



September 17, 2024

Sustainable Saratoga is an education and advocacy organization that promotes sustainable practices and protection of natural resources in Saratoga Springs and the surrounding area. While our focus is local and regional, we are commenting on this state wetlands proposal because of the significant presence of wetlands in our area, and the importance of those wetlands to our environment and economy.

Sustainable Saratoga applauds the changes to the Freshwater Wetlands Act adopted by the Department of Environmental Conservation in 2022, including the reduction in the size of jurisdictional wetlands from 12.4 acres to 7.4 acres and extending protections, both to wetlands that meet jurisdictional criteria but are not included on official maps, and to smaller wetlands of "unusual importance." However, the proposed changes to 6NYCRR Part 664, Freshwater Wetlands Jurisdiction and Classification, do not go far enough to protect this crucial natural resource.

In Saratoga Springs, wetlands are a major natural resource that we as a community strive to protect. As documented in Saratoga Springs' recent [Natural Resources Inventory](#), state-identified wetlands cover almost 4,000 acres, over 20 percent of the city's total area. These wetlands are distributed throughout the city, with significant concentrations in the eastern and western parts of Saratoga Springs. Our wetlands can be found in forests, in areas dominated by shrub vegetation, near lakes and ponds, and along rivers and streams. The city also contains numerous vernal pools, and other significant wetland complexes, such as the areas around Bear Swamp and the Bog Meadow Brook.

Wetlands in Saratoga Springs play a crucial ecological role, by providing habitat for diverse plant and animal species, acting as natural filters for water purification, aiding groundwater recharge, and contributing to carbon sequestration. Wetlands act as natural filters, improving water quality in rivers and streams. This is particularly important for Saratoga Springs, as wetlands help filter out pollutants from stormwater before it reaches downstream lakes, reducing the city's expenditures on stormwater management. Wetlands are crucial for flood control, storing floodwaters and reducing flooding peaks. This natural flood protection helps prevent costly damage to infrastructure and property in Saratoga Springs. In addition, Saratoga Springs, which is widely known as the "City in the Country," benefits economically from a vision that promotes a vibrant urban core surrounded by natural ecosystems and open spaces (the Greenbelt). This unique character, partly maintained by wetlands and other natural areas, contributes to the city's economy due to its attractiveness to tourists, residents, and businesses.

Saratoga Springs' wetlands also provide real climate change adaptation and mitigation benefits, which help protect the city from potential economic losses due to climate-related events. The Saratoga County FEMA-approved [Multi-jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan](#) identifies riverine, flash, and urban flooding as a high risk for the City of Saratoga Springs. The plan identifies numerous locations in the city that are prone to flooding including locations that are considered



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High-Risk Storm Water Disaster Areas due to local topography and geology. As human-induced climate change continues to drive increases in the occurrence of downpours and extreme weather events and an overall increase in annual rainfall totals, protection of natural areas that help absorb and direct stormwater away from built infrastructure is essential.

Despite the many benefits of wetlands, they regularly fall victim to various threats. The biggest threat to wetlands is human development and expansion into natural landscapes. Many wetlands are at risk of being filled in or degraded as urban areas grow, and the Saratoga Springs area is no stranger to development pressure. While the city of Saratoga Springs has regulations that aim to preserve wetland areas and their buffer zones, a state-level mandate to improve wetlands would provide much-needed heightened protections against various threats and challenges to our area's wetlands. State-based legislative improvements are especially crucial in light of recent federal developments, particularly the 2023 U.S. Supreme Court decision which narrowed the scope of wetlands protected under the Clean Water Act, making state-level protections more important than ever.

Sustainable Saratoga recognizes and appreciates DEC's efforts to improve wetlands protections through these draft amendments. We recommend that the protective features of the draft regulations be meaningfully improved to:

- Strengthen biodiversity metrics: Expand the criteria for rare species to include a wider range of at-risk plants and animals beyond the current proposals.
- Expand the criteria to protect smaller wetlands and vernal pools that are important as part of larger wetland complexes.
- Extend buffer zones for greater ecosystem protection.
- Enhance monitoring and enforcement to assess the status of protected wetlands and the effectiveness of mitigation measures.

By strengthening the draft regulations and promoting future amendments to the Freshwater Wetlands Act, DEC can create more robust and effective wetlands protections that address the full range of ecological, climate, and community benefits these vital ecosystems provide. This will help secure the enduring vitality and adaptability of New York's wetland assets, ensuring they continue to provide essential services for generations to come.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amy Durland', written in a cursive style.

Amy Durland
Board Chair, Sustainable Saratoga