“Waters of the U.S.” Over Time

From the 1970s through the 1990s, the majority of federal courts, as well as the agencies, consistently interpreted a broad scope of Clean Water Act jurisdiction.

Supreme Court decisions in 2001 and 2006 held that the scope of navigable waters must be linked more directly to protecting the integrity of waters used in navigation. The justices in the 2006 *Rapanos* decision were split on how this was to be accomplished.

The agencies have been working since these Supreme Court decisions to provide clarification and predictability in the procedures used to identify waters that are – and are not – covered by the Clean Water Act.

The 2015 Clean Water Rule was an effort to provide that needed clarification and predictability. Many stakeholders, including many states, expressed concerns with the 2015 Rule.

The agencies are now embarking on another effort to provide clarity and predictability to members of the public.

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The Executive Order

On February 28, 2017, the President signed the "Executive Order on Restoring the Rule of Law, Federalism, and Economic Growth by Reviewing the 'Waters of the United States' Rule."

The E.O. calls on the EPA Administrator and the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works to review the final Clean Water Rule and "publish for notice and comment a proposed rule rescinding or revising the rule…."

The E.O. directs that EPA and the Army "shall consider interpreting the term 'navigable waters'" in a manner "consistent with Justice Scalia's opinion" in *Rapanos*. Justice Scalia's opinion indicates CWA jurisdiction includes relatively permanent waters and wetlands with a continuous surface connection to relatively permanent waters.

https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/28/presidential-executive-order-restoring-rule-law-federalism-and-economic

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Two-Step Process

The agencies are implementing the Executive Order in two steps to provide as much certainty as possible as quickly as possible to the regulated community and the public during the development of the ultimate replacement rule.

1. The agencies are taking action to establish the legal status quo in the Code of Federal Regulations, by recodifying the regulation that was in place prior to issuance of the Clean Water Rule and that is being implemented now under the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit's stay of that rule.
2. The agencies plan to propose a new definition that would replace the approach in the 2015 Clean Water Rule with one that reflects the principles that Justice Scalia outlined in the *Rapanos* plurality opinion.

The agencies are aware that the scope of CWA jurisdiction is of intense interest to many stakeholders and therefore want to provide time for appropriate consultation and deliberations on the ultimate regulation.

In the meantime, the agencies will continue to implement regulatory definition in place prior to the 2015 rule, consistent with the 2003 and 2008 guidances, in light of the *SWANCC* and *Rapanos* decisions, pursuant to the Sixth Circuit stay of the Clean Water Rule.

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Step 1: Withdraw 2015 Clean Water Rule

While the Sixth Circuit stay may remain in effect for some time, its duration is uncertain.

To provide greater certainty, the agencies will move to reinstate the preexisting regulations and guidance and to withdraw the 2015 Rule.

In the Step 1 proposed rule, the agencies will define “waters of the United States” using the regulatory definition in place before the Clean Water Rule, which the agencies will continue to implement according to longstanding practice, just as they are today.

The Step 1 proposed rule would maintain the approach in place for decadesuntil a revised rule with a new definition can be promulgated.

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Step 2: Develop New Rule Consistent with the Executive Order

The E.O. directs the agencies to consider interpreting the term “navigable waters,” as defined in 33 U.S.C. 1362(7), in a manner consistent with the opinion of Justice Antonin Scalia in *Rapanos v. United States*, 547 U.S. 715 (2006).

Justice Scalia’s opinion indicates Clean Water Act jurisdiction includes relatively permanent waters and wetlands with a continuous surface connection to relatively permanent waters.

The agencies are consulting with state and local government officials as we begin to develop the new definition.

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Potential Approaches to "Relatively Permanent" Waters

Perennial plus streams with "seasonal" flow

Current practice: seasonal flow = about 3 months (varies regionally)

Perennial plus streams with another measure of flow

Use appropriate, implementable metrics, e.g., frequency of flow, intersecting water table

Perennial streams only

Streams that carry flow throughout the year except in extreme drought

Other

Thoughts?

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Potential Approaches to Wetlands with a "Continuous Surface Connection"

Surface connection even through non-jurisdictional feature

Current practice considers directly abutting wetlands and those with a continuous surface connection, regardless of distance, to be jurisdictional

Some degree of connectivity

Use appropriate, implementable metrics, e.g., distance

Wetland must directly touch jurisdictional waters

Only wetlands that directly touch a jurisdictional water

Other

Thoughts?

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