See infra notes 52-62 for an analysis of NEPA and its interaction with the Clean Water Act.

\(^{24}\) See Section 404 of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act Amendments of 1972, 94th Cong., 2d Sess. 53-55 (1976) (Statement of Mr. Veysey, Asst. Secretary of the Army for Civil Works) (historical review of the Corps' authority over the Nation's waters).


\(^{26}\) 33 U.S.C. § 1344(c) (1982).


\(^{29}\) Section 502(14) of the Clean Water Act defines "point source" in part as: any discernible, confined and discrete conveyance, including but not limited to any pipe, ditch, channel, tunnel, conduit, well, discrete fissure, container, rolling stock, concentrated animal feeding operation, or vessel . . . from which pollutants are or may be discharged. 33 U.S.C. § 1362(14) (1982).


\(^{32}\) Development of New Regulations by the Corps of Engineers, Implementing Section 404 of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act Concerning Permits for Disposal of
tions perhaps because its framers recognized that wetlands can be navigable or non-navigable and are vulnerable to pollution from a variety of sources, not just point sources.33

Several developments expanded the scope of the FWPCA. A few years after the enactment of the FWPCA, the District Court for the District of Columbia held in *Natural Resources Defense Council v. Callaway*34 that the term “navigable waters” under the FWPCA meant the “waters of the United States.”35 The *Callaway* court thus broadened the scope of the Corps’ federal jurisdiction over our Nation’s waters.36

On May 24, 1977, President Carter issued Executive Order Number 11990.37 The primary purpose of this Order was to avoid the destruction of, modification of, or new construction in wetlands whenever a practicable alternative exists.38 Executive Order 11990 indicated that...
all federal agencies must take an active role to preserve wetlands. 39

In December of 1977, Congress amended the FWPCA by substantially expanding the section 404 program. 40 First, Congress allowed the Corps to issue "general permits" on a state, regional, or nationwide basis. 41 General permits provided the Corps with administrative relief. Since the Corps could issue broad permits covering a specific category of activity, it no longer had to spend time on individual permits for minor dredge and fill activities. 42 The Corps could grant general permits if each individual discharge of dredge and fill material would have only a minimal adverse effect on the environment, and if the cumulative effect of all such activity issued under the same general permit would still have only a minimal adverse effect. 43 The second major amendment to the section 404 program exempted normal farming, forestry, and ranching activities from the Clean Water Act's regulations. 44

Since enacting the Clean Water Act amendments ten years ago, Con-
gress has confronted and explored two main issues. The first area of concern is reconciling the Corps' and EPA's differing interpretations of the section 404 permit procedures. The second matter Congress often discusses is using federal funding to acquire wetlands to shield them from destruction.

45. Senator Chafee argued that because the Corps and EPA failed to reach a consensus of what wetlands the § 404 program covers, thousands of wetland acres have been lost. Oversight Hearings on Section 404 of the Clean Water Act on S. 278 Before the Subcomm. on Environmental Pollution of the Senate Comm. on Environment and Public Works, 99th Cong., 1st Sess. 2 (1986) [hereinafter cited as 1986 Oversight Hearings]. The EPA and United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) define wetlands scientifically, based on soils, vegetation, and hydrology determinations. The Corps focuses only on hydrophytes (plants growing only in wet environments), following an "agricultural suitability" or "development suitability" approach. Id. at 32. (Statement by Mr. Baxter, Fish and Wildlife Biologist, USFWS).

One policy that might solve some of the tension between the EPA and the Corps is "advance designation" in which the agencies would predetermine certain wetlands as ineligible for dredge or fill material prior to a permit request. Id. at 41. (Statement of Ms. Cooper, Asst. Administrator for External Affairs, EPA).

See infra notes 62-66, 78 for additional discussions of the differing viewpoints of the Corps and the EPA on alternative sites and mitigation, respectively.

46. Sen. Chafee argued that Congress should strengthen the § 404 program by passing new legislation to fund wetlands acquisition. See Saving Our Wetlands, supra note 1, at 4. See also Wetlands Conservation: Hearings Before the Senate Subcomm. on Environmental Pollution of the Comm. on Environment and Public Works, 98th Cong., 1st Sess. 35 (1983) (statement of Sharron Stewart, from the National Advisory Committee on Oceans and Atmosphere) (acquire wetlands based on priority rating as advised by EPA, Corps and NACOA). Senators Chafee and Stafford proposed S. 1329, "Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1983," under which the government would purchase wetlands from private owners. Id. at 36. Over 90% of wetlands outside of Alaska are on private property. Id. at 39. Accordingly, some advocates urged the creation of a mechanism to maintain or restore privately owned wetlands. Id. (statement by Dr. Robert Davidson, National Wildlife Federation). See also J. KUSLER, OUR NATIONAL WETLANDS HERITAGE, A PROTECTION GUIDEBOOK 102-04 (1983) for a detailed description of the process of wetland acquisition.

In 1985 Senator Chafee held hearings to encourage state and federal funding in response to "record low numbers of some waterfowl species." Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1985, Hearings Before the Committee on Environment and Public Works, Subcomm. on Environmental Pollution, 99th Cong., 1st Sess. 1 (1985). Sen. Chafee explained that the proposed goal of the federal government to purchase 1.95 million acres of wetlands between 1977-1986 was not met. Instead, the government acquired only 400,000 acres of wetlands during this time. Id. at 2. The states have also fared poorly in meeting their wetland acquisition goals. From 1959 to 1986, only 17% of the states' goals have been reached. Id. at 47 (Statement of W. Wentz, of the National Wildlife Federation).

