



Annual Report on Habitat Activities Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel – February 2025

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 2024 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.

2024 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 August 2024 the council submitted a comment letter on NOAA’s EBFM roadmap.
- b. In October 2024 the council submitted a comment letter on the Central Atlantic 2 Call for information.
 - i. Given the recent EO from the President, the withdrawal of all areas on the OCS from OSW leasing includes the withdrawal of future leases being issued, including in the Central Atlantic. See:
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/temporary-withdrawal-of-all-areas-on-the-outer-continental-shelf-from-offshore-wind-leasing-and-review-of-the-federal-governments-leasing-and-permitting-practices-for-wind-projects/>

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

- a. Major Regional projects
 - i. North Carolina
 - A. Vesta – Carbon sequestration, Dare County
 - B. Alligator River Bridge, Tyrrell and Dare Counties
 - C. Kitty Hawk and Carolina Long Bay Offshore Wind projects
 - D. Wilmington Harbor Navigation Improvement project
 - E. Mid-Currituck Bridge
 - ii. South Carolina
 - A. Murrells Inlet Dredging and Nearshore Disposal, Georgetown County
 - B. Savannah Harbor Expansion Project (SHEP) Jasper County; Monitoring, Dissolved Oxygen concerns, New Savannah Bluff Lock & Dam
 - C. I 526 Extension – Mark Clark Expressway
 - a. Ceased until further notice. There was not a majority vote in Charleston County.
 - D. Carolina Bays Parkway Extension, Horry County
 - E. Georgetown Harbor Maintenance Dredging
 - F. USACE Emergency Sand Scraping GP reissuance
 - iii. Georgia
 - A. continuing working with SARP doing culvert assessments for connectivity mainly in coastal areas.
 - B. Staff attended a meeting hosted by Grays Reef NMS and the Georgia Aquarium to discuss the need for a SASMI-like cooperative for the South Atlantic Bight.
 - iv. Florida (Atlantic Coast)

- A. Florida Spaceport System Maritime Intermodal Transportation Study ([Feasibility Phase](#))
 - B. The Indian River Lagoon National Estuary Program (IRLNEP) is uniting ten partners across the watershed to implement a \$9.4 million NOAA Transformational Habitat Restoration grant. Together, these organizations will spearhead ecosystem-based restoration of seagrasses, oyster reefs, living shorelines, wetlands, clam populations, and fish reefs throughout the Indian River Lagoon. This collective effort not only highlights the IRLNEP’s unparalleled ability to drive large-scale environmental initiatives but also marks a significant step forward in the preservation and revitalization of one of our nation’s most vital estuarine ecosystems (<https://onelagoon.org/noaa-grant/>).
- b. Southeastern Aquatic Resources Partnership (SARP), and the Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership (ACFHP)
- i. ACFHP Funded Project: [Living with Water – USS Battleship NC, Habitat Restoration, Cape Fear River – Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership](#)
 - A. Story Map: [Battleship North Carolina Living with Water](#)
 - B. Expected completion early 2025.
 - 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.
 - iii. ACFHP Funded Project (NOAA Increasing Recreational Fisheries Engagement): In 2024, the Coastal Conservation Association of Florida and Sea & Shoreline, LLC completed the installation of 4,000 sediment tubes within John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park to restore seagrass beds that have been affected by boat propeller scars. The Park borders the [Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary](#) where the amount of damaged seagrass habitat in the sanctuary nearly doubled from 1995 to 2015.
 - A. Press Release: [National Fish Habitat Partnership Projects to Engage Recreational Fishing Communities and Restore Habitat | NOAA Fisheries](#)
- c. Important University Studies.
- i. UGA and Georgia Tech 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. (see graphic below regarding 2023 FY consultations by number and acreage provided by NMFS HCD)
 - i. Food Webs and Connectivity 2016- adding in predatory prey information (work ongoing)
 - 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 will meet in January 2025
 - ii. Food web policy is halting work until post the march 2025 Council meeting

