

Chapter 6

North Carolina Water Quality Classifications and Standards

6.1 Description of Surface Water Classifications and Standards

North Carolina’s Water Quality Standards Program adopted classifications and water quality standards for all the state’s river basins by 1963. The program remains consistent with the Federal Clean Water Act and its amendments. Water quality classifications and standards have also been modified to promote protection of surface water supply watersheds, high quality waters (HQW), and unique and special pristine waters with outstanding resource values (ORW).

6.1.1 Statewide Classifications

All surface waters in the state are assigned a *primary* classification that is appropriate to the best uses of that water. In addition to primary classifications, surface waters may be assigned a *supplemental* classification. Most supplemental classifications have been developed to provide special protection to sensitive or highly valued resource waters. Table 37 briefly describes the best uses of each classification. A full description is available in the document titled: *Classifications and Water Quality Standards Applicable to Surface Waters and Wetlands of North Carolina* (NCDENR-DWQ, 2004). Information on this subject is also available at DWQ’s website: <http://h2o.enr.state.nc.us/csu/>

Table 37 Primary and Supplemental Surface Water Classifications

PRIMARY FRESHWATER AND SALTWATER CLASSIFICATIONS*	
<u>Class</u>	<u>Best Uses</u>
C and SC	Aquatic life propagation/protection and secondary recreation.
B and SB	Primary recreation and Class C uses.
SA	Waters classified for commercial shellfish harvesting.
WS	<i>Water Supply watershed.</i> There are five WS classes ranging from WS-I through WS-V. WS classifications are assigned to watersheds based on land use characteristics of the area. Each water supply classification has a set of management strategies to protect the surface water supply. WS-I provides the highest level of protection and WS-IV provides the least protection. A Critical Area (CA) designation is also listed for watershed areas within a half-mile and draining to the water supply intake or reservoir where an intake is located.
SUPPLEMENTAL CLASSIFICATIONS	
<u>Class</u>	<u>Best Uses</u>
Sw	<i>Swamp Waters:</i> Recognizes waters that will naturally be more acidic (have lower pH values) and have lower levels of dissolved oxygen.
Tr	<i>Trout Waters:</i> Provides protection to freshwaters for natural trout propagation and survival of stocked trout.
HQW	<i>High Quality Waters:</i> Waters possessing special qualities including excellent water quality, Native or Special Native Trout Waters, Critical Habitat areas, or WS-I and WS-II water supplies.
ORW	<i>Outstanding Resource Waters:</i> Unique and special surface waters which are unimpacted by pollution and have some outstanding resource values.
NSW	<i>Nutrient Sensitive Waters:</i> Areas with water quality problems associated with excessive plant growth resulting from nutrient enrichment.

* Primary classifications beginning with "S" are assigned to saltwaters.

6.1.2 Statewide Water Quality Standards

Each primary and supplemental classification is assigned a set of water quality *standards* that establish the level of water quality that must be maintained in the waterbody to support the uses associated with each classification. Some of the standards, particularly for HQW and ORW waters, outline protective management strategies to control point and nonpoint source pollution. These strategies are discussed briefly below. The standards for C and SC waters establish the basic protection level for all surface waters. The other primary and supplemental classifications have more stringent standards than for C and SC, and therefore, require higher levels of protection.

Some of North Carolina's surface waters are relatively unaffected by pollution sources and have water quality higher than the standards that are applied to the majority of the waters of the state. In addition, some waters provide habitat for sensitive biota such as trout, juvenile fish, or rare, threatened or endangered aquatic species.

High Quality Waters (Class HQW)

There are 57,784 acres and 12 miles of HQW waters in the White Oak River basin (Figure 13). Special HQW protection management strategies are intended to prevent degradation of water quality below present levels from both point and nonpoint sources. HQW requirements for new or expanding wastewater discharge facilities address oxygen-consuming wastes, total suspended solids, disinfection, emergency requirements, volume, nutrients (in nutrient sensitive waters) and toxic substances.