The most recent Report from the Committee on Environment and Public Works suggested four ways to increase the purchase and improve the protection of wetlands:
III. THE PERMIT PROCESS

Congress designed the section 404 program to prohibit individuals from conducting dredge and fill activities in the waters of the United States absent a permit from the Corps. The permit process itself is relatively simple for the applicant. Initially, the applicant must submit a complete description of the proposed activity, its location, and its intended use. The Corps then has the difficult task of deciding whether to grant the permit. The Corps must follow statutorily defined procedures, using its discretion to interpret ambiguities in the statutes.

After receiving the application, the district engineer must review it and prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA) of the proposed activity in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). The EA discusses whether the proposed activity

1) extend the Wetlands Loan Act and forgive repayment of the advances made to the Migratory Bird Conservation ("Duck Stamp") Fund; 2) raise additional revenues for deposit in the Duck Stamp Fund; 3) allow the Land and Water Conservation Fund to be used specifically for purchasing wetlands; and 4) require study and inventory of the Nation's wetlands.


47. 33 C.F.R. § 325.1(c) (1987).
48. See generally Id. at § 325.1 (1987).
49. Id. at §§ 325.1-325.10 (1987).
50. Id. at § 325.2 (1987). The Corps is composed of four levels of authority: district engineers, division engineers, the chief of engineers, and the Secretary of the Army. Id. at § 325.8 (1987). The Secretary does not play a role in permit decisions. Rather, the chief of engineers has the authority to represent the action of the Secretary. Id. § 1344(d) (1982). Each level of authority, beginning with the district engineer, may refer the application to higher authority, either when doubt exists as to the applicable laws and regulations, or when requested by a higher authority. Id. at § 325.8 (1987).

The Corps itself is "highly decentralized." Throughout the United States, there are thirty-six district engineers and eleven division engineers. The applicant may not appeal a permit decision made by the district or division engineer. See id. at § 320.1(a)(2) (1987).

52. 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321-4347 (1982). Congress created NEPA to establish "a national policy [to] encourage productive and enjoyable harmony between man and his environment." Id. at § 4321 (1986). See also Sierra Club v. Sigler, 695 F.2d 957 (5th Cir. 1983) (judicial review under NEPA is to ensure procedural integrity); Lake Erie v.
could affect the environment. If the proposed project could significantly affect the environment, NEPA requires the Corps to prepare a more detailed Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

The Corps uses its discretion to decide whether an impact is "significant." NEPA requires the Corps to consider both the context and intensity of the proposed activity's impact, and lists guidelines specific to the Corps in 40 C.F.R. §§ 1500-1508 (1987). NEPA imposes two duties upon federal agencies: preparing an EIS, 42 U.S.C. § 4332(2)(C) (1982), and adhering to Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations, 42 U.S.C. § 4332(2)(B) (1982).

An EIS discusses the significant environmental impacts of the proposed activity and "inform[s] decision makers and the public of the reasonable alternatives which would avoid or minimize adverse impacts or enhance the quality of the human environment." 40 C.F.R. § 1502.1 (1987). See generally River Road Alliance v. United States Corps of Eng'rs, 764 F.2d 445 (7th Cir. 1985) (interpreting the term "significant").

Notably, less than 1% of all projects that received permits required an EIS. OTA REPORT, supra note 1, at 11. If the Corps receives additional, significant information
fying the impact's scope. For instance, the Corps must consider how the project may affect the public health or safety and scientific, cultural, or historical resources. If the Corps decides not to prepare an EIS, it must provide a “finding of no significant impact.” The Corps will draft an EIS only if it decides that the benefits of a better researched and analyzed statement justify the time and expense involved.

Under NEPA's guidelines concerning the EIS, the Corps must explore and evaluate “all reasonable alternatives” for the proposed activity. The EPA will deny a dredge and fill permit if a “practicable alternative which would have less adverse impact on the aquatic ecosystem” exists. For example, if the proposed activity is not that would affect the environment, the Corps must prepare a supplemental EIS (SEIS).

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59. 40 C.F.R. §§ 1501.4(e), 1508.13 (1987). In Sierra Club v. Peterson, 717 F.2d 1409 (D.C. Cir. 1983), the court stated four factors it considered in determining "no significant impact": (1) whether the agency took a "hard look" at the problem; (2) whether the agency identified the relevant areas of environmental concern; (3) whether the agency made a convincing case that the impact was significant as to the problems studied and identified; and (4) whether the agency convincingly established that changes in the project sufficiently minimized any impact of true significance. Id. at 1413. See Van Abbema v. Fornell, 807 F.2d 633 (7th Cir. 1986) (FONSI is not the equivalent of complete social benefit); Save Our Wetlands, Inc. v. Witherspoon, 638 F. Supp. 1158 (E.D. La. 1986) (local impacts that would be immediately adverse but beneficial in the long term had "no significant impact").

60. The Corps receives more than 14,000 permit applications each year, but only filed 119 EISs in 1983. River Road Alliance, Inc. v. Corp. of Eng'rs of United States Army, 764 F.2d 445, 449 (7th Cir. 1985). The Seventh Circuit stated that the purpose of the EA was to determine whether the proposed activity could cause significant environmental consequences. Such a result justifies the time and expense of preparing the EIS. Id.


62. Under NEPA, 42 U.S.C. § 4332(2)(E) (1982), the Corps must "study, develop, and describe appropriate alternatives to recommended courses of action in any proposal which involves unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources." See also 40 C.F.R. § 1502.14(a) (1987).

63. 40 C.F.R. § 230.10(a) (1987). The Seventh Circuit adopted the EPA's more conservative viewpoint on alternative sites. The court stated that "[t]he fact that this applicant does not now own an alternative site is only marginally relevant (if it is relevant at all) to whether feasible alternatives exist to the applicant's proposal." Van Abbema v. Fornell, 807 F.2d 633, 638 (7th Cir. 1986). See also Newport Galleria Group v. Deland, 618 F. Supp. 1179 (D.D.C. 1985) (EPA can still veto permit even if no alternatives exist for proposed project).
“water dependent,” the EPA presumes that viable alternatives exist. The Corps, however, is unlikely to consider alternative sites if they are economically impractical to the applicant. Furthermore, the Corps is under no obligation to find alternative sites.

