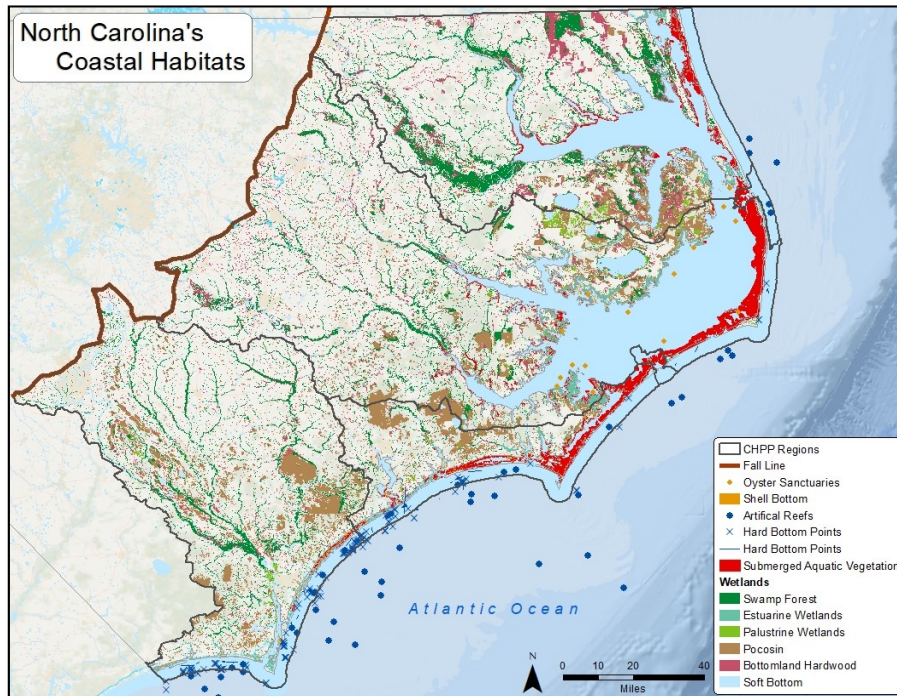


Implementing the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan 2021 Amendment



Background

The 1997 Fisheries Reform Act (SL 1997-400) mandated that a Coastal Habitat Protection Plan (CHPP) be developed by the DEQ and reviewed on a five year cycle. The overarching goal of the CHPP is long-term enhancement of coastal fisheries through habitat protection and enhancement efforts. The CHPP includes a description of North Carolina's coastal fish habitats, their ecological functions, value, status, and threats, as well as recommended actions to protect, enhance, and restore fish habitat. It must be approved by three state regulatory commissions: Marine Fisheries, Coastal Resources, and Environmental Management. The implementation of the CHPP, among other things, has advanced coastal habitat mapping, oyster restoration, identification of Strategic Habitat Areas (SHAs), improved stormwater management, and enhanced interagency collaboration.

The foundation of North Carolina's coastal economy is based on the abundance of healthy habitats in its 2.9 million acres of coastal waters. Fishing, outdoor recreation, and tourism all depend on a healthy ecosystem. With over 20,000 acres of shell bottom, 191,000 acres of submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) historically, and 4.5 million acres of wetlands, prioritizing where to focus efforts was essential to making effective progress. Increasing stressors from a variety of land use activities, coupled with climate change, threaten the health and sustainability of the coastal ecosystem. This plan recognizes that **clean water** is critical for all habitats. The plan also recognizes protecting and improving coastal habitats is key to strengthening **coastal community and ecosystem resilience** to climate change. Additionally, developing stronger **public-private partnerships** is needed to successfully address priority issues on the coast today. There are five priority issues in the 2021 CHPP Amendment with themes of improving water quality, increasing coastal resilience through increased use of nature-based solutions, and building public-private partnerships. Progress made to one issue will benefit others. For example, by restoring wetlands and using nature based methods for wetland protection, water quality will improve, benefiting SAV.

Priority Issues and Key Actions

Protection and Restoration of Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV) through Water Quality Improvements

- ◆ Commit to restoring 191,000 a of SAV
- ◆ Establish a water quality standard for light penetration adequate for SAV
- ◆ Evaluate/revise the chlorophyll *a* and nutrient standards adequate for SAV
- ◆ Form an interagency workgroup to increase best management practices (BMPs) related to water quality within SAV waterbodies, which may include seeking additional funding sources
- ◆ Determine loading and sources of nutrients and sediments into SAV waterbodies, and evaluate the link between that, water quality, and SAV
- ◆ Investigate impacts of agricultural practices and land use change on water quality in SAV waterbodies to determine BMPs needed

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Priority Issues and Key Actions

Wetland Protection and Restoration through Nature-based Solutions

- ◆ Increase conservation of critical wetland properties and marsh migration corridors by collaborating with researchers, NGOs, and agencies, including participation in South Atlantic Salt Marsh Initiative and increased use of state conservation trust funds
- ◆ Partner with other organizations to facilitate coastwide completion or enhancement of coastal vulnerability assessment tools, such as living shoreline suitability siting, marsh migration corridor identification, and wetland restoration prioritization
- ◆ Incorporate coastal wetlands into NC's Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Inventory
- ◆ Assess trends in salt marsh elevation, inundation, and distribution to prioritize areas for wetland restoration.
- ◆ Increase education, outreach, and training to consultants, local government, and landowners for nature-based stormwater and watershed management strategies

Environmental Rule Compliance to Protect Coastal Habitats

- ◆ Increase compliance staff in DWR and DEMLR by a minimum of two staff in the Washington and Wilmington offices
- ◆ Establish a public portal on DEQ's website that provides compliance information, allows the public to submit complaints, and potentially highlights a list of repeat violators
- ◆ Expand outreach to stormwater permit holders on rules and required maintenance of stormwater control measures

Wastewater Infrastructure Solutions for Water Quality Improvement

- ◆ Request that funding programs under the purview of the State Water Infrastructure Authority give additional priority for projects with a direct benefit to sensitive estuarine waters, including fish nursery areas, and impaired waters
- ◆ Partner with NCCORR, NCRCCP, and coastal counties to develop strategies regarding flood-proofing wastewater infrastructure; siting new and relocating existing infrastructure away from sensitive estuarine waters and floodplains; and upgrading sewer infrastructure
- ◆ Modify EMC rules related to collection line cleaning and certified operators for deemed permitted collection systems

Coastal Habitat Mapping and Monitoring to Assess Status and Trends

- ◆ Form interagency workgroups of DEQ agency staff, academics, and subject matter experts for each coastal habitat to identify indicator metrics, data gaps and monitoring needs for the ability to determine long-term status and trends of coastal habitats and the estuarine ecosystem
 - ◆ Implement or enhance assessment programs for each habitat to evaluate change in distribution and condition over time
 - ◆ Develop a document to communicate the ecosystem conditions of NC to the public
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Home Is Where the Habitat Is



For more information on the CHPP and recommended actions:

<https://deq.nc.gov/about/divisions/marine-fisheries/habitat-information/coastal-habitat-protection-plan>