

Regional News

Who is frustrating Museveni's wetland reclamation campaign?

Conservationists and stakeholders argue that despite the presidential directives on wetland vacation, the occupation and degradation continues in many parts of the country.

BY DAN WANDERA

President Museveni has once again announced an ultimatum to all wetland encroachers to leave and banned the continued crop cultivation in wetland areas.

The May 12, 2026 ultimatum made during his swearing-in ceremony for the 7th elective term and welcomed by a big section of conservationists and climate change actors is not the first, but a series of repeated ultimatums dating back to 2018.

In his first public pronouncement over the gross wetlands destruction at a function in the greater Luweero in 2018, Museveni threatened to dismiss the Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs), RDCs, GISOs and parish chiefs who fail to implement the directive.

While the National Environment Management Authority (Nema), District Local governments (DLGs) among other stakeholders have at several occasions appeared to act in some areas, wetland destruction continues across the country.

The construction of permanent structures, brick-making, sand-mining and farming activities are visible at the greater River Mayanja water catchment areas, Lugogo water drainage, River Ssezibwa water catchment areas, Lwajali and Lubenge wetland areas in central Uganda.

Mr Matia Lwanga Bwanika, the outgoing Wakiso District chairman says one of the greatest battles he has fought unsuccessfully during his reign, is the encroachment on the wetlands by reportedly well-connected individuals and investment companies.

"The wetlands that are catchment areas for the River Mayanja that include Kyengeza, Gobero and Mende were turned into farmlands for cabbages,



A woman weeds her yam garden in Ssezibwa wetland on June 20, 2020. PHOTO BY FRED MUZAALÉ

maize, among other crops due to impunity among a section of stakeholders including residents in the respective areas despite our repeated warnings," he told this publication on May 18.

While some farmers heeded to calls to vacate, we saw some investment companies establishing factories. This defeats the purpose of protecting the wetlands due to conflict of interest among leaders, government entities that licence investors to do business in wetland areas, Mr Bwanika adds.

In 2018, while officially commissioning the Goodwill Ceramic industries at Namunkeker Industrial Park (Liao Shen) in Nakaseke District, Museveni directed the immediate vacation of eight wetlands in Nakaseke, Luweero and Nakasongola areas that had been encroached on by sugarcane growers, among others.

"The wetlands at Kabeere, Kagembe, Wabikokoma, Bulega, Lukumbi, Walubumba, Kyerezi and Danze have been destroyed. We want to safeguard River Mayanja water catchment areas and the proposed water irrigation project on River Danze in Luweero District. The RDCs, CAOs, GISOs, DPCs, parish chiefs should act or risk losing their respective

positions," he said while commissioning the Goodwill Ceramic factory in Nakaseke District in 2018.

A section of conservationists and stakeholders argue that despite the presidential directives on wetland vacation by encroachers, the occupation and continued degradation continues

in many parts of the country.

Dr Mesusera Bangwa, a retired veterinary practitioner and resident of Sanga Village in Wakiso District says the ongoing degradation of the various wetlands in the district is under the watch of both the leaders and the concerned communities.

"Some encroachers on these wetlands have their premises guarded by security personnel and many of them claim to have obtained licences after environment impact assessments were undertaken and confirmed by the relevant government departments," he says.

Dr Mesusera adds that local communities are hesitant to vacate wetlands because many investors remain defiant and are protected by sections of the security agencies.

In 2024, Nema conducted several evictions at wetland areas in Sanga, Wakiso District, but by June 2025, farming activities including sugarcane growing had covered much of the areas that had been vacated.

In some areas, individuals claim to own land titles in areas meant to be wetlands, he says.

During his inaugural speech on May 12, 2026 at Kololo Ceremonial Grounds

Mr Museveni identified the Rwenzori Mountains, Mount Elgon and Ssezibwa River water catchment areas among the ecological systems requiring urgent protection from environmental degradation.

"All the rice and potato growing in the swamps must stop. Farming in wetlands damages the ecosystems and threatens long-term food security," he said.

Museveni instead proposed fish farming around the swamps as a more sustainable and economically viable money-generating venture for communities while preserving the ecosystems.

"Government has plans to support fish farmers to establish fish ponds. Earth-loading equipment will help farmers to make the ponds," he said.

But in areas such as River Ssezibwa water catchment area, water diversion, vegetable growing and construction of permanent structures by individuals that claim to own the land in these areas have continued in the past four years, despite a Nema-led ultimatum to vacate.

In Kiziika Village, Nazigo Sub-county in Kayunga District, rice-growing continues in sections of the Ssezibwa water catchment areas. Ms Kabanda, a resident of Kiziika village and a farmer, claims that farming has been part of the family livelihood for the last 30 years at sections of the swamps in Nazigo Sub-county.

"We own permanent homes in Kiziika village where the government wants us to vacate without compensation. This is our own land that we bought and possess land purchase agreements. We have no alternative farming land," she says.

Authorities in Kayunga, however, say government has no compensation plan for people settling in wetland areas. Mr Andrew Muwonge, the Kayunga District chairperson, says the district has a sensitisation programme targeting environment protection, but the cause is often defeated by the minimal resource envelope and non-compliant individuals and investment companies.

Green Cover Culture Safety Awareness (GCSA), a conservationist organisation operating in the greater Luweero District, blames the deteriorating wetland ecosystem on the lack of a vibrant environment enforcement mechanism in respective local governments.

"We have evidence that some of the local government authorities in areas where wetlands have been degraded are powerless and watch on as pollutants from industries get channelled into wetlands. Farming and construction of permanent structures have continued in wetlands under their watch," Mr Eddy Katamba, who is attached to GCSA, says.