64. 40 C.F.R. § 230.10(a)(3) (1987). Section 230.10(a)(3) of the EPA Guidelines defines water dependent as requiring “access or proximity to or sitting within the special aquatic site in question to fulfill its basic purpose.” Id. In Friends of the Earth v. Hintz, 800 F.2d 822, 832 (9th Cir. 1986), a proposed log storage that had to be adjacent to a shiploading facility for exporting purposes was water dependent. Cf. Korteweg v. Corps of Eng’rs of U.S. Army, 650 F. Supp. 603 (D. Conn. 1986) (residential units not water dependent simply because the proposed adjacent dock would make units more valuable). See Louisiana Wildlife Fed’n v. York, 761 F.2d 1044 (5th Cir. 1985) (soybean production, a non-water dependent activity, requires a more persuasive showing that no other alternatives exist).

Mr. Dawson, Acting Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works, disclaimed the importance of the water dependency requirement. He testified:

During FY 1984, approximately 1,200 permits were issued for non-water-dependent activities. The term water dependency has not been clearly defined and for the most part, serves little purpose in the analysis of an application under section 404. It often confuses the issue rather than promotes an objective analysis.


The EPA and the Corps sharply differ on the issue of how to define a “practical” alternative. On April 22, 1986, the Corps’ district offices received a memorandum that “requires that alternatives be practicable to the applicant and that the purpose and need for the project must be the applicant’s purpose and need.” Oversight Hearings, supra note 45, at 3 (statement by Sen. Chafee). In the Oversight Hearings, the Subcommittee on Environment and Public Works heatedly debated the Corps’ practice of deciding whether an alternative is practical from the applicant’s perspective. Mr. Dawson, Assistant Secretary of the Army, testified that in addition to considering the applicant’s statements, the Corps must determine if reasonable alternatives exist, as long as alternative sites are “reasonably acquirable” by the applicant. Id. at 24-25.


An alternative is practicable if it is available and capable of being done after taking into consideration cost, existing technology, and logistics in light of overall project purposes. If it is otherwise a practicable alternative, an area not presently owned by the applicant which could reasonably be obtained, utilized, expanded or managed in order to fulfill the basic purpose of the proposed activity may be considered.

Id.

66. See Friends of the Earth v. Hintz, 800 F.2d 822 (9th Cir. 1986) (Corps not obligated to conduct additional studies of alternatives that the applicant may have overlooked after the Corps, EPA, and Washington Department of Game sufficiently questioned the applicant’s finding of four impractical alternatives). See Olmsted Citizens for a Better Community v. United States, 793 F.2d 201 (8th Cir. 1986) (the range of alter-
After the Corps prepares either an EA or an EIS, it makes their findings public.\textsuperscript{67} Under the section 404 program, the Corps must provide notice and an opportunity for a public hearing regarding the issuance of a particular permit.\textsuperscript{68} The notice must contain sufficient information describing the nature and magnitude of the proposed project so that those notified can respond with meaningful comments.\textsuperscript{69}

In addition to complying with NEPA and the Clean Water Act's notice and public hearing requirements, section 404 obligates the Corps to consult with state and federal agencies.\textsuperscript{70} If a state currently has water quality regulations governing discharges, section 404 prohibits the Corps from issuing a dredge and fill permit absent state certification.\textsuperscript{71} Additionally, the Corps must consult with federal agencies such as the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service prior to issuing a permit.\textsuperscript{72}

In the final step of the section 404 permit process, the Corps has three choices: deny the permit;\textsuperscript{73} issue the permit according to the applicant's original plan for the proposed activity;\textsuperscript{74} or issue the permit

\textsuperscript{67} 33 C.F.R. § 325.2(a)(2) (1987). The district engineer issues a public notice within 15 days after receiving all of the necessary information from the applicant. \textit{Id.}


\textsuperscript{69} 33 C.F.R. § 325.3(d)(1) (1987) (distribution of public notices).

\textsuperscript{70} 33 C.F.R. § 325.3(a) (1987).

\textsuperscript{71} 33 U.S.C. § 1344 (1982).


\textsuperscript{73} 33 C.F.R. §§ 320.4(a)(1), 325.8 (1987).

\textsuperscript{74} 33 C.F.R. § 325.4(a) (1987).
with special conditions attached which the applicant must follow. These mitigation conditions range from decreasing the amount of wetland area that the applicant can dredge and fill to mandating that the applicant compensate for the impact of the proposed activity by creating new wetlands elsewhere. These conditions attempt to mitigate the adverse effect on wetlands by preserving the quality or quantity of existing wetlands. The Corps must decide which of the three mitigation conditions is most beneficial in a final decisionmaking process called the "public interest review."

The Office of Technology Assessment provided the following statistics: "Of approximately 11,000 project applications per year, slightly less than 3 percent are denied; about one-third are significantly modified; and about 14 percent are withdrawn by applicants. About half are approved without significant modifications." OTA REPORT, supra note 1, at 11.

The Council on Environmental Quality defines mitigation as:

a) Avoiding the impact altogether by not taking a certain action or parts of an action.
b) Minimizing impacts by limiting the degree or magnitude of the action and its implementation.
c) Rectifying the impact by repairing, rehabilitating, or restoring the affected environment.
d) Reducing or eliminating the impact over time by preservation and maintenance operations during the life of the action.
e) Compensating for the impact by replacing or providing substitute resources or environments.


See supra note 76 (defining "mitigation"). In creating a new wetland, open-water or upland ecosystems are usually filled. Next, the new wetland needs the "proper substrate level and type, assuring chemical compatibility, and providing erosion control during [the] establishment of vegetation." OTA REPORT, supra note 1, at 130. Although the process is complex and risky, new wetlands can be created with success.

