

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 30, 2011

The Honorable Lisa P. Jackson  
Administrator  
United States Environmental Protection Agency  
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20004

The Honorable Jo-Ellen Darcy  
Office of the Assistant Secretary (Civil Works)  
Department of the Army  
108 Army Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20310

Dear Administrator Jackson and Assistant Secretary Darcy:

On May 2, 2011 the Environmental Protection Agency and the Army Corps of Engineers (the Agencies) published in the Federal Register (76 Fed. Reg. 24479) a request for comments on draft guidance relating to the identification of waters protected under the Clean Water Act (CWA).

We have a great deal of concern about the actions that the Agencies are pursuing. The Agencies claim that this guidance document is simply meant to clarify how the Agencies understand the existing requirements of the CWA in light of the current law, regulations, and Supreme Court cases. More than clarifying, they greatly expand what could be considered jurisdictional waters through a slew of new and expanded definitions and through changes to applications of jurisdictional tests. This guidance document improperly interprets the opinions of the plurality and Justice Kennedy's opinion in *Rapanos v. United States* by incorporating only their expansive language in an attempt to gain jurisdictional authority over new waters, while ignoring both justices' clear limitations on federal CWA authority.<sup>1</sup> Attached are highlights of several specific issues regarding the draft guidance document.

The decision to change guidance, just a few short years after the Agencies issued official guidance on the exact same issue, has not been prompted by any intervening changes to the underlying statute through legislation or a new Supreme Court decision. Further, we understand that the Agencies intend this draft guidance to be the first step toward a formal rulemaking in the future. Because the Agencies' intent is to turn the draft interim guidance into regulations, it can only be interpreted to mean that they intend the guidance to be followed. Following the guidance will change the rights and responsibilities of individuals under the CWA – this is clearly the regulatory intent.

In the economic analysis completed by the Agencies, it was determined that as few as 2% or as many as 17% percent of non-jurisdictional determinations under current 2003 and 2008 guidance would be considered jurisdictional using the expanded tests under the draft guidance.<sup>2</sup> Any change in jurisdiction which results in a change to the rights and responsibilities of a land owner is, in fact, a change in the law as the program has been implemented to date.

Further, the draft guidance is intended to apply to more jurisdictional interpretations than just those covered by the Army Corps in making §404 determinations, but also those under §402 that governs

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<sup>1</sup> 547 U.S. 715 (2006)

<sup>2</sup> "Potential Indirect Economic Impacts and Benefits Associated with Guidance Clarifying the Scope of Clean Water Act Jurisdiction." April 27, 2011 [http://water.epa.gov/lawsregs/guidance/wetlands/upload/cwa\\_guidance\\_impacts\\_benefits.pdf](http://water.epa.gov/lawsregs/guidance/wetlands/upload/cwa_guidance_impacts_benefits.pdf)

National Pollution Discharge Elimination System permits, §311, oil spills and SPCC plans, §303, water quality standards and TMDLs and §401 state water quality certifications. Because most states have delegated authority under many of these sections, this change in guidance will also result in a change in the responsibilities of states in executing their duties under the CWA. While we question seriously the need for this new guidance and believe that the Agencies lack the authority to rewrite their jurisdictional limitations in this manner, one thing is clear: it is fundamentally unfair to the States and the regulated community (including our nation's farmers and other property owners) to subject lands and waters under their control to a change in legal status of this magnitude via a "guidance document." Changes in legal status should only be done, if at all, through the regulatory process, specifically under the Administrative Procedure Act, subchapter II of chapter 5, and chapter 7, of title 5, United States Code.

Because the draft guidance will substantively change how the Agencies decide which waters are subject to federal jurisdiction and will impact the regulated community's rights and obligations under the CWA, this guidance has clear regulatory consequences and goes beyond being simply advisory guidelines. The draft guidance will shift the burden of proving jurisdictional status of waters from the Agencies to the regulated communities, thus making the guidance binding and fundamentally changing the legal rights and responsibilities that they have. When an agency acts to change the rights of an individual, we believe that the agency must go through the formal rulemaking process.

We respectfully request you abandon any further action on this guidance document.

Sincerely,

James McClellan

Pat Roberts

Mike McConnell

Lee Neubauer

Lamar Alexander

Mike Crayon

Paul Coburn

Jeff Sessions

Mike Johanns

Richard A. Lugar

David Vitter

John Barrasso

Lloyd Winter

Tom Kuhl

Chuck Grassley

John Conyer

Tom Cole

Chris L. Hatch

Jimmy Pan

Mark

Ron Johnson

Jim Kinch

Jerry Moran

Pat Rooney

Rand Paul

Sayby Claiborn

Rob Portman

Sam Cook

Kay Bailey Hutchison

Joni DeMint

John A. Linn

Scott Carls

Dean Heller

Richard Shelby

John Bozeman

Michael B. Eiji

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L. J.

