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# DEPARTMENTS

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## *Public Affairs Perspective*

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### **Congressional Staff Get Their Feet Muddy with Wetlands Scientists**

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Staff from Congressional offices rolled up their shirt-sleeves and plunged into the world of wetlands research during a three-session science course.

Sponsored by the Ecological Society of America (ESA), the Society of Wetland Scientists, and the American Society for Limnology and Oceanography, the course focused on the fundamentals of wetlands science, and featured both classroom and field study.

The first two sessions were held inside, classroom-style, in lecture format but with plenty of time for in-



Ben LePage discusses wetland functions with Congressional staffers.

formal give-and-take discussion and questions. Ben LePage, an ecologist at the URS Corporation and Chair of the SWS Education and Outreach Committee, presented an introduction to wetland science, addressing competing scientific and legal definitions of wetlands, wetland functions and historical losses of wetlands. He drew on examples from his work with corporate clients and local governments to answer staff questions about how to classify wetlands and how to effectively restore wetland hydrological function.

Amy Jacobs, a wetlands ecologist at the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, continued with a discussion on the interactions between people and wetlands. She illustrated the services wetlands provide to society, threats to wetlands, and case studies of the actions people are taking to restore, create, and preserve wetlands. Staff questions ranged from the differences in function between restored and created wetlands, to tips for engaging constituent landowners to take a broader view of wetland services.

A field trip to freshwater wetlands and salt marshes of the Chesapeake Bay topped off the course. ESA member Pat Megonigal, a wetland biogeochemist at the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, led the course activities, together with colleagues Tom Jordan and Dennis Whigham, also ESA members.

Staff saw firsthand the differences in the structure and ecological function between natural and created freshwater wetlands in a suburban develop-



Congressional staff measure the elevation of wetland sediments in a tidal salt marsh.

ment near Annapolis, Maryland. They learned to distinguish anaerobic wetland soils from upland soils, inspected a riparian buffer within an agricultural landscape, and kept a close eye out for wetland wildlife.

Moving on to a tidal salt marsh, Congressional staff investigated how scientists are measuring wetland elevation with cutting-edge instrumentation. They discussed how wetland elevation may respond to sea-level rise and rising atmospheric carbon dioxide levels.

Staff appreciated the rare opportunity to learn hands-on and directly from practicing scientists. In the coming months, Congress will increasingly need an understanding of wetland functions and services as it considers legislation to clarify federal wetlands regulation in the wake of the Supreme Court *Rapanos* and *Carabell* decisions in June 2006. ESA and SWS plan to follow up with future wetlands activities, and to continue providing educational courses and briefings on the most current ecological science to policy makers.