Another option for offsite mitigation of wetland loss is to restore an existing, but degraded wetland. This can be achieved by "changing surrounding water inflow or drainage, eliminating erosion and siltation, and reducing pollution from adjacent areas." Id.

The EPA and the Corps both generally favor mitigation. They differ, however, on the timing of introducing mitigation as a method to procure a permit. In the 1986 Oversight Hearings on the CWA, the EPA and the Corps clarified their positions. The EPA believes that mitigation should be used only as a last resort when there would be an unavoidable loss of wetlands. Oversight Hearings, supra note 45, at 29 (1986) (Statement of Mrs. Wilson, Assistant Administrator for External Affairs of the EPA). The Corps responded that "in the real world of processing these 12,000-plus applications a year, what as a practical matter happens is mitigation becomes a possible factor almost
IV. Public Interest Review

After accumulating data and comments regarding a particular wetland from the applicant, federal agencies, and environmental groups, the Corps' final step under the section 404 program is to conduct a public interest review. The purpose of this review is to determine the probable impact that the proposed project will have on the public. This task is by no means an easy one. The Corps must consider twenty-one broad environmental areas as well as their cumulative impact. These areas are:

conservation, economics, aesthetics, general environmental concerns, wetlands, cultural values, fish and wildlife values, flood

from the beginning." Id. at 30. (Statement of Mr. Dawson, Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works).

Mitigation, however, is still a relatively new method of maintaining the status quo of wetlands. Critics argue that this method is ineffective. See Kusler & Groman, Mitigation: An Introduction, 8 Nat'l Wetlands Newsl. 3 (Sept.-Oct. 1986) (many mitigation projects are failing to achieve their goals). See Golet, Critical Issues in Wetland Mitigation: A Scientific Perspective, 8 Nat'l Wetlands Newsl. 6 (Sept.-Oct. 1986) [hereinafter cited as Wetland Mitigation] (wetlands often take thousands of years to develop and cannot be moved from areas that are naturally conducive to wetland formation as if they were "chessmen"). The author explains how mitigation has led to abuse in the permit process, because land developers are "sidestepping the question of avoidability of losses altogether" by presenting mitigation proposals in their initial permit applications. Id. at 4. This causes the Corps to become more willing to issue the permit since it believes the applicant will be cooperative in mitigation projects. Id. Yet, this causes the Corps to take on a pro-destruction attitude. See also V. Newman, Reinventing the Swamp, 8 Nat'l Wetlands Newsl. 15 (Sept.-Oct. 1986) (wetlands should be protected against "any" damage). Furthermore, mitigation measures are often difficult to monitor because of unclear objectives stated in the permit condition. See Quammen, Measuring the Success of Wetlands Mitigation, 8 Nat'l Wetlands Newsl. 6 (Sept.-Oct. 1986).

The Corps must follow these general criteria in evaluating every permit application:

(i) The relative extent of the public and private need for the proposed structure or work;

(ii) Where there are unresolved conflicts as to resource use, the practicability of using reasonable alternative locations and methods to accomplish the objective of the proposed structure or work; and

(iii) The extent and permanence of the beneficial and/or detrimental effects which the proposed structure or work may have on the public and private uses to which the area is suited.

Id.

80. Id.

hazards, floodplain values, land use, navigation, shore erosion and accretion, recreation, water supply and conservation, water quality, energy needs, safety, food and fiber production, mineral needs, consideration of property ownership, and, in general, the needs and welfare of the people.82

The Corps must balance83 these areas84 and weigh the benefits likely to result from the proposed activity against the reasonably foreseeable disadvantages.85

A. Standard of Review

While balancing these environmental concerns, the Corps must consider the purpose of the Clean Water Act: "Unnecessary alteration or destruction of [wetlands] should be discouraged as contrary to the public interest."86 To overcome this presumption in favor of wetland preservation, an applicant has the initial burden of proof.87 The burden then shifts to the Corps, which must consider the public and private needs for the project, the existence of feasible alternative sites, and the permanence of the project's beneficial or detrimental effect.88 Aside

83. Id.
84. Id. Even though there are many specific criteria to consider in the public interest review, it is difficult for the Corps to assess future impacts of the proposed project, especially the long term effects. OTA REPORT, supra note 1, at 126.
85. Id. Bayou Des Familles Dev. v. United States Corps of Eng'rs, 541 F. Supp. 1025 (E.D. La. 1982) (appropriate to deny permit that would destroy 200 acres of wetlands, result in both the loss of wildlife habitat and the loss of water purification and filtration benefits, and have significant adverse impact on fish).
87. See Riverside Irrigation Dist. v. Andrews, 758 F.2d 508 (10th Cir. 1985) (applicant had burden to show that proposed discharge would not destroy endangered species or adversely modify their critical habitat); National Wildlife Fed'n v. Marsh, 721 F.2d 767 (11th Cir. 1983) (most show substantial issue whether permit is required); Buttrey v. United States, 690 F.2d 1170, 1180 (5th Cir. 1982). The Buttrey court stated that an applicant for a filling permit must show: (1) that the benefits of the alteration outweigh the damages; (2) that the proposed activity is water dependent; and (3) that the proposed activity "cannot be located on any 'feasible alternative sites.'" Id. (citing 33 C.F.R. § 320.4(b)(4) (1987)).
88. 33 C.F.R. § 320.4(a)(2) (1987). Under NEPA, the Corps must "study, develop, and describe appropriate alternatives to recommended courses of action in any proposal which involves unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources." 42 U.S.C. § 4332(2)(e) (1982). In Olmsted Citizens for a Better Community v. United States, 793 F.2d 201 (8th Cir. 1986), the court stressed that the Corps could satisfy § 4332(2)(e) if it actively sought out and developed alternatives. Id. at 208. The Olmsted court relied on an earlier case, Environmental Defense Fund, Inc. v. United States Corps of Eng'rs, 492 F.2d 1123 (5th Cir. 1974), that suggested that an agency consider
from these general criteria, courts give the Corps a great deal of additional discretion when issuing permits.\textsuperscript{89}

