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Using Information on Ecosystem Goods and Services in Corps Planning

ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA. There has been a general growth in interest of assessing the benefits humans derive from ecosystems that function more naturally since the 1970s. This is the subject of the recently published Institute for Water Resources (IWR) report "[Using Information on Ecosystem Goods and Services in Corps Planning: An Examination of Authorities, Policies, Guidance and Practices.](#)"

The report examines existing authorities, policy and guidance that would influence the use of ecosystem goods and services in U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) planning processes.

Ecosystem goods and services are defined as socially valued aspects or outputs of ecosystems dependent on self-regulating or managed ecosystem structures and processes.

Ecosystem goods might include clean air and fresh water, and services could include water and air purification, biodiversity maintenance, wastes decomposition, groundwater recharge through wetlands, seed dispersal, greenhouse gas mitigation or aesthetically pleasing landscapes, among others.

The report, while not geared toward USACE district planners, details USACE policy and guidance, and explores ways other agencies and governmental bodies use ecosystem goods and services in their policies and programs related to ecosystem restoration or natural system management. The report is part of a research and development effort at USACE that is investigating incorporating ecosystem goods and services into USACE planning and environmental benefits evaluation.

Ecosystem services reviewed in the report were explored in order to demonstrate where ecosystem goods and services could be used meaningfully as components of USACE analyses. While USACE and the nation have implicitly recognized benefits from ecosystem goods and services, current policy monetizes ecosystem goods and serves as national economic development benefits instead of national ecosystem restoration benefits.

In their conclusions, the authors suggest that developing a methodology or framework to analyze ecosystem goods and services could be useful for integrated water resources management and problem solving by providing a multi-faceted view of the effects of water resources decisions and linking of the USACE missions with other agencies.

The inclusion of ecosystem goods and services in plan formulation and evaluation also has the potential to provide a broader, more accurate view of project effects, more directly illustrate the societal value of ecosystem restoration, and provide for more transparent consideration of the benefits and costs of proposed projects, according to the report.

As an interim approach, the report suggests that it might be useful to consider how descriptions of ecological conditions can be used as proxies for ecosystem goods and services.

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