



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 bulleted 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 believes will be of interest to the Council, that are NOT included in the Habitat AP meeting summary.

2025 Annual Report of Habitat Activities

1. Status of Essential Fish Habitat (EFH)-related comments submitted by the Council, South Atlantic States, and NOAAs Habitat and Conservation Division (HCD).

- a. In February 2025 the council submitted a letter 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 detailing the EFH 5 year review updates.
- c. In April, July, and September of 2025 the council submitted three comment letters on the development and permitting of the Space X program off Cape Canaveral.
 - i. NOAA fisheries also comments on one.

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 Lock and Dams 1 and 2, and brackish marsh and tidal creek restoration on Eagle Island.
 - 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 100 years. Approximately 1,500 shad used the fishway in 2025.
 - ii. South Carolina
 - A. NMFS continues working with the SC Public Service Authority to implement fish passage at the Santee Cooper Hydroelectric Project.
 - B.
 - 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.

- B.
- 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.
- vi.
- b. Southeastern Aquatic Resources Partnership (SARP), and the Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership (ACFHP)
 - i. ACFHP Funded Project:
 - ii. ACFHP Funded Project: [Salt Marsh Restoration and Donor Marsh at the North River Wetlands Preserve, NC – Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership](#)
 - A. Project began early 2024; Expected completion end of 2025.
- 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
 - 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 – Add in tide gate, beneficial shores, and storm water language (work ongoing)

- 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. Flow policy working group has met five times in 2025. Edits are ongoing but mostly completed.

4. Potential future or developing habitat issues/threats:

- a. HCD is seeing an
- b. What are the space program impacts with increasing launches and historical launches i.e. debris and waste?
 - i. Staff has reached out to many different representatives and is continuing conversations with Florida FWC staff.
- c. Emerging disease
 - i. Spinning fish – No update
- d. Range expansion/contraction of fisheries resources due to climate change
 - i. Multiple IRA project are ongoing for the Mid-Atlantic and south Atlantic council. The council will be updated over the next three years.

5. Regional projects of interest to the Council -

- a. South Atlantic Salt Marsh Initiative (SASMI) (<https://marshforward.org/>)
- b. Southeast Conservation Adaptation Strategy (SECAS)
- c. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC)
 - i.
 - ii.
- d. The Florida Aquatic Connectivity Team (FL-ACT)
 - i.
- e. Florida's Ecosystem Restoration Teams (ERT)
- 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>

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 meeting.
- b.

7. Funding projects/opportunities.

- a. Funding opportunities
 - i.

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 2026 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. The ASMFC Habitat Committee and Staff ...

Draft to be completed in meetings