Criteria for HQW Classification

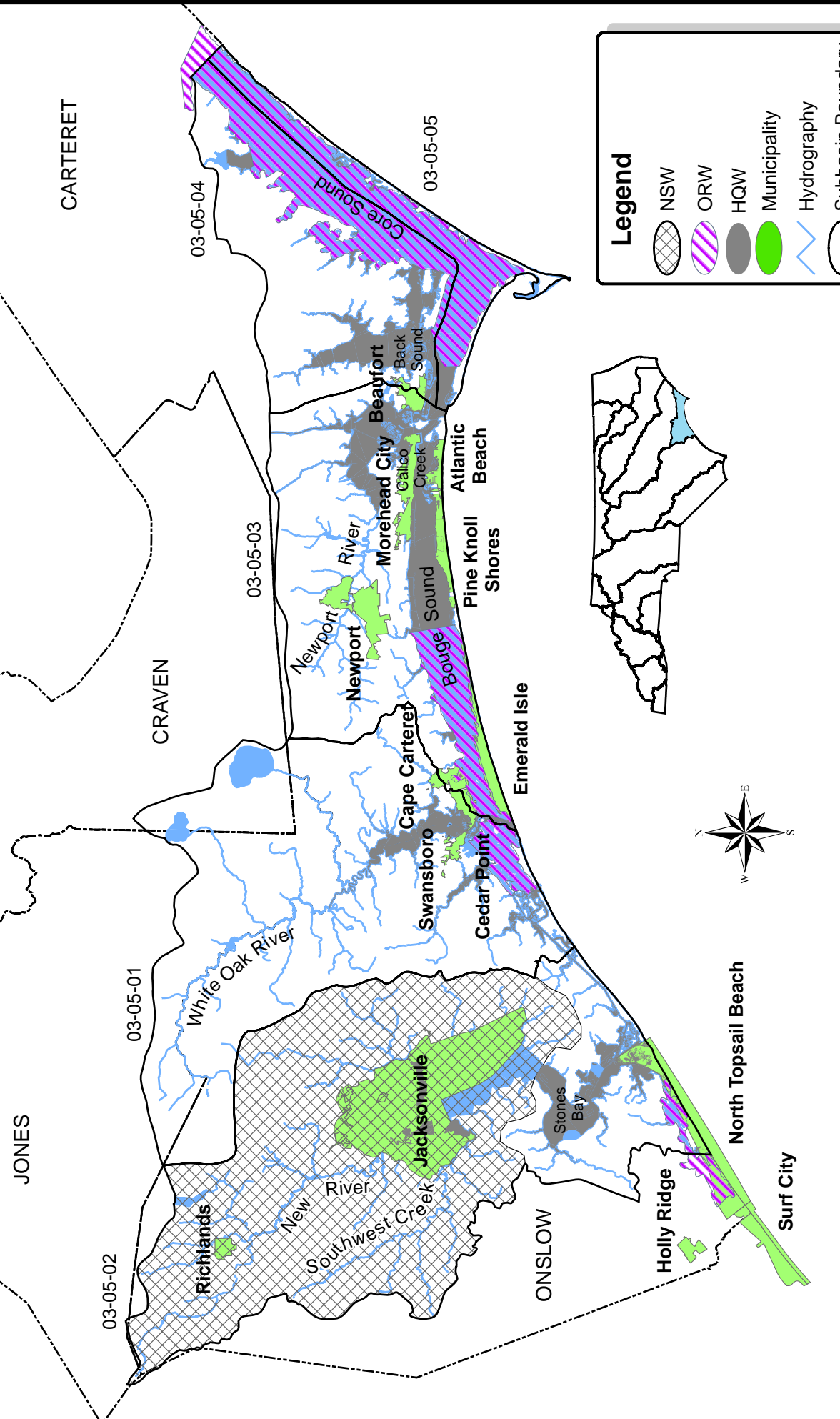
- Waters rated as Excellent based on DWQ's chemical and biological sampling.
- Streams designated as native or special native trout waters by the Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC).
- Waters designated as primary nursery areas or other functional nursery areas by the Division of Marine Fisheries.
- Waters classified by DWQ as WS-I, WS-II or SA.

For nonpoint source pollution, development activities which require a Sedimentation and Erosion Control Plan in accordance with rules established by the NC Sedimentation Control Commission or an approved local erosion and sedimentation control program, and which drain to and are within one mile of HQWs, are required to control runoff from the development using either a low density or high density option. The low-density option requires a 30-foot vegetated buffer between development activities and the stream; whereas, the high-density option requires structural stormwater controls. In addition, the Division of Land Resources (DLR) requires more stringent erosion controls for land-disturbing projects within one mile of and draining to HQWs.

Outstanding Resource Waters (Class ORW)

There are 61,229 acres of ORW waters in the basin, all of which are shellfish harvesting waters (Figure 13). These waters have excellent water quality (rated based on biological and chemical sampling as with HQWs) and an associated outstanding resource.

Figure 13 ORWs, HQWs and NSWs in the White Oak River Basin



The requirements for ORW waters are more stringent than those for HQWs. Special protection measures that apply to ORWs are set forth in 15A NCAC 2B .0225. At a minimum, no new discharges or expansions are permitted, and a 30-foot vegetated buffer or stormwater controls for new developments are required. In some circumstances, the unique characteristics of the waters and resources that are to be protected require that a specialized (or customized) ORW management strategy be developed.

The ORW rule defines outstanding resource values as including one or more of the following:

- an outstanding fisheries resource;
- a high level of water-based recreation;
- a special designation such as National Wild and Scenic River or a National Wildlife Refuge;
- within a state or national park or forest; or
- a special ecological or scientific significance.

Nutrient Sensitive Waters (NSW)

There are 10,816 acres and 201 miles of NSW in the basin (Figure 13). The New River and its tributaries in subbasin 03-05-02 carry the supplemental designation of NSW. Nutrient sensitive waters (NSW) is a supplemental classification that the Environmental Management Commission may apply to surface waters that are experiencing or are subject to growths of microscopic or macroscopic vegetation. Nutrient strategies are developed by the EMC to control these growths. For more information on NSW waters and nutrient strategies in the White Oak River, refer to Chapter 8 Section 8.2 and refer to 15A NCAC 2B .0223 for specifics on NSW rules.

Shellfish Harvesting Waters (Class SA)

There are 118,369 acres and 9 miles of SA waters in the basin. The best uses of Class SA waters are for shellfishing for market purposes and any other usage specified by the "SB" or "SC" classification. Fecal coliform bacteria in class SA waters shall meet the current sanitary and bacteriological standards as adapted by the Commission for Health Services. Domestic wastewater discharges are not allowed, and there are provisions for stormwater controls. Refer to 15A NCAC 2B .0221 for specifics on water quality standards in Class SA waters. All Class SA waters also carry a supplemental designation of HQW or ORW by rule (see above), depending on the resource value present at the time of classification.

Primary Recreation Waters (Class B and SB)

There are 473 acres and 95 miles classified for primary recreation in the White Oak River basin. Class B waters are protected for primary recreation activities (frequent and/or organized swimming) and must meet water quality standards for fecal coliform bacteria. Sewage and all discharged wastes into Class B waters must be treated to avoid potential impacts to existing water quality.