The Clean Water Act and NEPA both lack a standard of review.\textsuperscript{90} Thus, the Administrative Procedure Act (APA) establishes the standard of review for the Corps' permit decisions.\textsuperscript{91} Pursuant to section 706(2) of the APA, a court shall set aside agency findings, conclusions, and actions that are "arbitrary, capricious, [or] an abuse of discretion."\textsuperscript{92} In \textit{Citizens to Preserve Overton Park, Inc. v. Volpe}\textsuperscript{93} the

Criticism of the Clean Water Act focused on Congress' failure to specify precisely the degree to which wetlands should be protected. Testimony at a subcommittee hearing stressed that Congressional intent to protect the wetlands must expressly state that wetlands should receive primary importance. \textit{Section 404 of the Clean Water Act: Hearings Before the Subcomm. on Environmental Pollution, of the Comm. on Environment and Public Works, 97th Cong., 2d Sess. 403 (1982)} (statement of Mr. Arnett, Asst. Secre-
tary, Dept. of the Interior).

90. Sierra Club v. United States Army Corps of Eng'rs, 772 F.2d 1043, 1050 (2d Cir. 1985).


93. 401 U.S. 402 (1971). In \textit{Overton Park} the Secretary of Transportation authorized the construction of a six-lane interstate highway through a public park. \textit{Id.} at 406. The issue before the Court was whether the Department of Transportation Act of 1966
Supreme Court explained that in reviewing an agency's decision, the Court must evaluate whether the agency considered all relevant factors, rather than whether the agency made a clear error of judgment. The Court stated that although a court's factual discovery should be "searching and careful, the ultimate standard of review is a narrow one." This arbitrary and capricious standard precludes a court from setting aside the Corps' decision unless it lacks a rational basis.

Although under the "rational basis" test it appears difficult to successfully challenge the Corps' permit decision, courts impose stringent procedural standards on the Corps when examining permit adjudication. As mandated under the APA, judicial review of the Corps' action is limited to the Corps' administrative record.

In Sierra Club v. United States Army Corps of Engineers, the Corps issued a permit for a landfill in the Hudson River. After the Corps gave notice of the landfill project, the EPA, USFWS, and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) returned comments objecting to the permit. In response to this criticism, the district engineer, without further inquiry, forwarded his decision to the division engineer and the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1968, which preclude such construction if feasible alternatives exist, prohibited the Secretary from authorizing the highway construction. The Secretary approved the construction without providing documented findings.

94. Id. at 416.
95. Id.
96. Id. The Court remanded the case for a thorough review of the Secretary's administrative record. Id. at 420.
97. Wisconsin v. Weinberger, 745 F.2d 412 (7th Cir. 1984) (irresponsible action is an indication of arbitrary and capricious decision).
98. See supra notes 50-60 and accompanying text for relevant discussion of the Corps' administrative requirements under the § 404 permit program.
100. 701 F.2d 1011 (2d Cir. 1983).
101. Id. at 1024. New York City, New York State, and the Federal Highway Administration proposed a plan to replace a deteriorating highway with a newer highway called the "Westway." Id. at 1017.
102. Id. at 1021-22. These agencies were concerned the proposed landfill would adversely affect marine habitat. Id. at 1022. The EPA stated that it was unable to issue a permit based on the Corps' data. Id.
for review.\textsuperscript{103} Even after the division engineer received a supplemental report describing the large fish population that the landfill would destroy,\textsuperscript{104} both the division engineer and Chief of Engineers approved the permit.\textsuperscript{105} The \textit{Sierra Club} court concluded that the Corps failed both to give "great weight" to the views of the federal agencies\textsuperscript{106} and to make a permit decision based on reliable information.\textsuperscript{107} Therefore, the court held that the Corps acted arbitrarily and capriciously.\textsuperscript{108}

In addition to considering other agencies' comments regarding the issuance of a permit, the Corps must verify the information provided by the applicant.\textsuperscript{109} In \textit{Friends of the Earth v. Hintz}\textsuperscript{110} the Corps sent out public notice of an application to fill a wetland for a log export yard.\textsuperscript{111} The Corps issued an EA based primarily upon the informa-

\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Ia} at 1023. This information came from the "Lawler progress report," a study conducted by an engineering firm on the biological status of waters that would be affected by the landfill. \textit{Ia} at 1022-23. Unlike earlier calculations by the Corps of the existence of the aquatic activity in the affected water, \textit{Ia} at 1022, the Lawler report showed that significant numbers of fish used the water for their habitat. \textit{Ia} at 1023. In fact, the Hudson River provides 18-32\% of all striped bass to the Atlantic Coast. \textit{Ia} at 1024.

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Ia} at 1023-24. The court focused on the Corps' "total failure" to comply with the full disclosure provisions of NEPA, regarding the dangerous impacts on the fish set out in the Lawler report, \textit{Ia} at 1025, and its failure to comply with the Clean Water Act provision requiring the Corps to give "critical thought" to the adverse impact on the fish. \textit{Ia} at 1032.

\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Ia} at 1032. The Corps ignored comments by the Fisheries Service and Wildlife Service in violation of 33 C.F.R. § 320.4(c) (1987).

\textsuperscript{107} \textit{701 F.2d} at 1033. The \textit{Sierra Club} court stated that the district engineer knowingly approved the permit before the engineers working on the Lawler report rendered their findings to the Corps. \textit{Ia} at 1032.

