

# Illinois must protect wetlands



During this month dedicated to environmental awareness, sustainability and action, I am reminded that protecting our environment is not an abstract ideal. Rather, it is a daily responsibility that directly affects our health, safety and future.

Few natural resources embody that truth more clearly than our wetlands. These ecosystems quietly safeguard our drinking water, shield our neighborhoods from flooding, store carbon and sustain wildlife. Yet today, they face unprecedented threats due to sweeping federal rollbacks that have stripped protections from millions of acres of wetlands and streams nationwide. Illinois has already lost 90% of its original wetlands, and a University of Illinois study shows that 72% of those remaining no longer qualify for federal protection — a number that could climb to 90%.

In recent months, Illinois has taken meaningful steps toward reversing this trend. According to Environment America, our state is now one step closer to adopting strong, science-based protections for wetlands. This is a milestone driven by growing public support and the recognition that Illinois can no longer rely on federal safeguards weakened by the Supreme Court's Sackett decision. Environmental advocates, local governments and community leaders across the state have urged lawmakers to act, and I am proud to help lead that effort.

I am sponsoring House Bill 3596, the Wetlands Protection Act, which would establish a comprehensive state-level program under the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. The bill prioritizes avoiding wetland destruction, requires mitigation when damage cannot be avoided and ensures that counties with strong existing programs can continue their work.

HB 3596 has seen encouraging movement in recent weeks, advancing through the legislative process as conversations continue with stakeholders. Last month the bill passed the House Energy & Environment Committee, and I continue to work to address concerns raised by local governments, landowners, and conservation groups — strengthening the bill while maintaining its core mission: protecting the wetlands that protect us.

This is not simply an environmental issue; it is a public health, economic and moral imperative. Wetlands provide \$419 million in annual flood protection in Illinois alone and serve as nature's filtration system for the water our families drink. Without state action, it will be open season on these irreplaceable resources. The momentum behind HB 3596 reflects a shared understanding that Illinois must lead where federal protections have failed.

Earth Day is a moment to recommit ourselves to stewardship. This legislative session, we are doing so not in words, but in action. By striving to enact strong, science-based safeguards, we can ensure that our children and grandchildren inherit an Illinois where water is clean, communities are resilient and nature continues to sustain us. Protecting our wetlands is protecting our future.

- Anna Moeller, an Elgin Democrat, is Illinois state representative from the 43rd District.