4. Potential future or developing habitat issues/threats:

- a. HCD is seeing an uptick in Beneficial use projects like living shorelines and thin layer placements. The HEAP is gathering information on these projects for future use and will be discussing possible actions in the summer 2025 meeting.
 - i. SC SEA Grant: <https://www.scseagrants.org/thin-layer-placement-assessment-framework/>
- b. Tide gates control water flow between a tidewater area and a diked-off, drained upland area. The number of these projects in development is increasing with sea level rise. The HEAP Flow policy working group will be discussing these and other water flow projects and how to handle them in the future.
- c. What are the space program impacts with increasing launches and historical launches i.e. debris and waste?
 - i. Still waiting for FOIA response to address this issue.
- d. What are the impacts of sound/pressure from construction projects?
 - i. . HEAP has requested a presentation on the CVOW deaths and impacts for the summer 2025 meeting.
- e. Emerging disease
 - i. Spinning fish – No update
- f. Range expansion/contraction of fisheries resources due to climate change
 - i. No update

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. Habitat Management Series: [Anthropogenic Noise Impacts on Atlantic Fish and Fisheries: Implications for Managers and Long-Term Productivity](#)
 - ii. [Habitat Hotline 2024](#): Focuses on Atlantic state shell recycling programs; includes NC, SC, GA, and FL (pg. 14 – 19)
 - iii. SEAMAP Collaboration: [Home - SEAMAP-South Atlantic](#)
- d. The Florida Aquatic Connectivity Team (FL-ACT)
 - i. The Florida Aquatic Connectivity Team (FL-ACT), a multi-agency statewide aquatic resource management team sponsored by Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership (one of the national fish habitat partnerships), prioritized watersheds (St. Marys, Nassau, and St. Johns Rivers) in which member organizations will conduct extensive barrier inventories to fill information gaps.
- e. Florida's Ecosystem Restoration Teams (ERT)
 - i. No-updates

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

- a. Offshore wind projects
 - i. Given the recent EO from the President, the withdrawal of all areas on the OCS from OSW leasing includes the withdrawal of future leases being issued, including in the Central Atlantic. See: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/temporary-withdrawal-of-all-areas-on-the-outer-continental-shelf-from-offshore-wind-leasing-and-review-of-the-federal-governments-leasing-and-permitting-practices-for-wind-projects/>

7. Funding projects/opportunities.

- a. Funding opportunities
 - i. NOAA's Office of Habitat Conservation and Recreational Fishing Initiative are collaborating again this year to offer another informal funding opportunity in FY25 for coastal Fish Habitat Partnership (FHP) projects that support habitat conservation or restoration and engagement with the recreational fishing community.
 - A. The **total funding available** is approximately \$150,000 and will be used to support several FHP projects (up to max ~\$75,000 per project).
 - B. The **Call for Proposals** can be found [here](#), or on the [ACFHP Funding Opportunities](#) page.
 - C. View the last round of funded projects here: [National Fish Habitat Partnership Projects to Engage Recreational Fishing Communities and Restore Habitat | NOAA Fisheries](#)

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

This is scheduled to be done via email prior to the June Council meeting.

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

- a. The ASMFC Habitat Committee and Staff published the 17th issue of the Habitat Management Series (HMS).
 - i. View the full report here: [Anthropogenic Noise Impacts on Atlantic Fish and Fisheries: Implications for Managers and Long-Term Productivity](#).
- b. The ASMFC Habitat Committee and Staff also released the 2024 issue of the Habitat Hotline Atlantic, which focuses on shell recycling initiatives along the Atlantic Coast.
 - i. View the full report here: [Habitat Hotline Atlantic 2024](#). NC, SC, GA, and FL are included on pg. 14 – 19.
- c. The 18th issue of the HMS is in the early stages of development and will continue to focus on shell recycling programs and initiatives along the Atlantic coast. The report will build on the state summaries featured in the aforementioned [2024 Habitat Hotline Atlantic](#) issue and will include:
 - i. Best management practices for running shell recycling programs.
 - ii. State-by-state program overviews and comparisons.
 - iii. Challenges, solutions, and innovative strategies to encourage participation.
- d. To facilitate the development of the next HMS report on shell recycling programs, a survey has been created which is now live and ready for distribution.
 - i. View the survey here: [ASMFC Atlantic States Shell Recycling Survey](#)
 - ii. Responses are requested by no later than **February 28, 2025**; Draft report expected May 2025.