\textsuperscript{108} \textit{Ia} at 1033. The court concluded that by relying on a final EIS that claimed that the interpier area was "biologically impoverished," the Corps violated the Clean Water Act. \textit{Ia} at 1033. The court explained that the Corps' decision was motivated by a "predetermination to grant the Westway landfill permit." \textit{Ia}.


\textsuperscript{110} \textit{800 F.2d} 822 (9th Cir. 1986).

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Ia} at 827. ITT Rayonier, Inc. purchased a 17 acre tract area of a wetland. \textit{Ia} at 825. Rayonier filled the wetland with a toxic material until the Corps learned of this activity and issued a "cease and desist order." \textit{Ia}. The EPA, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Marine Fisheries Service stated that they would not oppose the filling if Rayonier implemented a mitigation plan. \textit{Ia} at 827. Rayonier's mitigation plan consisted of purchasing 17 acres of pasture land at a different site and converting
tion supplied by the applicant. The Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit held that the Corps may issue a permit based solely upon information provided by the applicant, as long as it independently verifies the information.

Similarly, in Buttrey v. United States, the Corps' findings of fact explaining the costs and benefits of a proposed dredging was sufficient to preclude the court from deciding that the Corps acted arbitrarily and capriciously. However, when the Corps in the continuing case of Sierra Club v. United States Army Corps of Engineers failed to support a change in position in the EIS reports, the court denied the permit. In a May 1984 EIS, the Corps concluded that the proposed landfill would cause a "significant adverse impact" to the striped bass that land into wetland. Id. at 825. Friends of the Earth, however, sent the Corps letters opposing the proposed activity on three grounds: (1) the permit activity was not water dependent; (2) practicable alternatives existed; and (3) issuance of the permit would adversely affect the water quality. Id. at 827.

The court viewed the Corps' reliance on Rayonier's data as acceptable. The court, quoting language from River Road Alliance, Inc. v. United States Army Corps of Eng'rs, 764 F.2d 445, 453 (7th Cir. 1985), cert. denied, 475 U.S. 1055 (1986), stated that "[t]he Corps is not a business consulting firm... it is in no position to conduct a feasibility study of alternative sites." 800 F.2d at 835. Noting that the Corps receives over 14,000 permit applications each year, the Friends court implied that the Corps does not have enough time to verify all the applicants' information before reaching decisions. Id. at 835-36. The verification the court required in this case was minimal. See infra note 113.

Under NEPA, the Corps may also "adopt a report furnished by the applicant in whole or in part." Lake Erie v. United States Army Corps of Eng'rs, 526 F. Supp. 1063, 1073 (W.D. Penn. 1981). The Corps is responsible for the scope and content of the EA and for evaluating the environmental issues. Id.

The court stated that the Corps must verify the information supplied by an applicant, as required under 33 C.F.R. pt. 230, App. B(8)(b). The standard for the verification applied by the court was low. The court required the Corps to avoid "blindly accepting" the information. Id. at 836. See Van Abbema v. Fornell, 807 F.2d 633 (7th Cir. 1986) (Corps must make independent effort to verify or discredit challenged material); Save Our Wetlands, Inc. v. Sands, 711 F.2d 634 (5th Cir. 1983) (if Corps independently verifies information, acceptable work by non-agency parties does not have to be redone).

In Buttrey, a land developer sought a dredge and fill permit to channel a bayou. Id. at 1172. Federal agencies criticized this project claiming that it would destroy natural drainage, damage a beautiful wetland area, and increase potential flooding. Id. at 1173.

The court looked to the Corps' administrative record in which the Corps individually acknowledged the facts and comments given by the federal agencies before denying the permit. Id.

772 F.2d 1043 (2d Cir. 1985).

Id. at 1055.
in the Hudson River. In November 1984, after revising its analysis based upon comments received on the earlier EIS, the Corps determined that the landfill would have only "minor impacts" on the fish. As a result of the Corps' failure to explain its drastic reversal, the court held that the Corps acted arbitrarily and capriciously.

In general, a court will intervene if the Corps exceeded its decision making authority under the Clean Water Act, NEPA, or the EPA Guidelines.

B. Balancing Factors

The more important aspect of the public interest review is not the ultimate standard of review used by the courts, but the manner in which the Corps balances competing interests in this final decision process. Some of the first variables the Corps encounters are the other federal agencies' view regarding approval of a proposed project. The Corps must seriously consider the positive and negative comments it receives from the other agencies. Since the Corps is not composed of environmental experts, the views of environmental agencies provide the Corps with valuable guidance. The Corps is bound only by the

118. Id. at 1047. This information was contained in a draft report that followed from a "worst-case" analysis over the span of four months during the winter. Id.

119. Id. at 1048. The Corps rationalized this decision by explaining that "the long-term decline in stock would be difficult to discern from normal yearly fluctuations... [e]ven in a worst case scenario." Id.

120. Id. at 1055. The court warned that the Corps was foolish to issue a permit for a proposed project based on speculation whether a major fishery resource would suffer a great loss. Id. The court required the Corps to explain its drastic change in findings. Id. at 1053.

121. See River Road Alliance v. Corps of Eng'rs of U.S. Army, 764 F.2d 445, 450 (7th Cir. 1985) (by correctly deciding that impact was not significant, Corps did not exceed bounds of authority).

122. 33 C.F.R. § 320.4(a)(1) (1986). The Corps must perform a balancing test and weigh the "benefits which reasonably may be expected to accrue from the proposal" against the "reasonably foreseeable detriments." Id. See Sierra Club v. United States Army Corps of Eng'rs, 772 F.2d 1043 (2d Cir. 1985) (unlike the Clean Water Act, which includes an "environment impact threshold," Id. at 1051, under NEPA, environmental concerns receive no more weight than economic or social concerns. Id. at 1050); Sierra Club v. Sigler, 695 F.2d 957 (5th Cir. 1983) (EIS and other NEPA requirements are only a few of the factors in the decision making process; analysis underlying EIS is more important).

