



## **Annual Report on Habitat Activities Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel – January 2026**

### *Purpose and Scope of this report*

In September 2023, the Council approved its Habitat Blueprint, which included a new provision for the Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel (HEAP) to develop an annual report on habitat activities during their spring meeting and present this report at the next scheduled Habitat Committee meeting.

The blueprint specified that the report should:

- address habitat and ecosystem conservation activities, including consultations, comment letters, future threats, research needs, and use of habitat policies during the prior calendar year.
- highlight the use of habitat policies.
- provide advance notice of developing issues; and
- rely heavily on tables, texts and bullet lists to convey the relevant information efficiently.

In December 2023 the Council approved an outline that would provide guidance for the HEAP on what subjects would be appropriate for inclusion in the annual report. This report will be presented at the spring or summer council meeting.

The following report is a summary of habitat activities that occurred in the calendar year of 2025 that the Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel believe will be of interest to the Council, that are NOT included in the Habitat AP meeting summary.

## **2025 Annual Report on Habitat Activities**

### **1. Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) related comments submitted by the Council, South Atlantic States, and NOAA's Habitat and Conservation Division (HCD).**

- a. In February 2025, the council submitted a letter to NOAA Fisheries on the draft Policy and Guidance for the National Marine Sanctuaries Act (NMSA) Section 304(a)(5) Consultation Process (Guidance)
- b. In March of 2025, the Council submitted an approved letter to NMFS detailing the EFH 5-year review updates.
- c. In April, July, and September of 2025, the council submitted three comment letters to the FAA and the Department of Airforce on the development and permitting of the SpaceX program of Cape Canaveral.
  - i. NOAA Fisheries also commented

### **2. Update of major regional activities/projects in the South Atlantic.**

- a. Major Regional projects
  - i. North Carolina
    - A. NMFS serves as a cooperating agency to the USACE for the Wilmington Harbor Navigation Improvement Project and submitted comments on the draft EIS. Deepening and widening of the channel will have direct impacts on Primary Nursery Areas and increase salinity upstream, reducing tidal fresh waters available for anadromous fish. Up to 50 percent of the dredge material will be used for beneficial use (beach nourishment, bird island enhancement, and intertidal mud flat creation). Proposed mitigation includes improvements to fish passage at Locks and Dams 1 and 2, and brackish marsh and tidal creek restoration on Eagle Island. There are concerns about habitat conversions of freshwater to saltwater marsh.
    - B. Duke Energy is now passing American shad at Blewett Falls, on the Pee Dee River. Consequently, 969 mi of spawning habitat was restored. This stretch of the river had been blocked for more than one hundred years. Approximately 1,500 shad used the fishway in 2025.
  - ii. South Carolina
    - A. Roanoke River Science Center funded project investigates climate changes and impacts on river discharge, anadromous fish spawning and bottom land forest health downstream.
    - B. NMFS continues working with the SC Public Service Authority to implement fish passage at the Santee Cooper Hydroelectric Project.
  - iii. Georgia
    - A. The monitoring program for the Savannah Harbor Expansion Project (SHEP) has been running for a decade and continues to

provide extensive information on local ecological conditions. In 2025, USACE determined that the final mitigation in the estuary, installation of a sediment basin weir and fill, would provide no major benefit and would not be constructed. NMFS agreed. The Dissolved Oxygen Injection System, installed in 2018, had mechanical issues. Repairs were finished in August, allowing the injection to reach target levels (40,000 lbs./day). Fish passage at New Savannah Bluff Lock and Dam continues to be delayed by a court order, and the USACE is evaluating options for new legislation to provide a mechanism to meet this mitigation obligation.

- iv. Florida (Atlantic Coast)
  - A. In December, NMFS provided the USACE with a draft Biological Opinion for the Port Everglades Deepening Project; NMFS expects to finalize the Biological Opinion in early 2026.
- v. South Atlantic Region (Atlantic Coast)
  - A. NMFS is assisting the USACE with its effort to develop EISs that examine effects from year-round maintenance dredging the navigation channels at major ports (no seasonal restrictions). This includes the Morehead, Wilmington, Charleston, and Savannah ports. The process is underway and expected to be completed by Fall 2026.
- b. Southeastern Aquatic Resources Partnership (SARP), and the Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership (ACFHP)
  - i. ACFHP Funded Projects Completed in 2025:
    - A. [Living with Water – USS North Carolina Battleship Habitat Restoration in the Cape Fear River, Wilmington, NC](#)
    - B. [Salt Marsh Restoration and Donor Marsh at the North River Wetlands Preserve, Carteret County, NC](#)
  - ii. ACFHP Funded Projects Initiated in 2025:
    - A. [Oyster Reef Restoration for Increased Habitat and Ecosystem Services in the Matanzas River, St. Augustine, FL](#)
- c. Important University Studies.
  - i. UGA and Georgia Tech are working with the USACE and the King’s Bay Submarine Station