William S. E.

Ray Bent

John Hovorn

### Highlights of Concerns

The following are a selection of the concerns we have with the draft guidance.

#### **Interstate waters:**

The Agencies' have added language to their definition of interstate waters explicitly directing field staff to use "other waters" that lie across state boundaries for jurisdictional determinations. "Other waters" include: "intrastate lakes, rivers, streams (including intermittent streams), mudflats, sandflats, wetlands, sloughs, prairie potholes, wet meadows, playa lakes, or natural ponds." "Other waters" are now elevated to the same level as "navigable waters" for the purposes of determining whether or not waters are jurisdictional. Thus a geographically isolated prairie pothole that happens to be situated on a state boundary would be jurisdictional and could allow for a jurisdictional claim to be made on all other wet areas that have a "significant nexus" to the pothole. This new definition clearly goes beyond the current understanding expands the Agencies reach to previously non-jurisdictional waters.

#### **Significant Nexus:**

The new guidance makes substantial changes to what is considered a "significant nexus." Justice Kennedy's opinion in *Rapanos* stated that wetlands that have a "significant nexus" to traditional navigable waters are "waters of the United States:" "if the wetlands, either alone or in combination with similarly situated lands in the region, significantly affect the chemical, physical and biological integrity of other covered waters more readily understood as 'navigable.'"<sup>3</sup> Previous guidance read Justice Kennedy's language to apply to wetlands and limited the significant nexus tributaries to their higher order streams reach.

The new guidance eliminates the reach concept and applies the significant nexus test to all tributaries, wetlands, and proximate other waters that are "in the same watershed." Currently "other waters" are determined to be jurisdictional based on conditions that show their connections to interstate commerce. Additionally, waters may be aggregated and considered together, and if the category of water or wetland is determined to have a significant nexus to downstream waters, then each water or wetland in that category is considered a jurisdictional water of the United States.

The draft interim guidance dictates that determining what tributaries, wetlands, and other waters will have a "significant nexus" includes an analysis of the functions of waters to determine if they trap sediment, filter pollution, retain flood waters, and provide aquatic habitat. A significant nexus is based on both hydrological and ecological effects. A hydrological effect does not require a hydrological connection. The ability to hold water is considered an effect on downstream waters because that function arguably reduces the chances of downstream flooding. Furthermore effects on the chemical integrity of a water body on downstream waters could be reason for asserting jurisdiction, because it could show the ability to reduce the amount of pollutants that would otherwise enter a traditionally navigable water or interstate water. Biological effects include the capacity to transfer nutrients to downstream food webs or providing habitat for species that live part of their lives in downstream waters. Under this interpretation, an isolated water body can be considered to have a significant nexus to downstream waters. Again, if the category of water or wetland is determined to have a significant nexus to downstream waters, then each similarly situated water or wetland is considered jurisdictional.

"Significant nexus" is defined as any relationship that is "more than speculative or insubstantial." This is not the same as requiring a nexus actually be significant. Again, because of the expansive nature of what can be included under the "significant nexus," the draft interim guidance is likely to encompass far more waters than have been previously included. The increased scope not only of "significant nexus," but of

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<sup>3</sup> 547 U.S. 715, 780 (2006)

what waters may be tested using this test, will likely allow the Agencies to assert jurisdiction far beyond current practice.

**Tributaries and Ditches:**

Like interstate waters, tributaries are considered jurisdictional under the Agencies' regulations, but do not have the extensive new definition given in this guidance. A tributary now has the physical definition of the presence of a channel with a bed and an ordinary high water mark. Additionally ditches, which were generally excluded under the current guidance, have been included as tidal ditches or non-tidal ditches newly defined as meeting one of the following: (1) the ditch is an altered natural stream, (2) the ditch was excavated in a water or wetland, (3) the ditch has relatively permanent flowing or standing water, (4) the ditch connects two or more jurisdictional waters, or (5) the ditch drains natural water bodies, such as a wetland, into a tributary system of a navigable or interstate water. The new standards for asserting jurisdiction over ditches utilize both the plurality opinion and the Kennedy significant nexus test. As the draft interim guidance asserts, many previously non-jurisdictional ditches will likely be deemed jurisdictional.

The plurality opinion was clear that the Agencies' assertion of jurisdiction over ditches and ephemeral waters was incorrect. However, the draft interim guidance document allows the Agencies to use the plurality standard as a basis for asserting jurisdiction over ditches. Furthermore, the use of the Kennedy standard for asserting jurisdiction over tributaries ignores the fact that Kennedy was skeptical about the Agencies use of an ordinary high water mark as a presumption for asserting jurisdiction. While more detailed than previous guidance, the effect is the same: nearly everything that connects to a navigable water is jurisdictional. Both the plurality opinion and Kennedy rejected this assertion in *Rapanos*.