123. 33 C.F.R. § 325.3 (1987).

124. See CWA REAUTHORIZATION, supra note 2, at 15 (tighter restrictions necessary to force Corps to take advice of EPA and other agencies seriously).

125. Commentators differ as to whether the Corps should have full control over the
EPA's views under the section 404 program.\textsuperscript{126}

After the Corps considers the agencies' opinions, it must next assess
the various public interest factors set forth by the Clean Water Act.\textsuperscript{127}
The Corps individually analyzes these environmental and nonenviron-
mental issues.\textsuperscript{128} If an area of concern is relevant to the project
hand, the Corps must evaluate its beneficial or adverse effect on the
public interest.\textsuperscript{129}

In a recent Seventh Circuit case, \textit{Van Abbema v. Fornell},\textsuperscript{130} the
Corps decided whether to grant a permit for construction of a coal-
loading facility.\textsuperscript{131} The court's review involved a balancing
between economic benefits and environmental costs. The court remanded the
case to verify inadequate and misleading economic data.\textsuperscript{132} Neverthe-
less, the court implied that had the economic data been sufficient, the
Corps could have issued a permit as long as the economic benefits
slightly outweighed adverse environmental consequences.\textsuperscript{133}

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\textsuperscript{126} See \textit{Clean Water Act Amendments of 1982}, supra note 13, at 389 (shift
authority away from EPA and give ultimate power and authority to the Corps); Blumm, \textit{Wetlands Preservation}, supra note 12, at 473 (Corps is an ambivalent program
administrator).

\textsuperscript{127} 33 C.F.R. § 320.4(a)(1) (1987). The EPA can veto a permit decision that does
not comply with the EPA § 404(b)(1) Guidelines. \textit{Id.} See \textit{supra} notes 25-26 and ac-
230 (1987). The Guidelines prohibit landfills that will result in "significant loss of or damage to
1179 (D.D.C. 1985) (EPA veto power upon finding of "unacceptable adverse effect" is
broad).

\textsuperscript{128} See \textit{supra} text accompanying note 82 for a list of these public interest review
factors.

\textsuperscript{129} Buttrey v. United States, 690 F.2d 1170 (5th Cir. 1982) (in public interest re-
view, the public benefit through construction jobs created by project not the intended
economic benefit for Corps consider).

\textsuperscript{130} 33 C.F.R. § 320.4(a)(1) (1987) states: "All factors which may be relevant to
the proposal must be considered including the cumulative effects thereof."

\textsuperscript{131} Id. at 635. The proposed site of the coal-loading facility required the building
of a truck route through 900 acres of nature reserves. \textit{Id.} These preserves are wildlife
sanctuaries and a "major wintering area for bald eagles." \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Id.} at 639. Originally, the district engineer decided not to issue the permit
because it was not in the public interest. The division engineer made the decision be-
cause the Governor of Illinois favored the project. \textit{Id.} at 635. The division engineer
approved the permit with various preconditions. \textit{Id.} See \textit{supra} note 78 for a discussion
of mitigation.

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Id.} at 639. The division engineer purposely used wrong transportation cost
statistics to make the project appear more favorable. \textit{Id.} at 642. The court also found
that the Corps had not taken a "hard look" at the alternatives. The applicant presented
The *Van Abbema* court did not suggest that economic concerns, if substantial, could immunize a project from environmental considerations.\(^{134}\) To the contrary, in *Van Abbema* the Corps attached twenty-three special conditions to the permit to mitigate adverse environmental impacts.\(^{135}\) This step is consistent with *Sierra Club v. United States Corps of Engineers*,\(^{136}\) decided one year earlier, stating the courts must reverse permit decisions that would have a significant adverse impact upon the environment.\(^{137}\) The *Sierra Club* standard states the threshold for denying a permit under the public interest review.\(^{138}\) As mentioned, determining whether an impact is "significant" involves considerable discretion.\(^{139}\)

**V. ANALYSIS**

The purpose of public interest review under the Clean Water Act is to protect wetlands from unnecessary destruction by requiring that the benefits of a project outweigh the detriment of wetlands loss.\(^{140}\) Yet, developers are destroying the wetlands at a threatening rate.\(^{141}\) The structure of the section 404 program would seem to deny the existence of this quandary. The Corps, after all, has procedures and guidelines

\(^{134}\) Id. at 639. *South La. Envtl. Council, Inc. v. Sand*, 629 F.2d 1005 (5th Cir. 1980) (marginal net benefits from the project sufficient under public interest review). *Cf. Sierra Club v. Sigler*, 695 F.2d 957 (5th Cir. 1983) (Corps' decision reversed because it omitted important and significant environmental costs from *EIS* and decision making process).

\(^{135}\) 807 F.2d at 636. If the Corps issues a permit based upon the premise that the landowner must satisfy mitigating conditions, the applicant must fulfill these mitigating measures or risk nullification of the permit. *See Note, Wetlands Protection Under the Corps of Engineers' New Dredge and Fill Jurisdiction*, 28 HASTINGS L.J. 223, 241 (1976); National Wildlife Fed'n v. Marsh, 721 F.2d 767 (11th Cir. 1983) (mitigation plan itself required to follow § 404 program); *Sierra Club v. United States Army Corps of Eng'rs*, 701 F.2d 1011 (2d Cir. 1983) (mitigation measures either minimize loss of fish or compensate for its loss). *See generally* 33 C.F.R. § 320.4(c) (1987); 40 C.F.R. § 1508.20(e) (1987).

\(^{136}\) 772 F.2d 1043 (2d Cir. 1985).

\(^{137}\) Id. at 1051.

\(^{138}\) Id.

\(^{139}\) *See supra* note 89 and accompanying text for discussion of Corps' discretion.

\(^{140}\) *See supra* notes 81-85 and accompanying text for a discussion of the balancing process of the public interest review.