### **3. Status of Council Habitat Policy Statements.**

- a. Adequacy of existing statements compared with current activities.
  - i. Food Webs and Connectivity 2025
    - A. Staff discovered that the 2025 update didn’t integrate the approved 2018 version of this policy. The working group will meet to integrate the two.
  - ii. Marine Aquaculture 2014

- iii. Climate Variability and Fisheries 2016
- iv. Marine Submerged Aquatic Vegetation 2014
- v. Beach Dredging and Filling, Beach Renourishment and Large-Scale Coastal Engineering 2023
- vi. Energy Exploration Development, Transportation, and Hydropower Licensing 2024
- vii. Alterations to Riverine, Estuarine and Nearshore Flows 2014 – The flow policy working group has met five times in 2025. Edits are ongoing but almost completed.
  - A. The working group's end goal is summer 2026.
- viii. Marine and Estuarine Ecosystems from Non-native and Invasive Species 2014
- ix. Artificial Reefs 2017
- b. Suggestions for revisions of existing policies or the creation of new policies.
  - i. None currently

#### **4. Potential future or developing habitat issues/threats:**

- a. What are the space program impacts with increasing launches and historical launches, i.e., debris and waste?
  - i. Staff have reached out to many different representatives and are continuing to gather information.
- b. Emerging disease
  - i. None reported
- c. Range expansion/contraction of fisheries resources due to climate change
  - i. Multiple IRA-funded projects are ongoing for the Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic councils. The council will be updated over the next three years.
- d. Invasive seagrass (*Halophila stipulacea*) has been identified in Biscayne Bay and the Indian River Lagoon. The FWC has groups focused on it. Removal and reporting projects are in development.

#### **5. Coastwide projects of interest to the Council -**

- a. South Atlantic Salt Marsh Initiative (SASMI) (<https://marshforward.org/>)
  - i. Each state has an implementation team that has been working on individual projects <https://marshforward.org/projects/>.
- b. Southeast Conservation Adaptation Strategy (SECAS)
  - i. No updates
- c. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC)
  - i. Habitat hotline newsletter will be released early in 2026.
  - ii. Atlantic States Shell Recycling: Program Summaries and Best Management Practices will be released in February 2026.
- d. The Florida Aquatic Connectivity Team (FL-ACT)
  - i. No updates
- e. Florida's Ecosystem Restoration Teams (ERT)

- i. No updates
- f. BOEM
  - i. <https://www.boem.gov/oil-gas-energy/national-program/national-ocs-oil-and-gas-leasing-program>
  - ii. <https://www.boem.gov/newsroom/press-releases/boem-initiates-process-potential-mineral-lease-sale-offshore-virginia>
  - iii. Construction of wind projects has been paused, and the northern half of the Kitty Hawk area was sold to Dominion.
- g. Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership has created a new Story Map Highlighting Coastwide Habitat Conservation Efforts ([Making the Connection: From Headwaters to Coral Reefs](#)).
- h. Major proposed changes to federal regulation with respect to air and water quality regulations. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/01/15/2026-00754/updating-the-water-quality-certification-regulations>
- i. The US Navy renewed its 7-year Marine Mammal Protection Act permit and obtained a Biological Opinion under the Endangered Species Act for Navy and Coast Guard military readiness activities occurring in the western Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico. They also updated their Essential Fish Habitat consultations and conducted Coastal Zone Management Act consultations with eighteen states for these training and testing activities.
- j. The Coast Guard released an [FRN](#) in January 2024 and has been looking into a fairways study for the East Coast for shipping safety purposes. The EIS has been delayed, but the regulatory change, if successful, would cause shipping lanes to be concentrated and may impact fishing areas.
  - i. The link for USCG's [Federal Register Notice of Proposed Rulemaking](#) for establishing defined shipping lanes along the East Coast.

## **6. Coordination between regions. (Mid Atlantic, Gulf, and Caribbean partnerships or nationwide coordination)**

- a. Council staff attended multiple CCC wind working group meetings and CCC Habitat working group meetings.
  - i. Staff presented twice at the Habitat CCC working group meetings.
- b. MidAtlantic is undergoing an EFH 5-year review that may impact South Atlantic Species.
  - i. Using a joint species distribution model with the northeast species.
  - ii. The project identified EFH as the upper 75% of population density.
  - iii. HAPCs are top 25% of population density.

## **7. Funding projects/opportunities.**

- a. None reported for the 2025 calendar year

**8. Highlight regional research and monitoring activities supporting EFH and review recommended priorities included in the SAFMC Research and Monitoring Plan.**

- a. Prior to the 2025 June council meeting, the HEAP reviewed all the recommendations from the FEPs and policies made throughout the years and submitted an updated research and monitoring document to be integrated into the Council's.
- b. The HEAP will continue to suggest additions to the plan throughout the year.

**9. Outreach and communication activities: Habitat and ecosystem focused.**

- a. None reported