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TRAINING FIELD STAFF ABOUT WETLANDS AND WETLAND ISSUES: DEALING WITH THE UNKNOWN—A CASE HISTORY

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Abstract: In response to an increasing number of requests for assistance from county-based extension agents in Virginia about regulatory issues relating to wetlands, an in-service training program on wetland definition, delineation, and permit review was developed and conducted in spring 1995. As a means to familiarize agents with the various wetland regulators, representatives from all agencies or organizations who have any regulatory authority over wetlands in Virginia were invited and asked to introduce and describe their agency and its responsibilities, and discuss when and how they conduct wetland permit reviews. Although an important objective of this training workshop was to help eliminate uncertainty and reduce confusion about wetland issues among agents, and thus improve their ability to properly advise clients, an entirely different, yet unplanned, outcome was realized. Instead of conveying that a consistent regulatory process exists, agency representatives revealed considerable disparity on how wetlands were being defined and delineated, when project review was required, and who among the various regulatory agencies should be involved in such reviews. Regardless, agents participating in the workshop (1) expressed satisfaction in learning much useful information, (2) found the unanticipated discrepancies among agency representatives to be “enlightening” and a beneficial “real world” learning experience, and (3) expressed a need for additional “hands on, field-oriented” training to supplement and apply the knowledge gained. In contrast, most agency representatives expressed dismay or a sense of discomfort over what had transpired and suggested that a retreat among just regulators was warranted.