\(^{141}\) *See supra* note 1 and accompanying text for a discussion of the number of wetland acres lost both currently and historically.
to follow under the section 404 permit program. In addition, Congress supplemented the Corps’ authority with the checks and balances of other agencies such as the EPA, USFWS, and NMFS. The problem with public interest review is that it gives the Corps too much authority.

First, the balancing process is excessively discretionary. The public interest review provides over twenty areas of environmental concerns for the Corps to consider, but fails to require any degree of detail. The task of balancing economic, aesthetic, and recreation costs, for example, could result in a skewed decision depending on the external influences on the Corps’ decision.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, it is difficult to quantify the maximum acreage of wetlands or the number of fish possibly affected by a dredge and fill permit. Each wetland is too unique in its chemistry and waterfowl to meet such rigid standards. Although a subjective approach in public interest review is more practical than an objective approach, it is limited by problems of quantification.

A solution to this dilemma is to require the Corps to make two separate conclusions in its public interest review before making a permit decision. The first finding would deal solely with the economic costs and benefits of the proposed activity. The Corps would then make a separate conclusion explaining the environmental effects of the project. After separating these two distinct categories of concern, the Corps would weigh heavily the environmental considerations before making a final permit decision as intended under public interest review. Or, in the alternative, the Corps would be required to delineate which economic concerns it favored.

Congress attempted to emphasize environmental rather than economic concerns by allowing the EPA to veto a permit decision by the

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142. See supra text accompanying notes 51-85 for a detailed discussion of NEPA and the § 404 permit program.

143. See supra note 72 and accompanying text.

144. See supra text accompanying notes 81-82 for a listing of the areas considered under the public interest review.

145. See supra note 132.

146. See supra note 6 for the EPA’s pro-conservation attitude under the § 404 program. Cf. supra notes 130-135 for an example of the current practice of viewing economic concerns favorably if they “slightly outweigh” environmental concerns.

147. See Buttrey v. United States, 690 F.2d 1170 (5th Cir. 1982) (public jobs created from construction of proposed activity was not the kind of economic benefit that the public interest review should consider.)
Corps if the permit would cause a "significant adverse effect" to the environment. 148 The EPA's veto power over the Corps' decision is necessary to restrain the Corps, but if falls short of a solution. The EPA uses the veto only after the Corps conducts a public hearing. 149 Until that point, the Corps may give little weight to the EPA's comments. 150 While reviewing the feasibility of a project, the Corps could structure the administrative record more favorably toward issuing a permit, thereby making it difficult for the EPA to find "significant adverse effects." To preempt such manipulations, the EPA's advance designation policy would determine whether various wetlands are ineligible for dredge and fill activity before permit requests arise. 151

A second loophole in the section 404 program is in locating alternative sites. 152 Current case law suggests that as long as the applicant attempts to find alternative sites, the Corps need not, on its own, look beyond the applicant's suggested alternatives. 153 This situation creates the potential for abuse. As stressed earlier, an applicant who desires to save money and time in obtaining a permit is not motivated to find alternative sites that would be expensive and time consuming to restructure for development. The applicant is also aware that the Corps is unlikely to determine whether sites alternative to those presented by the applicant exist. 154 An applicant familiar with the section 404 program may cleverly present only the most favorable alternatives to the proposed project. As a result, the Corps will receive a narrow view of the alternatives to the proposed project.

A third problem with public interest review relates to the effect that potential mitigation measures have on the Corps' decision. The Corps is more likely to weigh the public interest criteria in favor of granting the permit if mitigation measures will reduce the permit's detrimental effects. 155 The mitigating factors range from measures that decrease

148. See supra notes 25-26 and accompanying text for a discussion of the EPA's veto power.
149. 33 U.S.C. § 1344(c) (1986).
150. See supra text accompanying notes 50-69 for the steps that the Corps follows under the § 404 permit program prior to the public hearings.
151. See supra note 45 for a discussion of the advance designation policy.
152. See supra notes 61-66 for a discussion of the EPA's and the Corps' differing attitudes toward locating alternative sites.
153. See supra note 66.
154. See supra notes 61-66 and accompanying text for a discussion of alternative sites.
155. See supra note 78 for both discussion and criticisms of mitigation.
the impact of a project to plans that create artificial wetlands elsewhere to account for the proposed project's destruction of existing wetlands. These measures, however, are often ineffective\textsuperscript{156} and take place only after the Corps fails to consider environmentally feasible alternative sites.\textsuperscript{157} More importantly, frequently the permit does not state the mitigation objectives clearly.\textsuperscript{158}

Public interest review can be understood only if one recognizes the problems presented in finding alternative sites and in allowing mitigation measures. As suggested by the EPA, these three problems should be reordered and analyzed one at a time. The Corps should consider implementing mitigation only after it independently determines that the loss of wetlands is unavoidable,\textsuperscript{159} and that the permit will serve the public interest in the long term.

CONCLUSION

The section 404 permit program under the Clean Water Act is a step in the right direction. To ensure the existence of the remaining wetlands, the permit process must continue to give environmental goals top priority. The section 404 permit program must give less discretion to the Corps and more weight to the protection of the wetlands. It is time to eliminate the serious loopholes of the section 404 permit program. Preservation of the wetlands is an investment in our environmental future.

\textit{Ellen K. Lawson*}

\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{157} Barrows, \textit{Mitigation in the Army Corps of Engineers Regulatory Program}, 8 \textsc{Nat'L Wetlands NewsL.} 11 (Sept.-Oct. 1986) (mitigation “tips the public interest balance” to lead to a favorable permit decision under the public interest review in cases that otherwise would have been denied.)

\textsuperscript{158} \textit{See supra} note 78 for a criticism of mitigation.

\textsuperscript{159} \textit{See supra} note 78 for a discussion of the EPA’s view on mitigation.

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